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into Higher Education*

**Local higher education in a global marketplace: Everyday mobility and local capital
in island higher education**

Research report

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UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

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Executive summary

This project explored access to and experiences of higher education on small islands with relationships to the UK, seeing these as instances of 'local' undergraduate education away from the urban campus environment. Given dominant national discourses which suggest that widening access to HE in 'cold spot' areas is both an answer to local skills shortages and a way of redressing enduring social and educational inequalities, the project looked at the positions taken up within these discourses at both an institutional and individual level, asking what it means to study higher education in a place that is divided from but part of UK mainland geography, and in the 'local' mode that is recognised within but often ignored by dominant understandings of student experience.

Building on current scholarship in the three interlinked areas of educational geographies, social geographies and island studies, the project began with a nuanced understanding of educational mobility that refused the common deficit model in which students who have stayed in place for undergraduate study are seen as immobile and as lacking the requisite resources to move away from home. Instead, we sought to understand how all the students were mobile and understood their own mobility, informed by research on relationships to place. While making connections to scholarship on education and 'remote' or rural places, we have also considered the particularity of the small island as a kind of place in its own right.

The project used a multiple case study approach, conducting interviews with students and staff from three case colleges on three different islands. Two of these colleges operate as independent institutions, accrediting degree awards through partnerships with universities on the UK mainland. One of these was a college on one of the channel islands; the other was on another Crown Dependency island. The third case college was one of the twelve campuses in the University of the Highlands and Islands, and was based on a Scottish island. These case studies were informed by preliminary documentary analysis of policy documentation and marketing literature from a wider sample of small islands in and around the UK.

This report summarises three key findings from our analysis of the project data. The first of these emphasises the specificity of the experiences of island-domiciled students, while the second and third findings highlight how these specific locations make visible some of the geographical narratives that underlie higher education more broadly.

1. Students in island colleges have particular economic constraints affecting access to higher education that are unlike those encountered on the UK mainland, and largely unfamiliar to those working in higher education on the UK mainland:
 - Tuition fee costs depend upon a multitude of factors, including the funding arrangements on each island. Islands that are crown dependencies do not have access to UK student loans, and there are islands on which students have no access to funds for higher education. UK mainland universities are within their legal rights to charge international fees to students from Crown Dependencies.
 - Transport costs between islands and mainland UK are prohibitive, and transport itself is unreliable if weather conditions are bad. The physical barrier of the sea therefore represents a barrier to the kinds of mobility that are traditionally associated with undergraduate study, particularly in travelling to and from university accommodation during holidays and weekends.

2. There are tensions between the local and global positioning of higher education provision in island colleges:
 - Island colleges are positioned by policy as responding to island-specific employment needs and skills shortages, with particular emphasis on moving towards self-reliance in industry and retaining the islands' young populations.
 - At the same time, there are normative expectations placed on institutions of progression towards internationalisation that creates comparisons to UK universities and pressures to measure success on narrow terms.

3. There are opportunities in higher education provision in island colleges. The island location exaggerates and offers the potential to challenge the traditional UK binary distinction between staying in place or leaving home for higher education.

- The provision of higher education on islands means that students no longer have to choose between staying on the island and continuing their education.
- The students most likely to 'stay' on the island are seen to do so for a variety of reasons that are similar in particular to those cited on the UK mainland for 'local' students.
- Students who have 'stayed' challenge the language and assumptions that go along with student im/mobility: they see themselves as having gone on journeys without having travelled, and they see the possibilities for mobility as extending beyond the traditional moment of undergraduate decision-making.

Introduction

Alongside and amongst the more commonly observed inequalities of social class, age, race and ethnicity, and dis/ability in access to higher education in the UK, there are significant geographical inequalities. Perhaps the most obvious of these inequalities is in the unequal distribution of higher education institutions across the UK, which means that some students live further away from universities than others, and that therefore the decision of whether and where to attend university is made on different grounds for students living in different places. As Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) have demonstrated, patterns of student mobility within the UK further reinforce these existing distributional inequalities, where geographical mobility intersects with the other social characteristics listed above to create undergraduate and then graduate populations associated with particular regions and institutions. Underlying these patterns of movements are enduring shared narratives that connect a place with a reputation for higher education – the ‘university cities’ of Oxford and Cambridge are perhaps the clearest examples of this kind of narrative.

