



Rural and Coastal Disadvantage Working Group

Update Briefing

May 2017

The Importance of Place: Progression to Higher Education in Rural and Coastal Communities

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“Remoteness is a determinant of the complex choices and opportunities open to individuals. This work recognises the significance of place in social mobility, aspiration, progression and attainment, drawing together the research and practice from several institutions who have demonstrated a desire to work collaboratively on a place-based approach to university outreach. This is a significant and timely piece of work serving a serious purpose to investigate, understand and reverse the patterns of educational inequality determined by Place. Research will inform policy and practice and has much to offer to the debate on future spending choices, joined up interventions and appreciation of differentiated models of outreach based on Place. We expect these interim emerging themes and the recommendations in the Full Report to have a positive impact on our work here in Cumbria where Place and partnerships are vital for progression”

**Professor Julie Mennell, Vice Chancellor of the University of Cumbria
Member of the Rural and Coastal Disadvantage Working Group**

“We are living in turbulent times with significant inequality, locales drained of infrastructure, hollowed out economies and significant political turmoil. In recent months, there has been a burst of public debate about the increasing divides in society; particularly as upward social mobility has stalled in the UK. Since the beginning of this century, encouraging people from underrepresented groups into higher education has been a priority, but until recently the connection between widening participation, place making, and economic growth has not been drawn.

**Professor Mary Stuart, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lincoln
Member of the Rural and Coastal Disadvantage Working Group**

Background to the Rural and Coastal Disadvantage Working Group

The Bridge Group is a leading, charitable policy association that researches and promotes strategies to achieve increased socio-economic diversity in higher education, and the professions.

The Rural and Coastal Disadvantage Working Group was established in the summer of 2016, in response to key findings from our conference earlier in the year, our wider research, and an increasing realisation that place continues to receive insufficient attention in social mobility debates.

We seek to address this gap by focusing on the way that geographical isolation influences progression to higher education, and access to professional employment. We will build a more sophisticated understanding of the way that geography intersects with socio-economic factors to compound the experience of disadvantage felt by many people who are dispersed across the country.

The Working Group will publish its inaugural report in autumn 2017.

A team of committed experts and practitioners has been convened to contribute to, and guide, our efforts to gather and interpret data, both quantitative and qualitative, and to share insights into effective practice to support students in rural and isolated coastal areas. The Group has representatives from the school, higher education, charity and employer sectors, and a list of participants is outlined in the final section. This cross-sector approach is enabling us to identify the key challenges determined by geography during the student journey, and to define solutions that are informed by evidence and delivered collaboratively.

The objectives of the Working Group are to:

- Represent the needs and interests of young people living in rural and coastal isolated areas of England;
- Establish an evidence-based approach and translate research into practical solutions;
- Explore the value of existing data in identifying geographical inequality and expose any gaps;
- Establish and share best practice in engaging and supporting students in rural and coastal areas; and
- Agree recommendations for policy and practice to improve the outcomes for children and young people living in rural and coastal areas.

The programme of work includes:

- Producing an annual report, with an inaugural publication in autumn 2017, which will include key findings and recommendations;
- Organising an annual event to convene academics and senior leaders from across sectors to share findings and debate solutions; and
- Undertaking lobbying activity to raise awareness of geographical inequality.

Scope of the Report: ‘The Importance of Place: Progression to Higher Education in Rural and Coastal Communities’

1. A key output for the Working Group is the publication of a report in autumn 2017. In partnership with members of the Rural and Coastal Disadvantage Working Group, we are undertaking research to improve understanding of the influence of place on access to higher education and raise awareness to transform policy and practice. The study will focus on the challenges to progression faced by young people living in isolated rural and coastal areas, and on the way in which geography combines with socio-economic factors to compound disadvantage.

“Class has an interactive relationship with space, because those with greater economic capital have greater choice”.¹

2. The identification of coldspots, through mapping participation in higher education, reveals the complex intersection of people and places. Several organisations have indicated that if higher education is to respond to inequality of access, the sector will need to adopt a regional or local approach; these include the Social Mobility Commission and Universities UK.² However, significant additional research is required to underpin and drive action. We need to build our understanding of the way that structural and cultural factors, determined by place, collide to inform student choices and affect outcomes. For example, this wider research needs to focus on:
 - the need to challenge assumptions that link social mobility with geographical mobility and break links between places or institutions and success;
 - improving our knowledge of variations in school performance based on geography in terms of the progress gap;
 - strengthening data collection so we know who is, and is not, benefitting from university outreach programmes;
 - understanding better the types of intervention that are proven to be impactful for young people in remote communities.
3. Remoteness provides a linking characteristic between a wide range of different rural and coastal areas that will be explored in the report. We will consider the differences between places and their cultures, and the distinct challenges and solutions associated with progression to higher education. By conducting interviews with young people, we will gather important new evidence, and share narratives on the experience of place in relation to educational progression.

