

Coast and Country: Access to higher education cold spots in England

Graeme Atherton^{1,2}, [Frances Sit](#)^{1,2}

¹University of West London, London, United Kingdom. ²Ruskin College, Oxford, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Higher education (HE) is widely promoted as a pathway to social mobility and community renewal, yet stark and persistent inequalities in HE participation raise urgent questions about who is included, who is overlooked and why. Drawing on national data across 149 local authority areas, this paper highlights how young people from free school meal (FSM) backgrounds in towns, rural, and coastal areas face significantly lower chances of progressing to HE than their similarly disadvantaged peers in cities, urban or inland areas. This paper challenges the current strategies for widening access to HE and calls for a shift towards place-based policy approaches that better link access to HE with regional strategies for skills development, economic growth and reducing inequality. Without action, the aspirations of individuals and communities in rural and coastal England will continue to be held back, reinforcing structural exclusion and deepening mistrust in HE's value.

Full paper

Introduction

Geography plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's life chances, including access to higher education (HE). Previous research has shown that learners from similarly low socio-economic backgrounds can experience up to a fivefold difference in their likelihood of progressing to HE depending on where they live. This report examines how HE participation among young people from free school meal (FSM) backgrounds varies by geography, using the Department for Education's latest 'Widening Participation in Higher Education' data. Analysing data from 149 local authority areas, it explores participation differences between rural and urban areas, towns and cities, coastal and inland communities, and London compared to the rest of England.

Key Findings

1. **Most disadvantaged areas:** State school pupils from FSM backgrounds who live in rural villages have on average the lowest chance of going on to HE, while those living in coastal locations tend to have a lower chance than their inland peers.
2. **Coastal gaps:** There was a difference of around 11 percentage points in the HE participation rates for FSM learners in 2022/23 between coastal areas (at 32%) and inland areas (at 21%).
3. **Rural disadvantage:** In predominantly urban areas the HE participation rate in 2022/23 for learners from FSM backgrounds was 31%, while in predominantly rural areas the participation rate was 19%.
4. **Worsening urban-rural divide:** The HE participation rate gap between predominantly urban areas and predominantly rural areas has increased from 9.64 percentage points in 2012/13 to 12.3 in 2022/23.
5. **Size matters:** As the population of an area increases so does its average HE participation rate for learners from FSM backgrounds. In 2022/23, participation for core cities was 42% while for villages it was 19%.
6. **Sharp differences between towns:** There are significant differences between the HE participation rates for FSM learners in large towns, with Slough at 47.1% in 2022/23, Oldham at 36.2% and Blackpool – which is just over 50 miles away – at 16.2%.
7. **London outperforms:** The average HE participation rate for learners from FSM backgrounds outside of London was only 23% in 2022/23, which was six percentage points lower than the national rate that includes London learners. The gap between London and the rest of England has also increased from 20.83 percentage points in 2012/13 to 23.79 in 2022/23.
8. **Attainment matters, but so do place-based factors:** Areas where learners from FSM backgrounds have lower attainment at school level tend to have lower FSM HE participation, but other factors like place-based barriers can also have an impact.

Analysis and Implications

This paper's findings show that HE opportunities are increasingly restricted for the poorest young people from towns, rural and coastal areas, despite ongoing efforts to widen access to HE through Access and Participation Plans (APPs) and Uni Connect. Early analysis indicates that these areas have the lowest levels of HE provision, while attainment at school level is also strongly correlated with HE participation of learners from FSM backgrounds. However, these factors alone cannot fully explain the variation in participation, underscoring the need for further research to unpack the complex, place-based factors contributing to the gaps between areas in HE participation.

Yet the findings not only reveal entrenched inequalities, but also a policy failure: the institution-focused approach to widening access has failed to deliver meaningful progress in many parts of the country. When entire communities are structurally

excluded from HE, the narrative of HE as a driver of social mobility is fundamentally undermined. A policy approach that centres the role of place is urgently needed.

Recommendations

This paper argues for five key policy shifts:

1. **Local targets:** Targets for education participation, including HE participation for learners from FSM backgrounds, should be developed as part of the government's devolution strategy.
2. **Place-based audit:** A comprehensive audit should be done looking at the post-16 educational opportunities available by place to understand where relative cold spots for provision exist.
3. **Commitment to geographically accessible HE:** A commitment to provide a level of HE opportunity that is geographically accessible for those from all areas should be developed.
4. **Tailored HE access initiatives:** The replacement for Uni Connect should reflect in its structure and funding differences between the type of place, as well as include an explicit focus on rural and coastal communities.
5. **Shifted widening access focus:** The primary focus of the government's strategic approach to widening access to HE should shift from a provider-centric approach to one that prioritises increasing participation for target groups in a place.