This project has sought to understand what it means to attend higher education in places that are remote from most higher education institutions in the UK. The particular focus of the project has been on those studying on small islands with relationships to the UK¹. In some cases, the students and tutors involved in the project are studying and working in higher education in Colleges of Further Education². In the case of the Scottish islands, these colleges are some of the twelve campuses that make up the University of the Highlands and Islands, of which four campuses are based on Shetland, Orkney, Skye and Lewis. The students are ‘local’ students, in that they have chosen not to move off their island of residence in order to study. While recent scholarship has explored the experiences and mobilities of ‘local’ students in, for example, large campus universities in England (Holton and Finn, 2018) and in large post-industrial towns (Henderson, 2019; 2020), little is known about students in more remote locations. Although some existing research

¹ This report uses the phrase ‘with relationships to the UK’ to refer to the variety of legislative connections between the UK mainland and the small islands surrounding it. While the Isle of Wight is named as a county in England and the Scottish islands are subject to the same UK and devolved legislature as the Scottish mainland, the Channel islands and the Isle of Man are self-governing Crown Dependencies.

² Colleges of Further Education offer a range of courses for students from the age of 14 onwards, including adult, community and higher education. The colleges are particularly associated with the provision of vocational, technical and professional education, though this is not universally the case. Further Education Colleges do not have university status, and their higher education qualifications are, except in rare cases, awarded through partnerships with universities.

addresses teaching and learning challenges in specific UK island contexts (Scott, 2002; Simco and Campbell, 2011), this study is unique in looking across multiple island locations in the UK, and in positioning these as instances of local, town and village-based higher education within a national and global higher education marketplace in which higher education is strongly associated with urban centres.

The project was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do tutors and students on higher education programmes on UK islands perceive the relationship between higher education and locality, taking into account local labour markets, skills shortages, local and everyday mobilities and local career futures?
2. Using the concept of the 'spatial story', what can be learned about experiences of materiality, mobility and inequality for students in island higher education?
3. How can instances of island higher education contribute to understandings of locality and place within the overarching geographical and policy context of UK and global higher education?
4. What are the policy implications for localised higher education in a global marketplace?

In responding to these questions, the project has addressed a constellation of current concerns in higher education research. Looking at colleges positioned within small and specific labour markets prompts questions of whether higher education institutions are or should be seen as global or local in their reach and how to negotiate this binary; closely related to this question is that of the purpose of higher education. Is it useful to understand higher education purely in relation to labour market outcomes, or is it important to see education as meeting social justice imperatives with or without guaranteed graduate employment? The project's positioning within the UK, with its deeply-entrenched tradition of undergraduate mobility (Whyte, 2019), means that 'local' students still represent a minority group, and that questions about these students' everyday mobilities and mobility decisions are important to ask. Given the traditions within the University of the Highlands and Islands, the project has also enabled us to explore how institutions use virtual learning to offer different kinds of mobility across geographical space, and closely related to this concern is the question of the physical spaces in which higher education takes place, and how these

are located in their immediate environments. Each of these broad areas of enquiry is positioned in the project's context of places in which, in Corbett's (2007) terms, being successful in education and moving onto higher education has for many years meant 'learning to leave'. Only relatively recently and for relatively few students in each of the island contexts in this project has it been possible both to study at undergraduate level and to remain living on the island. While it is impossible to address all of these issues in the space of this report, it is important to signal how the project's focus on geographies of higher education sits within and speaks to wider discourses in contemporary higher education research.

Literature review

Because the project touched upon so many key issues in current higher education research, conducting a literature review for the project involved spanning several different bodies of scholarship. We focused on three overlapping areas which, taken together, allowed us to work towards understanding the issues most pertinent to experiences of students at island college. The first of these, educational geographies, explores differences between educational systems and student trajectories in urban and rural or remote places, as well as complicating the binary distinction between mobility and immobility in relation to higher education. The second area of focus for this project was on social geographies, looking particularly at relationships to place, how these are formed and sustained, and how they might differ in different places. Finally, we looked at islands studies scholarship. This is a hugely diverse and interdisciplinary field of study encompassing a range of ways of understanding the significance of the island as a location that allowed us to ask questions about how the experiences of students involved in the project were specific to their geographical surroundings. In the paragraphs below, we offer a brief insight into each of these expansive areas of scholarship.

