

#### **F4 Caldicot Wednesday 5 December 16.45 – 17.15**

##### ***Local students in Higher Education cold spots: Geographies of undergraduate futures (0326)***

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As participation in Higher Education (HE) in England has increased, so too has the number of students studying at ‘local’ HE institutions (Christie, 2007; Holton and Finn, 2017). Despite the growing proportion of this student population, the dominant English model of the undergraduate who leaves home at the age of eighteen, and who gains independence through their geographical and social movement to university accommodation, remains a powerful societal narrative. Often seen in contrast to this ‘traditional’ student, the local student risks being understood as immobile, fixed in place by family or employment commitments and by lack of other opportunity. A number of studies have sought to challenge these assumptions by arguing against a normative association of geographical mobility with independence (Holdsworth, 2006), by showing the everyday mobilities of the commuter student (Finn, 2017; Holton and Finn, 2017), and by interrogating perceptions of university accommodation as promoting diversity and widening social horizons (Holton, 2016; Smith and Hubbard, 2014). This paper further explores the experiences of local students by positioning the local student within the complex geographies and the stratified marketplace of English HE. The paper looks at the experience of the local student where the institution is also described as ‘local’, and where the locality itself does not have a history of HE provision.

The paper focuses on undergraduate education delivered in Further Education (FE) colleges (or College-based Higher Education, CBHE) in England, arguing that when this provision is described as ‘local’, the descriptor signifies a complex matrix of competing claims. In the FE sector, ‘local’ signals a historical tradition of connections to regional employers and the surrounding community (Hodgson, Bailey and Lucas, 2015). By contrast, in an HE sector that competes in a ‘global’ market (Marginson, 2006), ‘local’ provision is also lower-status provision. The FE college as ‘local’ HE provider is further complicated by policy demands which position it as widening access to HE for ‘underserved’ local populations (Bathmaker, 2016, p. 20), and as redressing skills gaps at both regional and national level (Bathmaker, forthcoming). The unequal geographies of distribution in English HE mean that these policy demands are distinctly different within and between different areas of the country, with some colleges providing the only locally accessible HE in HEFCE-defined HE ‘cold spots’ (HEFCE, 2015). These compounding features of the local combine so that a college offering HE in a cold spot area to a majority of ‘local’ (ETF, 2016) students is also working within powerful narratives of the ‘local’ HE institution in both the FE and HE sector, and at the same time working against place-specific histories where HE is not part of the architectural or discursive landscape.

The study that forms the basis of this paper followed a multiple case study design (Thomas, 2011), with two case study institutions. Both institutions were large CBHE providers, each in a post-industrial English town without university provision, and in ‘cold spot’ areas of the country. The case studies included documentary analysis of marketing materials from each institution, ethnographic observations of the HE site and classes in each institution, interviews with HE directors, and interviews with

students and tutors on two degree courses at each institution. As well as positioning the research sites and participants within the geographies of the local in HE, the study also conceptualises student futures using the possible selves concept (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Using this psychological concept sociologically (Henderson, Stevenson and Bathmaker, 2018), the study argues that imagined futures have become important currency in educational contexts, but that access to particular imagined futures is limited and constrained by the inequalities of the HE system. The dual spatial and temporal foci of the study allow a discussion of how inequalities of, for example, social class and race, are mediated through the specificities of the local in each place (Cahill, 2007; Pahl, 2008), and how these combined factors work to delimit and enable particular educational futures.

The findings presented in this paper are based on data from semi-structured static and mobile interviews (Finlay and Bowman, 2017; Merriman, 2014) with students in each case institution, and on ethnographic observations of the institutions' HE sites (Brockmann, 2011). This data has been analysed using a narrative approach informed by de Certeau's concept of the 'spatial story' (1984, pp. 115-130). Three main findings are presented, each drawing on and complicating the idea of the 'local' in HE. First, students' ambivalent relationships to place show how undertaking degree education in an HE cold spot both challenges and is threatened by long-held narratives of lack of opportunity in the locality. For some students, imagining a graduate future required a re-writing of placed associations between the local area and education, while others occupied contradictory and sometimes impossible subject positions of loyalty to and rejection of the locality. The second finding highlights the dominance of the homogenised traditionally mobile university student, even and especially in places where this student is largely absent. As well as showing the persistence of this narrative of student mobility, the data offers a challenge to the idea of mobility as capital (Corbett, 2007), suggesting the concept of 'local capital' as an alternative to a deficit-driven view of the local student. Finally, the paper looks at the ways in which narratives of the local student and of the local area intertwine to create the institutional spaces of CBHE. It is in these spaces that students measure their current experience against the university-based undergraduate futures they have not lived, and negotiate the rapidly changing built environment of HE architectures (Gieryn, 2002; Smith, 2017).

Taken together, the three findings in this paper demonstrate the richness and importance of an approach to researching student subjectivities that takes into account the multiple and unequal geographies in which HE futures are imagined and lived.

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