¹ Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century* (Pelican, 2015), p. 274.

² Universities UK, The final report of the Social Mobility Advisory Group, ‘Working in Partnership: Enabling Social Mobility in Higher Education’.

4. The Working Group's research will be placed in the context of the increasing economic and cultural dominance of London and urban centres. The divide between urban and rural areas is significant, and can have an acute impact on young people from low socio-economic backgrounds who have less capacity to be geographically mobile.³ Place can be limiting for some young people, at the same time as it can give rise to a strong sense of identity and belonging that naturally informs decision-making relating to careers and educational progression.
5. The Bridge Group annual conference in May 2017 offers a valuable platform for the Working Group to share its insights, raise awareness of the influence of geography on educational outcomes, and define the terms of debate. Professor Danny Dorling and Professor Mary Stuart, both leading thinkers on geographical inequality, will articulate some of the key issues relating to progression to higher education. Professor Mary Stuart is also a committed member of the Working Group, able to share her expertise as both a researcher in social policy and as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lincoln – an institution that is evidently leading the way in promoting social equality by focusing on regional economic growth.

Methodology and Terms

6. The Working Group will adopt a dual approach in its research, both reflective and solutions oriented, and will draw on qualitative and quantitative data. Through a more informed and detailed appreciation of the complex of factors that influence students' decisions, we will increase the prospect of designing successful interventions, and influencing policy to effect change. The Working Group's annual report will reflect on:
 - the nature of the inequality existing between places;
 - the relationship between class and place; and
 - the way that place informs progression to higher education.
7. The annual report will harness the Working Group's practical experience of effective practice in rural and coastal areas, to promote participation in higher education and propose possible models of interventions to trial. Thematic case studies will provide a way of exemplifying the key issues and challenges, such as:
 - the importance of knowledge and understanding of place;
 - understanding young people's mobility;
 - the availability of local jobs; and
 - logistical difficulties in universities and employers engaging with remote schools.
8. This dual approach will enable the Working Group to comment on cultural perceptions of place and the way it determines inequality – challenging narratives that places designated as rural/coastal are 'lacking' in comparison to urban centres - whilst also proposing practical solutions to influence policy and practice across the education, employer, and third sectors.

³ Savage, 'Class and Spatial Inequality in the UK', *Social Class*, pp. 261-297; Mark Shucksmith, 'Young People and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas', *Journal of the European Society for Rural Sociology*, 2004.

9. The annual report will be situated in the current policy context and will examine, for example: the potential for HEFCE's National Collaborative Outreach Programme to engage geographically isolated young people in higher education; the ideas surrounding the Government's plans for devolved authorities; and Opportunity Areas.
10. The Working Group will challenge the prevailing vocabulary used to define places, which is built on a model of deficit. While we welcome the work of the Social Mobility Commission in recognising a spatial dimension to the social mobility problem, we seek to use more positive terms than 'left behind' or 'socially hollowed out' parts of Britain. While many areas are defined by low-income economies, with talented and academically motivated young people often moving away from isolated areas to find jobs or enter higher education, many of them remain because of a strong sense of place. Far from being 'socially hollowed out', communities have rich cultures and varied perceptions of student 'success', often making them different, rather than 'behind'; this needs to be more carefully articulated and placed alongside notions of economic deprivation.

Key Emerging Themes

11. Data from the National Pupil Database show that pupils living in rural areas tend to have higher secondary school attainment than those living in urban areas.⁴ Research has not discovered any characteristics specific to rural areas that define higher attainment; rather, rural areas are generally more affluent, and the higher levels of attainment are most likely a result of social background. These data therefore mask variations between rural areas and conceal the dispersed nature of poverty – a key determiner of academic attainment in rural areas, as in urban ones.

“Research into inequalities has shown that disadvantaged people who live in affluent areas can be worse off than those who are surrounded by other disadvantaged people”.⁵

12. We know that sparsity has a negative impact on the educational outcomes of socio-economically disadvantaged children and young people. Unlike rural areas that are defined more broadly by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), areas defined as 'sparse' have below average levels of the highest qualifications. 'Where remoteness can be shown, “two countrysides” often emerge’.⁶ The reasons for the differences in outcomes are not yet known. Our report will begin the process of identifying the key issues contributing to this educational inequality determined by place.
13. One possibly central factor behind poor outcomes amongst socio-economically disadvantaged pupils in isolated schools is the lack of expertise in supporting them, in comparison to schools in urban centres. Rural schools are failing to close the progress gap.⁷ Considerable investment has been channelled into urban centres, including London and Birmingham, to break the link between poverty and low educational attainment over the last decade. For instance, initiatives such as Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones have been widely acclaimed for transforming the outcomes of socio-economically

⁴ DEFRA, 'Educational attainment in rural areas' (2009).