Educational geographies

In a context with a strong tradition of undergraduate mobility, such as the UK, the 'local' students participating in this project could be seen as immobile, in contrast to their peers who have relocated for undergraduate study. The project is therefore positioned alongside scholarship that identifies the 'everyday mobility' (Finn and Holton, 2019; Holton and Finn, 2018) of UK students in the categories of 'local' or 'commuter' students. This research builds upon that of Holdsworth (2009) and Christie (2007), who argue that the tradition of student mobility in the UK has created enduring normative associations between leaving the familial home to study for a degree and gaining independence; as their findings demonstrate, 'local' and 'commuter' students often manage multiple responsibilities alongside their studies and it is not uncommon for them to have moved out of the parental home long before beginning undergraduate education, if this were to be taken as a measure of independence. For the purposes of this project, we see this UK-focused literature as situated within an international field of educational mobilities study that looks at, for example, the institutional and extra-institutional infrastructures required in order that

students can study from a distance (Roos Breines, Raghuram and Gunter, 2019), the experiences of Aboriginal students who relocate for degree-level study (Harris and Prout Quicke, 2019), as well as the different policy approaches to student mobility across Europe (Brooks, 2018).

Of particular importance to this project is a body of literature exploring the relationship between rural places and student mobility (Corbett, 2007; 2009). As this research highlights, students attending school in places without the possibility of commuting to university have different decisions to make about attending higher education than their peers in urban locations near university campuses, who have the option of staying in place and studying for a degree (Morse and Mudgett, 2018; O'Shea *et al.*, 2019; Steel and Fahy, 2011). This literature also challenges the ways in which rural and remote places are defined, and education systems planned, with the urban centre positioned as both the default and the ideal educational location (Macintyre and Macdonald, 2011).

Social geographies

This area of research literature was useful to the project in two ways. Firstly, our conceptual framework for the project (outlined below) drew on definitions of place from social geographies theorists. The key influences for our conceptualisation of place as experienced and expressed in narrative form came from the work of Massey (2005) and de Certeau (1984). Massey defines place as 'woven together of ongoing stories, a moment within power-geometries' (2005, p. 131). This definition emphasises the narrative structures of place as well as its temporal specificity, seeing any one place as possible to understand through the stories told about it in any one moment. De Certeau's theorisation of the 'spatial story' (1986, pp 115-130) provides a way of understanding the relationship between people and place; according to this theorisation, telling stories about what a place is 'like' is crucial to way that people narrate their own subjectivity.

The second way in which we used social geographies literature was in exploring the complex and often contradictory relationships between people and places. This literature looks at how embodied experiences of, for example, belonging, community and comfort, become associated with particular localities (Yarker, 2019), as well as the ways that emotion, senses and memory are intertwined with places (Davidson, Smith and Bondi, 2012). Of importance to this project due to our focus on social inequality is research

literature that demonstrates how the intergenerational effects of deindustrialisation and regeneration in places such as the north of England are narrated and experienced differently according to inequalities of social class (Bright, 2011) and gender (Taylor, 2012). As suggested by scholarship on, for example, feminist (Rose, 1993), Black (McKittrick and Woods, 2007), and Black feminist (McKittrick, 2006) geographies, relationships to place must be understood according to spatial structures of power that work to exclude or even displace some social groups. We see the effects of these structures as refracted through the ways that particular places or types of places are narratively constructed; the effects of, for example, immigration or industrialisation are felt differently in rural, remote and urban places (Botterill, Hopkins and Sanghera, 2019), and a social class or gender identity has some specificity to the place in which that identity is located (Pahl, 2008). Similarly, some scholarship has identified common associations with rural and remote places, such as the narrative connection between rural living and safety (Valentine, 2014), which have proved relevant to island locations as we have progressed through the project.

Islands studies

In engaging with the above bodies of literature, we sought perspectives on rural and remote places, positioning islands as instances of these kinds of place. However, the interdisciplinary scholarship in the field of islands studies was also important to the project because it asks whether there is a specificity to the small island that should also be taken into account. This literature ranges in disciplinary field from economics and ecology to anthropology, literature and music (Stratford, 2017). The literature also varies in the ways that the idea of the island is represented, which usually takes one of three forms; in the first kind of representation, the physically bounded geography of the island is seen as useful in providing a specific research site for the exploration of a more general phenomenon (Rappleye, 2015). The second representation of the island in research literature sees the geography of the island as having necessitated that its population develop innovative responses to, for example, the problems of climate change (Connell, 2015). As a consequence of these innovative responses, the islands in question represent an example of a generalisable solution. The final representation of the island is often in critical dialogue with these first two, positioning the small island as a unique place rather than as a useful test site for phenomena to be subsequently applied to larger populations (Murray, 2017).

This third consideration of the island as a unique kind of place introduces concepts such as the 'island psyche' (Gill, 1994), or a way of thinking and being that is specific to those living on islands, as well as the 'aquapelago' (Alexander, 2015), which re-frames the traditional geographical terminology of the archipelago in a way that privileges the sea over land. As these concepts suggest, there are particular features of island geography such as that the sea forms a complete boundary that might mean different relationships between people and place. The significance of this boundary, as creating a material barrier to travel to or from the island, and in its visibility in the landscape of the small island, is also felt in the social and economic conditions of a small island, where the roles of community and industry are, this literature suggests, shaped by the consciousness of working within a physically bounded place (Cohen, 1987; Watts, 2018).

For the purposes of this project, we integrate insights from each of the above fields of literature in our working definition of the island as a place, and particularly as a place in which higher education is happening. We occupy a position in terms of representing islands as research sites somewhere between those we have found in the research literature; while we do not see the island as a test site or a simply scaled-down version of a larger or more populous area, we see the aspects of island geography that make living in such contexts a unique experience as exaggerating some of the features of rural and remote places. For example, the physical boundary of the sea is implicated in decisions about mobility as well as in the ways that the place is defined in ways that are specific to small island experiences, but that are also not completely divided from the barriers faced by those living in remote, land-bound locations. Similarly, while small islands might develop particular configurations of local employment that are specific to the industrial development of that island, they also rely on single or small numbers of industries, and have this is common with remote or rural coastal or farming towns. We are interested in the ways that these multiple factors from islands studies and social geographies intersect with the concerns of educational geography, regarding higher education mobility and education systems that operate away from the urban centre.

Methodology

The first stage of data collection involved desk-based analysis of two data sets. The first focused on policy literature. This data set was comprised of policy documents available from island government websites, or in the case of the Scottish islands, from the Scottish Government websites. A total of 16 documents was included in the data set, and these are either the most recent education-specific policy in each island's policy history or the most recent policy to refer to education as part of its remit in each island's policy history. These were analysed thematically, so that we were able to identify common concerns across the documents while also using them to provide vital contextual detail for the progression of the research project. Islands with relationships to the UK have one of two policy relationships to the devolved nations. In the first instance, they might be included as part of the country to which they are geographically closest, and therefore share policy with this country. This is true of islands such as the Isle of Wight (part of England, seen as a county), and of the Scottish islands (part of Scotland). In the second instance, the island is a crown dependency of the UK. This arrangement of self-governance means that education, including curriculum, qualifications and inspection, are independent of UK policy structures. In these cases, island education systems tend to be strongly influenced by UK qualifications and frameworks in order that students are able to move between the island and the UK if necessary, but also to reflect the particular history of the island in question. For example, Guernsey retained a divided grammar/secondary modern school system for all state-educated school students until the academic year 2018-19.

The second data set was made up of marketing documents used by island colleges to advertise their higher education courses. Our data set for this stage of the research was compiled of website pages for a total of 10 island colleges, of which five were part of the University of the Highlands and Islands, a Scottish University made up of 12 mainland and island colleges. Additionally, five higher education prospectus documents were available online and were included these in the data set. We analysed these using a development of a discourse analysis method used in a previous project (Henderson, 2018). This method looks particularly for the semantic fields used for course and college descriptions, and asks how these semantic fields contribute to a narrative representation of the college, its higher

education offer, and its potential students. In this case, we developed the framework to explore the references to the local area in more detail using the concept of the spatial story.

Three fieldwork visits of five days each were conducted in May-September 2019 at one Channel island college, one other crown dependency college, and one Scottish island college that is part of the University of the Highlands and Islands. These visits included semi-structured interviews with between 6 and 8 students at the college, and between 3 and 5 staff. In total, 21 interviews were conducted with students, and 14 with tutors. Interviews with students included the trialling of a participatory mapping interview method which we hope to extend to other projects. The technique is influenced by the 'mapping tool' used by Donnelly, Gamsu and Whewall (2020) in their higher education mobilities project. The method involves presenting students with a map of the island on which to draw the places or areas that are significant to them. This process is aimed at elucidating responses to and knowledge of place that might be unconscious or unspoken, and which is therefore difficult to access from a question-answer style interview. The fieldwork visit also allowed time for the collection of observational data regarding students' interactions with college space, as well as the position of the college in island discourses and its visibility within the island geographies.