⁵ DEFRA, 2009, p. 8; Tim Pateman, Office for National Statistics, 'Rural and Urban Areas: Comparing lives using rural/urban classifications' (2010/11).

⁶ ONS, 2010/11, p. 71.

⁷ Education Policy Institute, 'Divergent Pathways: The Disadvantage Gap, Accountability, and the Pupil Premium' (2016).

disadvantaged pupils. While successful models of interventions have been developed in urban areas, where there are high concentrations of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils, they have failed to give due attention and resource to tackling the poor outcomes of pupils in remote areas across the country.

14. The barrier of transport for schools in isolated areas is well documented, particularly in terms of young people's aspirations and life chances.⁸ But more research is required to understand better the way in which student performance and progression is affected because of: a large proportion of school funding being devoted to transport to/from school; and more limited opportunities for out of school learning and progression activities. In addition, we need to gather data to discover the extent of the barrier of transport in the context of university outreach programmes.
15. The National Funding Formula offers an unpredictable impact on funding for rural schools, as a consequence of the relationship between the following factors: the Lump Sum, deprivation factors, sparsity factors, and pupil numbers. The Working Group is particularly concerned about its potentially negative impact on large schools serving sizeable and diverse catchment areas. For instance, Ullswater Community College, in Cumbria, which has the largest catchment in England, has been an outspoken critic of the proposed funding model because of its failure to recognise the geographical and cultural nature of the areas that schools serve. Vocational provision will be put at risk, and schools will be less able to offer a wide curriculum to engage students from diverse social backgrounds. This has significant implications given the local employment context of many isolated schools.
16. Ambition School Leadership (formerly Future Leaders Trust) has conducted research that exposes the challenges facing schools in coastal areas in recruiting and retaining school leaders and teachers.⁹ Many of their findings have relevance for rurally isolated schools as difficulty in recruiting was primarily seen as a consequence of geographical isolation, including: poor transport links; limited employment opportunities for partners; distance from more affluent urban areas; and distance from educational training centres and professional development opportunities. The Working Group is collecting further information through partner schools and organisations, such as Teach First, to improve knowledge of the scale of the challenge and its implications for socio-economically disadvantaged students.
17. Insufficient data is currently captured from universities regarding to which geographical areas they are directing Access Agreement funds. There is no requirement that they report to OFFA on the places they are reaching through their outreach work. We therefore have a limited understanding of the extent to which universities are already operating in remote areas and influencing progression; and of the areas that are not benefitting from university resource and expertise. OFFA are involved in the Working Group, and are responding to the current gap in knowledge by introducing new measures to raise awareness of the issues around access faced by students from rural and coastally isolated areas.
18. HEFCE's National Collaborative Outreach Programme may have an impact in isolated areas that are underrepresented in higher education. Many participants of the Working Group are actively engaged in establishing and running NCOPs and will be able to feed back early

⁸ Mark Shucksmith, 'Young People and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas', p. 53; Rural England, 'State of Rural Services 2016' (Jan 2017).

⁹ The Future Leaders Trust, 'Combatting Isolation: Why coastal schools are failing and how headteachers are turning them around'.

evaluation research in July, which will inform our autumn report. Additionally, HEFCE participate in the Working Group and are sharing data and building insights into a place-based approach to university outreach.

19. In many parts of the country there is insufficient access to higher education. In Devon and North Yorkshire, for example, there are areas with no higher education provision at all, and limited or no choice available in the surrounding local areas. Many aspirational pupils are left with no choice but to leave their communities to progress educationally. This can pull the brightest young people away from areas to pursue education and careers, further exacerbating problems about skills gaps and skewed labour markets.¹⁰
20. In areas where there is access to higher education, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to participate at institutions closer to home. The higher young people's attainment, the more extreme this pattern becomes: high-attaining pupils from lower socio-economic groups travel an average of 71km to attend university, whereas their more affluent peers travel on average 110km. In the East of England and the South West, areas in which there are only one Russell Group university, progression rates for FSM-eligible children with good GCSEs are the lowest in the country.¹¹
21. The geographical location in which young people live has a strong impact on their decision-making processes. It shapes attitudes towards higher education because of the degree to which it acts as a 'pull' and promotes studying locally rather than travelling a distance to study.¹² The varying degrees of attachment to place experienced by young people helps to explain patterns in mobility that need to be recognised in conjunction with the influence of socio-economic background.
22. There is evidence to suggest that distance is a strong factor influencing the choice of university amongst those who participate – although, at present, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that it effects participation.¹³ This has significant implications for the type of higher education received by students who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and who are remote from high tariff institutions.