With the exception of the thematic analysis of policy documents, which focused on common issues across the data set, the data have been analysed using a narrative approach informed by the concept of de Certeau's 'spatial story'. As discussed above, this concept offers a way of understanding how people and places are narrated together. Put simply, a person might define themselves as a particular 'kind of person,' and therefore as fitting or not into a particular 'kind of place'. In educational terms, as the students involved in the project explained the narrative of their educational trajectory, they also explained how this trajectory was influenced by or accorded with narratives of the island as a place. Crucial to the 'spatial story' concept is the notion of narratives as boundary-making; as a place is defined or described, implicit boundaries are set around the edge of the place being described. On the other side of the boundary are places that are, for whatever reason, not included in the description. It is through these boundaries that places are defined relationally, so that a place is the 'kind of place' at least in part because it is not another 'kind of place'. Given the highly visible position of geographical boundaries in small island

contexts, the 'spatial story' can be used to highlight how relationships between the places inside and outside the boundary are implicated in participants' accounts of their education, and how the boundary itself is defined.

Although the project has taken a multi-sited case study approach in which each case site has specificity, in the space allowed in this report we group the colleges together in order to summarise the commonalities across them. The findings sections below each focus in turn on a common 'spatial story' that we found replicated across the data set. For the purposes of analysis, a 'spatial story' can be recognised by the features of description or definition of place and person together, often in causal relationship as discussed above. Our analysis then explores how the factors of place and person are defined in relation to each other, and asks what this tells us about the role of place in educational trajectories. In some sections, we analyse documentary and interview data together because of the commonalities between the findings in each data set.

Findings 1: The geographical conditions of island higher education participation

This section draws on contextual details from policy documents, as well as on data from tutor and student interviews where these participants were responding to an interview question about why students might make the choice to stay on the island for higher education. These data are used to set out the variety of ways in which the economic and social conditions of higher education are different for those on small islands than they are for those on the UK mainland.

Costs of higher education

One of the three case colleges was based on a Scottish island, part of UHI and subject to education legislation from the devolved Scottish government; this meant that tuition fees were not a consideration for these students, as Scottish students are not charged tuition fees for attending a course of higher education in Scotland. For students domiciled on the other two islands in the project, both Crown Dependencies of the UK, arrangements for tuition fees were far more complex. Students from these islands do not have access to the UK-based student loans system, and are therefore dependent on the financial aid provided by their island government for higher education if they choose to study on the UK mainland. As was the case in the other Crown Dependencies included in our policy analysis, the islands in question were in the process of reviewing tuition fee arrangements following the tuition fee increase in the UK in 2012, and were either introducing or further limiting means-tested assistance with tuition fees and living costs. Financial aid for higher education students on these islands was made more complicated given that mainland UK universities are legally able to charge international student fees to students from Crown Dependencies. These more prohibitive costs were not covered by any assistance offered on the islands, so that students were reliant on relationships with mainland universities who commit to charging domestic fees. By contrast, fees at the colleges on the Crown Dependency islands were considerably subsidised for all island residents.

Crucially for students in the Channel islands, only the two largest of these islands, Jersey and Guernsey, had any available financial assistance for higher education at the time of the project. The conditions of both Jersey and Guernsey's financial higher education assistance was that the student be a resident of the island. As a consequence of these factors,

students from the smaller islands of Alderney and Sark had no financial assistance available from their island's government, and nor could they apply for financial assistance from the mainland of the UK or the larger Channel islands. For this small population of students, an undergraduate degree would need to be entirely self-funded; two of the tutors participating in the project mentioned students in this position who were reaching the end of their Level 3 study but could not access funding to continue to undergraduate level; a third tutor was investigating whether a student from Alderney was eligible to apply for an apprenticeship on the larger Channel islands. This financial barrier to accessing higher education was coupled with the fact that Level 3 education, (which is the level required for access to higher education) was available only on the larger Channel islands; students from the smaller islands had the choice of ending their education at Level 2 or, as one tutor put it, 'staying term-time in what they call host family accommodation, which is basically foster parents in term-time'. Although those students who had relocated during term-time in order to continue their education had already made the difficult decision to leave their home island (discussed in more detail below), they were unable to extend this mobility or their education any further.

The living or tuition costs of higher education were commonly referred to in interviews with tutors and students as part of a rationale for having remained on the island for their undergraduate study. As will be explored further in the section on 'staying or leaving' below, cost was rarely isolated as a single explanatory factor. On the contrary, these significant (and significantly different from the UK mainland) economic conditions were part of the spatial stories that narratively linked students, place and education, and formed part of the physical and socioeconomic landscape in which higher education decisions were made.

Costs of travel

Along with costs of tuition and accommodation, tutors and students described the economic and time costs of travel as a key consideration in students' decisions to remain on the island. As one tutor from the Scottish island college put it:

It's very expensive to get on and off the island, obviously. Flights are insanely expensive. The ferries are reasonably cheap for locals, especially if you're prepared to sleep in the bar, so you get on and off not too expensively. But it's an extra layer of complexity. (Tutor, Scottish island)

While the ferry is represented in the narrative above as a reasonably cheap option, the journey from the most northerly of the islands on which UHI has a college campus, Shetland, to Aberdeen, is some 12 and a half hours long; while journeys to the other islands in the project are shorter, ferry and aeroplane journeys to any of these locations are liable to be cancelled at any time due to poor weather conditions. In common with some of the findings of islands studies literature (Alexander, 2015), the sea represents a significant boundary around the place of the islands. The barrier is felt in costs of time as well as money. The role of this barrier in determining higher education trajectories is considerable; leaving the island for higher education is a more difficult decision when the opportunities to return home throughout the academic year are fewer, more expensive and less reliable than for mainland students. As one tutor explained, advising students on their choice of higher education institution includes warnings about which campuses become deserted at weekends and during holidays:

And [the challenge is] actually finding the university that people don't always leave because certainly our students are kind of trapped there. So I know some students that have gone across to Lancaster but actually a lot of Lancaster students leave at the weekends. (Tutor, other Crown Dependency island)

In both of these examples, the place of the island is defined by the difficulty or impermeability of its sea boundary. At the same time, these spatial stories also define the ways that mainland universities, as places to which student relocate, rely upon dominant mobility practices. In these practices, the time, cost and reliability of travel is so rarely a consideration for the majority of students that it is possible for entire campuses to empty during weekends and holidays. This offers a further challenge to a broad categorisation of students who have relocated for university study as 'mobile' (Henderson, 2020); the question of whether a student is mobile should be reframed to ask in what ways they are mobile, taking into account the assumptions that travel to and from the place of the university is simple.

Findings 2: Local or global higher education

This section focuses on the position of each of the case colleges as the single provider of higher education on the island on which they were located (though in the case of the Scottish island, it should be noted that provision extended beyond the college itself to the networked University of the Highlands and Islands as a whole). In this section we draw on data from policy documents, marketing literature and tutor interviews to consider how the college positions itself as responding to local, island-specific educational and employment needs.

A common theme across the policy documentation data was the need to increase or retain a young adult population on the island, with the related concern that students leaving to access higher education on the UK mainland were unlikely to return, or only did so some considerable years later. Increasing higher education provision in subject areas with close links to each specific island labour market was therefore marked as a priority, so that young adults might see a clear education and career future on the island. The tying of higher education courses to local labour markets was particularly evident on the Crown Dependency islands, where capacity for higher education provision was relatively small and therefore rationalised and argued for according to local need:

The island pays a lot of money to bring people over, from mainly the UK but it can be Australia, it can be anywhere to fill posts. So we have got skill shortages, desperate skill shortages and actually there should be more of a focus, I feel, for engaging people in island, to be able to access the training that they need to train. (Tutor, Channel island)

Employability on the island is crucial. We are providing you know high quality graduates who would then step into the world of work on-island and that is the win for us. (Tutor, other Crown Dependency island)

These spatial stories suggested that the colleges reinforce the boundaries around the island as distinct places where it was possible to identify and cater to specific skills shortages and increase the on-island workforces, as well as to decrease the need to look outside of the island boundary for a workforce. In the case of the Scottish island, despite the connections to other places and campuses and the greater breadth of courses available across the UHI network, there was a similar narrative of specificity:

The huge universities that have been established for generations, they've got a larger choice of courses. So there's the benefit there. There might not be quite exactly that niche course that we can offer, though, because we are trying to offer courses here that mean students can directly get employment here. (Tutor, Scottish island)