“Even if distance has no effect on participation, it could affect choice of institution, and hence the sorting of students across institutions, both within and between cities. A school-leaver from a disadvantaged background may be less likely to enrol in a top-quality university than a school-leaver with identical credentials from a wealthier background, if top-ranked universities are on average further away from family homes. This tendency would have long-term consequences for wage inequality, given recent evidence of the significant wage premium earned by graduates from elite universities.”¹⁴

23. The Working Group will gather further data to better understand students' decision-making about higher education, but also to inform recommendations to promote greater geographical educational equality. For instance, rather than focusing efforts on making the 'top' universities more geographically accessible (through travel bursaries or distance learning), we might look

¹⁰ Dorling, D. and Thomas, B., People and Places. A 21st-Century Atlas of the UK, 2015.

¹¹ NPD-ILR-HESA data analysed by Education Datalab for the Social Mobility Commission, 2015.

¹² Michael Donnelly and Ceryn Evans, 'Framing the Geographies of Higher Education Participation', British Educational Research Journal, 2015.

¹³ Stephen Gibbons and Anna Vignoles, 'Access, Choice, and Participation in Higher Education', Centre for the Economics of Education, 2009.

¹⁴ *Ibid*

to the work of regional universities, like Lincoln and Cumbria, for an alternative approach.

24. In the context of access to higher education, the Working Group will be attentive to the influence of weak labour markets, which are prevalent in rural and coastal areas, as these often lead to lower aspirations. If graduate jobs are not plentiful in the local area, there is some evidence to suggest that those students with a strong desire to stay locally will decide early on that higher education is not necessary to achieve their ambitions of securing a job in the area.¹⁵
25. Aspiration in general is found to be lower amongst young people located in coastal and rural regions, compared to urban areas.¹⁶ There are several factors, aside from the weak labour markets already mentioned, that can explain these lower aspirations. For example, there are lower levels of employer engagement with young people, due to the prevalence of small companies and distance from large employers with resource for attraction activities. The aspirations of those in these areas would benefit from being introduced to a wider variety of role models, including those based in growing sectors such as the creative industries and self-employed entrepreneurs.¹⁷
26. This issue is compounded by the problem of weaker careers provision in more isolated areas – and limited employment opportunities and distance from universities may contribute to this.¹⁸ The Working Group would welcome the opportunity to improve understanding of this issue through engagement with organisations such as the Careers and Enterprise Company.
27. Young people are separated into two very different labour markets. One is local and is associated with low pay, poor chances of progression and insecurity. The other is national and is associated with greater opportunities, higher pay and greater security. There is therefore an incentive for high achievers to leave their local communities, in favour of more metropolitan areas where universities and graduate jobs tend to be located. This may compound some of the inequalities discussed so far that are related to weak labour markets, and make it more difficult for students from low socio-economic backgrounds to access higher education and highly paid, secure labour. There is also evidence that this can create narratives in these types of communities of universities and cities taking young, talented people away, which may serve as a further cap on aspiration. This presents difficult challenges for policymakers, regarding the development of rural communities and the location of higher education and graduate employment opportunities.
28. The Bridge Group has worked extensively with employers on promoting socio-economic diversity in the professions. Through the Working Group, we intend for this work to have a greater focus on place, and geographical disadvantage. This will necessarily involve broadening our range of partners, and increasing our current focus on the role of SMEs, and on challenging the London-centric nature of many professions.

¹⁵ Spielhofer, T., Golden, S. and Evans, K. (2011), *Young People's Aspirations in Rural Areas*. Slough: NFER.

¹⁶ Wilkinson, S. and Lane, K. (2010), *Rural and Coastal Participation in Higher Education*. Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia.

¹⁷ Rolfe, H. (2008) *Rural Opportunities*. National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

¹⁸ The Careers and Enterprise Company, 'Understanding the Careers Cold Spots', 2016.

Next Steps

29. The full report of the Working Group is due to be published in the autumn, 2017, and will include recommendations for Government (particularly regarding school funding), schools, higher education, employers, and the third sector.
30. The Working Group is in the process of gathering quantitative data and insights from colleagues at HEFCE, OFFA, ONS, and HEAT. Participants are also collecting qualitative data from their student populations across England. We are additionally collecting thematic case studies to highlight strategies that foster geographical educational equality. There is much to learn from established practice and this will be included, along with signposting of new and experimental measures for change. Amongst the themes covered through case studies are: the role of universities in place-making and regional economic growth (Prof. Mary Stuart, Vice-Chancellor, University of Lincoln) and brokering relations between remote schools and universities to promote progression to higher education (Dr Felicity Dunworth, Director, Kent and Medway Profession Federation).
31. The Working Group are also convening an event in October 2017 to share key findings from the report and to gather leading thinkers and practitioners together to debate our recommendations, and help to establish its policy priorities for 2018.
32. We would welcome hearing from researchers and practitioners who have an interest in geographical inequality and might be able to join our Working Group and share evidence and insights to inform our work. The Working Group will announce its policy priorities and programme of work for next year in January 2018.

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