The spatial stories here that connect higher education provision to local skills shortages and local labour markets are not unusual, particularly in discussions of college-based higher education and geographical areas of educational disadvantage or post-industrial decline in the UK (Henderson, 2020). The visible boundaries of the island location simply exaggerate the definitions of places as having specific or 'niche' needs that often go unremarked in these discussions. There are two counter-arguments to this relatively straightforward view of the instrumental purposes and local specificity of higher education. The first will be discussed further in the section below on 'staying or leaving for higher education', which demonstrates that students' choices to study on-island are rarely employment-driven. There is some mismatch, therefore, between the purposes of on-island higher education as seen in island policy and as taken up by students. The second counter-argument view of higher education provision as being linked to the needs of the specific locality was evident in interviews with tutors taking part in the project. Here, a narrative of internationalisation emerged alongside and in contradiction to the spatial story of island specificity:

So, if we [the college] become an awarding body in our own right we are going to have to bring in international students so, therefore the student experience would have to be more akin to an HEI in the UK, albeit smaller (Tutor, other Crown Dependency island)

In this spatial story, the boundaries around the island are blurred to allow for potential future similarities to colleges and universities on the UK mainland. This blurring of boundaries was echoed by another tutor, who asked, 'should we put ourselves up in competition [with mainland UK universities]?'. While island-specific policy refers to the imperatives to retain young populations and address island skill gaps, the colleges do not work in isolation from the policy environment of the UK, which is itself influenced by global trends in higher education. As a consequence, the well-established linear institutional progression from local to global provision as a marker of higher education success (Whyte, 2019) is present even where it is in opposition to the stated island priorities. The conflict between the pressures to define higher education as local and as global is represented in a phrase used in the marketing of several different island colleges: 'The island is your campus'. In this phrase,

higher education on the island is represented as a spatially re-imagined version of the campus university experience, different from the traditional experience but made recognisable through reference to that experience. This struggle to meet the demands of a local area, whether seen in terms of the educational needs of the local population or the employment needs of the local labour market, at the same time as acquiring the status of an internationally attractive higher education institution, is not unique to the island colleges in this project. Instead, the pressures seen here highlight the dominance of internationalisation as the measure of institutional success and progression in higher education, despite the incompatibility of this measure to some contexts of provision.

Findings 3: Staying or leaving for higher education

This section focuses on data from interviews with students and tutors, each of whom were asked their views on why students might stay on-island or to leave the island for higher education. Firstly, these data demonstrate the importance of on-island provision, which crucially offers the possibility of both staying on the island and pursuing higher education. Secondly, we see the distinction between students who stay and students who leave the island as exaggerating the binary between staying and leaving that accompanies the transition to degree education in the UK and other countries with strong traditions of undergraduate mobility. In the nuanced responses to this question, however, we also identified possible challenges to this reductive binary distinction.

Tutors in each of the case colleges felt the colleges had a social role to play in 'combating isolation' and 'offering opportunities to people who wouldn't normally get to university.' One tutor explained how the recently established provision of higher education on the island was necessary for students who had previously had to choose between staying on the island and studying for a degree:

At 18, you're not necessarily ready to go and do that, there's a lot of people that aren't, there are people that will, in the UK, opt to go to a university that is down the road, so they can still live at home, for instance. That wasn't an option here at all [when there was no higher education provision at the island college] so all of a sudden, the only option is stay here or jump, literally jump and I think that's quite a big decision to make, for a lot of them, at that age. (Tutor, Channel island)

This account of the limited options available to island students without on-island higher education provision has some similarity to Corbett's (2007) findings on students in coastal towns in Canada. For these students, continuing their education was incompatible with belonging to the place in which they had grown up, so that the boundaries around place were educational as well as spatial. The visibility of the sea as a boundary to the island exaggerates this spatial-educational barrier.

The opportunity to study higher education on-island complicates the binary decision between staying and leaving, meaning that staying on the island is no longer synonymous with not progressing to higher education. Instead, a new binary is created, between those who stay for higher education and those who leave for higher education, with new distinctions to be made between those on either side of the boundary. Tutors across each of the case study colleges described some shared characteristics amongst students who stayed on-island for higher education. As noted in the section on tuition fees above, although these descriptions referred to the costs of attending higher education on the UK mainland, cost was seen as working alongside other factors. Often, family economic capital was described as being connected to the kinds of social and cultural capital that enable educational mobility (Corbett, 2007):

Some of the less well-off students' families, they have probably never been off the island. They may have been to one of the nearby islands if they're lucky. So their world view is completely different to what you would assume and that changes everything. (Tutor, Channel island)

In this spatial story, the economic resources that enable travel are described as having a further effect on the more abstract 'world view' that reinforces a hard boundary around the island as a place. Another tutor made a similar connection between economic and the kinds of social capital that enable mobility:

A lot of people whose children go to university from here have contacts in the UK or even if they go abroad somewhere else, so there's somebody. Whereas a young person who is absolutely local, who is from a certain financial income, won't have those mechanisms. (Tutor, other Crown Dependency island)

As these narratives suggest, financial disadvantage creates spatial barriers around the island as a place in much the same way as the spatial patterns of privilege reinforced by

relocation to university on the UK mainland (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). However, here there is also a sense of the particularity of the island as a location (Cohen, 1987), where the surrounding sea requires both financial and accompanying social resource to traverse. Importantly, there are questions to be asked here regarding the logic of employability as the overriding rationale for subject choice at higher education level on the islands; the consequence of this logic is that students who stay on the island for a multitude of reasons are relatively limited in their access to subject options.

The accounts given by students of their reasons for staying on-island for higher education offer a counter not only to the view that their decision-making is structured by limitation but also to the terms in which higher education is described. For example, one student described having 'everything I need on the island', seeing boundaries around place as containing rather than limiting. Another student depicted her relationship to the room in which she had been taught throughout her higher education studies:

I quite like that I've been in the same room all the time. So my whole journey's been in this room. (Student, Scottish island)

These spatial stories demonstrate the implicit associations between mobility and success in higher education, which conflate geographical journeys with more abstract or metaphorical kinds of progression (Holdsworth, 2009) and which tend to see boundaries around place as representing barriers to opportunity. As the above account suggests, it is possible to experience a journey without being mobile. A further challenge to the distinction between staying and leaving for higher education came from a mature student, who described how her feelings about educational mobility had changed over a long period of time:

At one point I thought if I did my Master's I could go away, and my husband from Glasgow said, "Well, we could go for a year if you want". He'd get a job, so it's not completely out. I could do it now definitely more than I could have done when I was younger. Maybe it's giving you that bit more confidence. (Student, Scottish island)

For this student, the boundaries around the island as a place had become more flexible and more permeable over time, and other places had become more possible to imagine. This spatial story highlights the normative temporality that accompanies a decision to stay or leave for undergraduate higher education. This decision is often seen to represent a single, time-limited possibility for mobility; while there is evidence that mobility for higher education

enables or even produces future mobility (Corbett, 2007), there is also a danger of seeing a particular temporal moment in universalising terms as inevitably determining future possibility.

Conclusions

This project has explored geographical inequalities in higher education in two ways. Firstly, we have taken island locations as instances of places without easy access to a choice of higher education institutions, where decisions about whether to relocate for higher education are more complex than for those in urban locations. Within such locations, these decisions are based on relationships to place, which are further inflected by inequalities in higher education policy as well as in access to economic, social and cultural resources. Secondly, our focus on island locations has highlighted the geographical assumptions on which understandings of mobility and immobility and related ideas about educational progression and futures are based. These assumptions are structured around the ease of movement associated with urban or semi-rural locations, and also elide the most visible and traditional forms of educational mobility with future possibilities and success. These assumptions apply as much to institutions as a whole, for whom there is an imperative to attract internationally mobile students in order to be seen as successful, as it does to students who risk being seen as limited by their mobility decisions.

Further analysis is planned. In particular, we intend to analyse data from the participatory mapping exercise. Our early finding from these data is that although there is a tendency to see a small island as a single place, as we have represented the islands in this report, students see the island as made up of multiple smaller places, many of which they rarely visit. This is a reminder of the limitations of externally prescribed definitions of place. There is also further work to do in exploring the relationship between decisions to stay and leave islands and social class. We also plan further dissemination events after a successful project dissemination day in November 2019, which brought together researchers and practitioners from island colleges; our dissemination plans are currently on hold due to the Covid-19 lockdown which commenced in March 2020 in England. A planned presentation at the Bristol Conversation in Education seminar series hosted by the University of Bristol was postponed, the International Small Islands Studies Association in July 2020 and the European Conference of Education Research in August 2020, at which papers from the project had been accepted. Having contributed an invited blog to the Higher Education Policy Institute's blog series based on the project findings, we are currently working on academic publications for journals. The project has also allowed us to establish further

connections with the Edge Foundation, joining their Island Education network and presenting project findings in this forum.

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Appendix 1: Map of UK including island groups



(Source: woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk)