Calculating the cost: place, mobility and price in higher education decision-making for students on small islands around the UK

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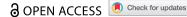
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ABSTRACT

The decision of whether and where to attend higher education is an inherently geographical decision. Amongst the structural inequalities that determine how decisions about higher education are made are a number of complex socio-spatial factors ranging from proximity of higher education institution to place of residence and availability of transport options, to national and locally-specific expectations of undergraduate mobility and personal relationships of belonging to place. This article situates these multi-layered factors in the particular geographical context of the United Kingdom (UK), and more specifically in the small islands that surround the UK, presenting findings from a multi-sited case study of three island colleges. The article adapts the language of cost and price, commonly used in discussions of social mobility, arguing for the importance of considering place and geographical mobility for higher education as part of the balancing of financial and social risks, benefits and investments that structure higher education decisions. Focusing on three aspects of cost and higher education, – costs of tuition, living expenses and travel expenses – the article asks how place and mobility shape higher education decision-making in the often-ignored context of the small island, and what might be learned from these contexts about the workings of geographies in places with more familiar and therefore more naturalised relationships to higher education.

Introduction

The decision of whether and where to attend higher education is an inherently geographical decision. Amongst the structural inequalities that determine how decisions about higher education are made (Reay et al., 2005) are a number of complex geographical factors ranging from proximity of higher education institution to place of residence and availability of transport options, to national and locally-specific expectations of undergraduate mobility (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Finn & Holton, 2019) and personal relationships of belonging to place. A decision about whether to attend higher education, then, is often also a decision about whether or not to leave a familial home or local community, how far to travel and how permanently to do so, accompanied by an appraisal of what

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type and status of higher education is available or acceptable within a local area. As will be outlined below, the spatial factors identified here are often articulated within the broad language of financial cost that accompanies discussions of higher education decision-making (Clark et al., 2019), so that the language of loss, price, debt, investment and benefit can mask a multitude of socio-spatial issues. This article therefore focuses on those socio-spatial issues, asking how place and mobility are both integral to and extend beyond financial considerations in higher education decisions.

Exploring the socio-spatial in higher education requires an alertness to individual and shared relationships to place, collective narratives that determine the significance of higher education within a given place (Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Forsberg, 2019), traditional assumptions about student mobility (Whyte, 2019), and the geographical distribution of national, regional and local higher education provision (Harrison et al., 2016). This article situates these multi-layered factors in the particular location of the United Kingdom (UK), and more specifically in the small islands that surround the UK. The article asks how issues of place and mobility shape higher education decision-making in these unusual contexts and what might be learned from these contexts about the workings of geographies in places with more familiar and therefore more naturalised relationships to higher education.

The article draws on findings from a project funded by the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) (Henderson & Bathmaker, 2020) which explored the higher education experiences of students studying at degree level on small islands with relationships to the UK. These islands included island groups such as the Channel Islands and the Scottish Islands as well as single islands such as the Isle of Man and Isle of Wight (see the methodology section of this article for further information on the scope and design of the project). Each with different complex policy relationships to the devolved nations of the UK, these islands demonstrate the permeability of national policy borders and the clashing of national education policy priorities as students seek to navigate island and mainland higher education systems simultaneously. While arguing for the importance of paying attention to the specific conditions of higher education access in these easily overlooked contexts, the article also uses these as instances that demonstrate how place and mobility are involved in decision-making processes whenever and wherever students are making higher education decisions. The article therefore seeks to develop a framework that can be applied across international contexts that facilitates understanding of the ways that place and mobility are part of the discourse of cost in higher education decision-making.

The subsequent sections of this article first give some contextual detail regarding the small islands included in the project, before setting out a construct of "cost" that acknowledges the primacy and complexity of this discourse in the articulation of higher education decision-making. The article then brings together three interconnected bodies of literature, looking at geographical mobility and higher education, place and education, and remote and rural access to education. The following methodology section outlines the research design for the project on which this article is based, and then three findings sections analyse interview data from the project case studies. These findings represent a way of understanding: i) how higher education decisions, often expressed through the language of financial cost, encompass multiple factors specific to international, intra-national or regional spatial conditions, and ii) how students

negotiate the effects of structural geographical inequality within higher education policy through their own personal relationships of belonging to place. In identifying the ways in which the language of cost extends beyond the purely practical, the article is positioned alongside scholarship such as that of Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997; see also Alexander, 2015) that argues against perceptions of educational, career or life-course decision-making as being linear or rational, and that highlights the role of social structures in these decisions.

Establishing the context: small islands in and around the UK

The three small islands on which this article focuses each operate in a distinct policy context. Two of the three islands are Crown Dependencies of the UK, a status meaning that the islands are self-governing on all domestic matters, are not represented in the UK parliament, and have never been colonies of the UK. Of these two islands, one is a single independent island and the other is part of the Channel Islands, an island group that is itself divided into three distinct jurisdictions. On both of the Crown Dependency islands involved in the project, education policy was in some ways determined in response to policy in the UK while also operating independently; for example, both Crown Dependency islands used UK school qualification frameworks but the school systems themselves differed from UK policy on grounds such as selectivity in state schooling. Similarly, higher education funding policies on each of these islands had been altered in response to the tuition fee rises in the UK, but each island had developed its own means-tested criteria for funding grants and loans. The third island involved in the project is not self-governing and is a Scottish island; in the devolved education policy context of the UK, the island's schooling and higher education policies were determined by the Scottish government. Of significance to this paper is the Scottish government's policy of funding higher education tuition for all Scottish residents who progress to higher education, which extends to the Scottish island context.

Alongside their distinct policy contexts, these three islands shared commonalities with one another and with the UK in terms of their current higher education participation rates, which at between 25 and 35% across the three islands were lower than UK averages, as well as in their current higher education policy concerns.[1] These were centred around widening access to higher education for disadvantaged groups and employability. While unemployment rates were low on each of the islands, the specificity of graduate employment possibilities to the particular labour markets on each island was linked to concerns regarding youth out-migration, with young adults seen to be leaving the islands in order to access a wider range of career possibilities (see Alexander, 2015, for a discussion of this phenomenon); on the two Crown Dependency islands, trends towards recruitment to graduate positions from outside the islands had also led to policy intentions to increase the range of higher education provision available on the island in collaboration with local employers; on both of these islands, higher education was provided through the island's Further Education college, with qualifications awarded through partnerships with UK mainland universities. The range of higher education opportunity was less of a concern in the instance of the Scottish island, which was part of the Highlands and Islands University network of 12 colleges providing a combination of remote and in-person study. Each of the colleges therefore works within and establishes its own complex

institutional-regional relationships (Harrison et al., 2016) and these relationships create some of the conditions for cost calculations in higher education as will be seen later in the article.

Conceptualising cost in higher education decision-making

This article develops a construct of cost in higher education that acknowledges the weight of meaning associated with the language of finance, as well as the prevalence and importance of this language in accounts of higher education decision-making. The construct takes account of a) the financial issues involved in higher education participation, and b) the closely tied but more abstract social issues signified by language of loss, risk, price and debt. This construct aims to demonstrate the difficulty of separating the concretely financial from the abstract and therefore the importance of expanding discussions of cost to include these wider concerns.

As the data presented in later sections of this article demonstrate, notions of cost, price, loss and debt are integral to the language of higher education decision-making (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012); the prevalence of this language in student perceptions of higher education is understandable particularly in relation to the UK, where 2012 saw a threefold increase in the cost of tuition. Research exploring the impact of the rise in tuition fees highlights the complexities of the association between finances and degree-level education. The relationship between degree qualifications and employment opportunity structures perceptions of both potential rewards from investing in undergraduate education and risks of possible loss of opportunity if the investment is not made, particularly as massification results in more employment avenues becoming designated as graduate-only (Harrison, 2019); for students considering career pathways in these areas, an undergraduate degree represents an insurance against lost future earnings. This calculation of current debt against future earnings is underpinned by social class inequality; unequal experiences of debt and unequal access to financial security from social networks mean that the cost as well as the practice of taking on loans are experienced differently by students from different income backgrounds (Clark et al., 2019). Social class also impacts upon the extent to which degree education in itself is understood as a valuable opportunity to become socially mobile (Clark et al., 2019), as well as on connected factors such as access to information about employment, careers and finance impact (Mangan et al., 2010).

In addition to being experienced differently according to social inequality, the financial considerations of reward, risk, debt and loss that are associated with higher education also have broader social meanings that stem from but extend beyond the strictly economic. Because degree education holds the promise of social mobility (Boliver, 2011), its possible rewards as well as the risks of not participating are associated with societal status, networks and identity as much as with financial security, for example. Similarly, an investment in higher education through paying tuition fees comes at the "price" of being positioned as a debtor or of passive acquiescence to an externally defined valuing of personal skills and assets. The achievement of social mobility through education and employment can be seen as incurring "cost" in terms of a rupture in social identity and a loss of a sense of social, familial and geographical place (Clayton et al., 2009; Friedman, 2014).

The construct of cost used in this article brings together both the specific and the wider significations of the language of cost in higher education decision-making, looking at how this language is used to articulate decisions about where to attend higher education. This focus on location extends the acknowledgement that the living costs (Harrison, 2019; Lewis et al., 2007) associated with a decision to relocate for undergraduate study are a crucial aspect of financial decision-making in higher education, as well as the argument that "a degree of geographical mobility" is associated with the kinds of upward social mobility enabled by higher education participation (Friedman, 2014, see also Mallman, 2017). In this article, the specific location of the student in relation to the higher education institution is positioned as having multiple financial consequences that can be identified using the expanded construct of cost outlined here; student-institutional location determines the price of tuition, accommodation and travel as well as policies on loan availability, and at the same time the student's relationship to and social position within their location determines the broader social price, risks and benefits of mobility. In the below literature review, scholarship on higher education mobilities, place and education and remote and rural education is discussed in connection with the construct of cost in order to outline these aspects of higher education participation more expansively.

Literature review: place and mobility in educational decision-making

This section brings together three interlinked areas of scholarship. Each privileges the relationship between education and the spatial; together, this scholarship is used here to establish how the costs of mobility for higher education are spatially inflected, first by nationally specific expectations of mobility and then by place-specific contexts that determine what is possible, what is risked and what might be lost in a decision to relocate for undergraduate study.

Mobility and higher education

Expectations of student mobility for higher education vary hugely across and within different national contexts; these expectations are structured both through different policy approaches at national level (Brooks, 2018) and by more nebulous but very powerful shared societal narratives of what it means to attend higher education (Holdsworth, 2009a; Whyte, 2019). Particularly where higher education is collectively and normatively understood as a transition to adult life, geographical mobility for the beginning of degree study is seen as synonymous with gaining independence and developing social skills (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009b). A growing literature exploring the relationship between mobility and higher education has worked to problematise the naturalised associations between higher education and mobility in countries with this longstanding tradition, doing so in several ways. Firstly, scholarship on the trend of "studentification" explores the effects of mass temporary migration of undergraduate students to university towns and cities. As this literature demonstrates, student mobility on a large scale has the effects of creating divisions within university towns and cities between students and long-term residents (Sage et al., 2012; Smith & Hubbard, 2014), creating a particular kind of gentrification associated with the privileges of higher education participation (Moos et al., 2019; Prada, 2019; Smith & Holt, 2007). A second body of research looks at the role of

inequality in determining where students move to and from. Within the UK, for example, the Geographies of Higher Education project (Donnelly, 2020) has identified patterns of movement from family home to chosen university, highlighting the spatial perpetuation of privilege through movement (Donnelly & Evans, 2015), as well as the regional, racial and class-based mobility traditions within the country (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018). This focus on inequalities of higher education mobility is echoed by international scholarship looking at, for example, the experiences of Aboriginal students who relocate to majority-white campuses for degree-level study (Harris & Prout Quicke, 2019), and the colonial and post-colonial drivers of international student mobility (Beech, 2014; Kölbel, 2020). Alongside questioning some of the normative assumptions in the ways that students are positioned according to their mobility decisions, this literature identifies how movements of students to undergraduate institutions are deeply embedded in and perpetuating of the structures of inequality and privilege that underlie higher education participation.

A further body of research literature questions the discursive positioning of students with regards to mobility, as well as highlighting some of the inequalities embedded in patterns of student mobility. Writing against the tendency to categorise students who have not re-located as immobile, for example, Holton (2015) and Finn and Holton (2019) demonstrate the multiple "everyday" mobilities of "local" students who balance commuting to lectures with part-time employment and family responsibilities (see also Henderson, 2020). Similarly, Christie (2007) and Holdsworth (2009b) question the naturalised associations between undergraduate mobility and independence or transition to adult life. As this literature identifies, the decision to move away for undergraduate education balances the benefits of conforming with societal expectations against losses of ties to local community, manageable family care costs and investment in local labour markets. Waters (2017) highlights the "ripple effect" of higher education mobilities, arguing that individualised accounts of mobility do not take full account of the impacts of mobility decisions on wider social networks and local communities. This ripple effect can be seen in the impacts and patterns of mass student movement as outlined above, as well as in the local family, community and employment consequences of a decision to leave or stay for higher education and can be considered as part of the calculation of cost and loss that is made when deciding whether to conform to expected patterns and locations of higher education mobility.

Place and education

While the research discussed in the above section highlights the role of shared national discourses in students' decisions about whether to relocate for degree education, these decisions are also based upon whether leaving or staying in a place seems possible or desirable. This understanding of moving from or staying in place is then itself shaped by the collective and individual narratives that define the place (Massey, 2005), along with historical associations between the place and educational and/or industrial opportunity (Henderson, 2019; Hodgson & Spours, 2015). These historical associations determine, for example, whether it is seen that, "in order to get on, you must get out" (Weller, 2012, p. 124). In this formulation, "getting out" insures against the threat of static or downward social mobility just as investment in degree education does for participants in Harrison's

research. Two aspects of this area of scholarship are of particular importance to this article. The first is research exploring concepts related to place attachment (Murray, 2017). Yarker (2019), for example, disaggregates the concept of belonging into processes of establishing comfort, community, and even ironic attachment to place. Similarly, scholarship on emotional geographies (Pile, 2010) identifies how emotion, senses and memory are intertwined with places (Davidson et al., 2012). This research ranges from explorations of landscape and its connections to a sense of ancestral heritage through the lens of colonial displacement (Kearney, 2009) to analyses of the ways that places are emotionally redefined during electoral campaigns (Schurr, 2013); as a body of literature, the research privileges the complex and embodied factors that tie people to places, or push them from them. As identified in the higher education mobilities literature above, mobility for higher education requires a balancing of what is lost in stretching or severing these ties to place against what might be gained in terms of different employment prospects and social mobility in a new location.

As suggested by scholarship on, for example, feminist (Rose, 1993), Black (McKittrick & Woods, 2007), and Black feminist (McKittrick, 2006) geographies, the emotions that tie people to place must be understood according to spatial structures of power that work to exclude or even displace some social groups. This literature highlights that the development and articulation of emotional ties to place is inextricable from social identities. Bright (2011) and Taylor (2012), for example, demonstrate 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 and gender. Cahill (2007) explores the dilemma for working class African Americans from Manhattan's lower east side, where loyalty to place could be understood as both a need to remain in the place and a desire to move outside the place to visibly challenge its reputation. Marcu (2020) argues that relationships to place are necessarily different for those in transition from one place to another, describing a "floating" relationship to place. As this scholarship demonstrates, there is considerable conceptual work to do in understanding what it means to have a relationship with place and how relationships to place are embedded in structures of inequality. The calculation of rewards of undergraduate education against loss or change to ties to place is therefore both structurally and spatially differentiated; a position within socially unequal structures, itself refracted through the workings of that social structure in a specific location, shapes the calculation.

Remote and rural places and education

The above section highlighted the role of social identities and structural inequalities in relationships to place; this section develops that line of thinking further by seeing different types of place (such as urban, rural, remote or island) as productive of their own inequalities, particularly with relation to the role of education. The effects of, for example, immigration or (de)industrialisation are felt differently in rural, remote and urban places (Botterill et al., 2019), and a social class or gender identity has some specificity to the place in which that identity is located (Pahl, 2008). While higher education institutions continue to be located in urban centres, longstanding associations between safety and rural living (Valentine, 2014) create a strong sense of personal risk in a potential move to study for a degree; seen through the construct of cost in this article,

the calculation of risk for students from rural areas therefore incorporates both financial and physical understandings of risk. Literature on remote and rural "stayers" highlights that where higher education requires relocation, the factors of place attachment, belonging and perceptions of long-term career and educational success (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Forsberg, 2019; Schmidt, 2017; Turner, 2020) combine in complex ways to determine mobility decisions. Just as Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) demonstrate the role of social class in shaping career plans, this literature positions place alongside its intersections with socioeconomic inequality to show how higher education mobility, as part of mobility decisions across the lifecourse, is bound up with multiple social and emotional processes.

Particularly important to this article is the literature exploring the particularity of the small island as a place. Literature in the field of island studies explores the ways in which social identities are structured differently within the visibly physically bounded context of the small island (Alexander, 2019; Cohen, 1987; Collins, 2011; Watts, 2018), asking whether the small island produces a particular way of thinking and being (Gill, 1994), and whether land-based conceptualisations of place ignore the role of the sea in island lives and career and mobility decision-making (Alexander, 2015). Here, a construct of cost that takes account of social and financial factors together is particularly important; costs of living and travel as well as financial policy structures are all particular to any one small island, as are the emotional and social losses and benefits involved in belonging to, staying in or leaving the island (Gaini & Pristed Nielsen, 2020).

Scholarship focusing on remote and rural places intersects with the issues of educational mobility, and particularly higher education mobility, discussed above. 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 & Mudgett, 2018; O'Shea et al., 2019; Steel & Fahy, 2011). As a consequence, the role and significance of education in places without easy access to university is understood differently – the decision to continue with education beyond school in a remote or rural place is also necessarily a decision to leave the place; as Corbett (2009, 2007) highlights, this decision is strongly affected by structures of social class and gender, where these structures are also particular to the place and its local industries and traditions. While the costs of higher education are weighed against potential gains in employment market value (Clark et al., 2019; Harrison, 2019), these costs are calculated in relation to local as well as national and global trends in employment opportunity, particularly where employment markets are bounded by rurality or island status (Theodori & Theodori, 2015). 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 & Macdonald, 2011). A clear consequence of the dominance of the urban centre in education and particularly higher education systems is the conflation of mobility from rural areas with success in career or educational terms (Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Forsberg, 2019; Wiborg, 2001). If, as identified in the higher education mobilities section above, there are national discourses and policies that shape decisions about student mobility, these discourses and policies have different resonances where access to higher education depends upon mobility, or, as suggested by Roos Breines et al. (2019), where even

a decision to remain in place and study at a distance from a rural location relies upon the workings of the institution in its urban centre. Similarly, where relocation is required for access to higher education, costs of travel and accommodation as well as the social costs of leaving a locality become an essential rather than an optional part of the calculation of cost, where each aspect of these costs is determined by the particularities of the location itself.

Taken together, the above three areas of scholarship demonstrate the spatial conditions in which decisions are made about higher education. The decision of whether or not to relocate for degree education is shaped by the traditions and expectations of student mobility in any particular place, and the place of the university city or town is in turn shaped by patterns of student movement. Mobility decisions are then further inflected by relationships of belonging to place which make movement from place more or less imaginable, and relationships of belonging are structured through inequalities such as those of social class, race and ethnicity and gender identity. Each of these aspects of mobility and place is lived and experienced differently in different places, where historical connections between a specific place and the role of education as well as the urban-centred geographies of education systems create further inequalities both in access to higher education and the imperative to move for higher education. The remainder of this article explores how these multifaceted spatial conditions structure calculations of cost and higher education in the specific context of the small island.

Methodology

This article reports findings from a multi-sited case study exploring experiences of higher education students and staff in colleges on small islands in and around the UK.[2] The project looked at mobility decisions and everyday mobility experiences (Finn & Holton, 2019), positioning these amongst the complex interlinked contexts of island-specific and UK higher education policy, locality and discourses of belonging, education and labour markets, and the structural geographical inequalities of higher education systems. The case study colleges were selected in order to gain, as far as possible within a small-scale project, a variety of higher education provision in terms of policy relationships to the UK, independent islands and members of island groups. Three fieldwork visits of five days each were conducted in May-September 2019 at two Crown Dependency colleges and one Scottish island college that is part of the University of the Highlands and Islands. These visits included semi-structured interviews with 6–8 students and 3–5 staff at each college (see Table 1). Interviews focused on the factors involved in making the decision to stay on the island for higher education as well as the day-to-day experiences of studying or working at the college and living on the island.

The findings presented in this article are based on sections in the interviews in which both students and staff described decision-making about mobility for higher education. As the language of cost and price emerged as a key theme in these data, further inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify three primary types of higher education costs involved in decisions about mobility for undergraduate students. These cost types – tuition fee costs, living costs and travel costs – are explored in turn in the

Table 1. Participant information.

Case study college	College	Island relationship to UK mainland	Student participants	Tutor participants	Total participants
College 1	Independent College of Further and Higher Education	Crown dependency	8	3	11
College 2	Independent College of Further and Higher Education	Channel Islands Crown dependency	6	4	10
College 3	College of Further and Higher Education and campus of Highlands and Islands University	Island group governed by UK mainland	6	5	11

sections below. Using the construct of cost explained above, these sections offer an expanded definition of the costs of higher education mobility within which students make decisions about whether and where to continue their education.

Findings: the geographical costs of higher education

Cost 1: loan policies and socio-economic circumstance in the calculation of tuition fees

As noted in the context section above, both Crown Dependency islands had their own policies of means testing for loans and grants to meet the tuition fees charged by mainland UK universities, as well as their own approaches to funding for on-island higher education, while tuition fee costs on the Scottish island were determined by the Scottish government. The data in this section demonstrate how the students in these case colleges were therefore negotiating competing on-island and mainland policies, each determined by its own definitions of residence and its own priorities in terms of funding for undergraduate education.

When asked how he made the decision to study for a degree on their home island, one student explained:

> That [studying on the UK mainland] is not really an option for me and that was part of my thinking when I was 18. I didn't bother applying through UCAS or anything because it's just like - single father. There's no way in hell he could support me, even with tuition support, so it wouldn't work. Doing the degree over here is really great because they will pay for tuition. (Student 1, other Crown Dependency College)

The above explanation of higher education decision-making includes a variety of policy-related and personal factors that combine to create a sense of the impossibly high price of studying on the UK mainland. For students applying from a Crown Dependency island, tuition fee costs for degree study on the UK mainland were difficult to predict because universities can charge international fees,[3] though not all of them do so; this institution-level policy decision alone creates shifting financial cross-regional points of possibility or barriers between the islands and different locations in the mainland (Harrison et al., 2016). In addition to this complexity, students resident on a Crown Dependency island are not eligible for a UK government student loan and therefore must pay for tuition immediately upon beginning their studies. As the above quotation indicates, residents of this island are offered means-tested support from their island government to cover a proportion of the

tuition costs, but this is balanced against the option of no-cost tuition at the island college. The student above highlighted how these policy-level financial factors worked in negotiation with his status as the child in a single income household. Here, there are costs associated with living in a remote rather than a central location in terms of UK education policies (Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011) which must then be understood according to the effects of structurally unequal home circumstances on calculations of cost (Clark et al., 2019), so that there is no standard cost of tuition in any given place.

For a student studying at the Channel Islands college, the calculation of tuition costs was made slightly different as there was no possibility of free tuition on this island; instead, the island college charged significantly lower costs than UK mainland universities. This student explained the prominence of cost in her higher education decision-making process:

> I think mostly it was the costing. If you compare the price of the course here and going away, it's dramatically different. So I am paying for the course, chipping in and helping my parents but it is not as expensive as going away. That's the biggest factor, for sure. (Student 8, Channel Islands college)

As this quotation highlights, tuition costs were understood by students at these colleges as an immediate price to pay while in the process of studying, rather than in the terms of the UK loan system as a cost to be balanced against lifetime earnings (Harrison, 2019). It is important to note that the costs of tuition on each of the islands were, like the UK student loan availability, determined by residency status and in particular by length of residence on the island. The cost comparisons described in the above quotation were therefore contingent on a formalised and externalised measurement of belonging to place (Yarker, 2019) that is regulated by length of time lived in place. Nowhere was this more clear than in the Channel Islands college, where students from the smaller Channel Islands attended the college for post-16 education due to the lack of post-16 provision on their island of residence, doing so through the foster care system and living with a host family. For these students, neither the UK loan system nor the financial support or lower-cost on-island higher education on their host island were available, and nor did their smaller island provide support for tuition costs. In the processes of balancing of costs described by the above participants, students from these geographical locations were faced with financial impossibility at every turn.

The example of these small islands denaturalises a view of a standard tuition cost as UK mainland-centric that works on the assumption that students will be negotiating a single national policy in addition to their own familial circumstances. As is consistent with literature on place and inequality (Bright, 2011; Taylor, 2012), the students' locally specific position in relation to mainland UK students was then further refracted through their own unequal positions in access to financial resource on an individual level, with both factors working together in the calculation of cost.

Cost 2: rent payments, social networks and ties to place in the calculation of living costs

This section highlights the myriad concerns that fall into the category of "living costs", where this category is part of the discourse of loan and grant arrangements for higher education, and part of the decision-making process regarding the costs of whether and

where to study for a degree. For students making the decision about whether to leave the island, the process of calculating the costs of renting accommodation involved taking account of factors such as the availability of family or friends on the mainland and the potential losses in terms of local employment and local belonging (Yarker, 2019) that would be incurred by the move.

Tutors at each of the island colleges involved in this project cited living costs as more prohibitive than tuition fee costs in students' decisions about leaving the islands. As one tutor from the Scottish Islands college put it, "it's a big cost going to university, for accommodation alone". A tutor from the Channel Islands college described how the costs of accommodation are exacerbated for students without social networks on the UK mainland:

> There's not much chance for them to be staying with a friend or family, so they've got to have the cost of living on top of their fees and for a lot of families here, it's just not accessible. So they don't see themselves as being able to progress. They think, "That's it. That's it for me." (Tutor 1, Channel Islands college)

Here, the price of living costs and fees was increased by the geographies of students' social networks, where remoteness from the urban locations of UK mainland universities (O'Shea et al., 2019) means fewer resources to call upon to ameliorate costs of relocation. In these circumstances, "living costs" must be understood to include the price of living away from all pre-existing social contacts. These costs were further inflected by socio-economic inequality, so that for "a lot" of families, the decision of whether travelling to university was "for me" was determined through individual access to a combination of socioeconomic and sociospatial resources that were easily elided by the term "living costs".

Students referred in their interviews to a number of different costs associated with living at university, ranging from accommodation costs to parking. For some, there were particular barriers in the differences between living costs on the island and the mainland, with one student on the Scottish island describing an ongoing decision-making process they revisited throughout their degree study:

> But there might be a bit of me that wants to experience it down south - Dundee, Edinburgh. It's just expensive. It's very expensive. It's the living costs down there that are so extortionate. That's much better up here right enough. (Student 2, Scottish Islands college)

As this student highlighted, although terms such as "university accommodation" suggest a universal cost to higher education living, the costs are geographically relative, experienced as higher than or equivalent to standard living costs depending on where a student has lived previously. Here, the student represented a perpetual weighing up of the potential experience offered by a different place against the economic barrier created by the cost of living in a different place.

However, students also articulated the higher education decision-making process as one involving weighing costs against potential losses had they decided to leave their island of residence:

> I considered it [studying on the UK mainland] but I thought it would just be easier for me to be here because I have a part time job so I kept that going as well and my mum and dad are here. Plus I don't actually have to pay for it so that is beneficial, and I have my car and stuff like

that so it's so much easier here. And we know the lecturers as well so it's just more of a comfortable environment rather than struggling across [on the UK mainland] but that's just me personally. (Student 8, other Crown Dependency College)

Rather than describing cost in terms of barriers to leaving, this student's decision-making also involved calculating the gains involved in staying on the island, including maintaining a part-time job and sustaining family relationships, in similar ways to "local" students on the UK mainland (Holton, 2015). The series of factors included in the calculation took into account the benefit of free tuition on the island in addition to more abstract, emotional and collectively constructed relationships to place (Pile, 2010; Schmidt, 2017) such as knowledge of the college tutors from previous study and the "comfortable environment" this knowledge creates in comparison to the unfamiliarity of the UK mainland. The potential "struggle" described in imagined study on the UK mainland encapsulated the possibilities of financial struggle alongside the kinds of emotional costs involved in leaving behind a sense of belonging in place (Murray, 2017), so that it is not possible to disaggregate economic and emotional relationships to place in higher education decision-making.

As these data demonstrate, the multiple factors involved in the costs of living during undergraduate study are intertwined with geographical factors, where these factors themselves involve a myriad of financial, emotional and social considerations. The cost of rent, for example, is measured against the financial and emotional cost of leaving the parental home at the same time as the rate of rent in the urban place of the university is measured against the costs of living on the island. There are additional costs to accommodation where a student's social and familial networks are not in the place of the university, just as there is specificity of any of these costs to a student's particular socio-economic circumstance.

Cost 3: price, weather and homesickness in the calculation of travel costs

The data in this section demonstrate that because universities are located in urban centres in the UK, the cost of travel become an important consideration for those living in remote, rural or island places. Like tuition costs, travel costs might be assumed to be static and universal; in fact a calculation of travel costs includes a multitude of factors such as the accessibility and viability of each island's transport options in combination with the extent to which emotional ties to place necessitate multiple journeys to and from the island throughout the year. For students living on small islands, the sea is both a physical presence in their lives and a financial consideration when they consider their futures (Alexander, 2015), and this is particularly the case where transport is liable to be cancelled in rough weather. As Simpson (2019) argues, the materiality of weather is significant not only in determining the possibility of movement but in shaping perceptions of what a journey might feel like. Again here a factor that might be seen as a practicality – the increased cost incurred by cancelled or delayed transportation – is also something more emotional and abstract, the physicality of weather conditions structuring understandings of what it means to travel.

One student from the Channel Islands college explained what was involved in calculating the costs of travel to the UK mainland for higher education:

> Going back to expenses again and money, people I do know in their first year of uni get so homesick that they spend so much money flying in and out and it's one of the most expensive places to fly in and out to. You spend almost £300 for going in and out. (Student 1, Channel Islands college)

This student had drawn on observations of others' experiences in order to understand the potential costs of travel, and the costs were calculated according to a relationship between the expense of a single journey and the number of journeys necessitated by homesickness. Here, the emotional response to leaving a place to which there is a sense of belonging, which could already be seen to have a psychological cost (Lewis et al., 2007), also brought with it an accompanying financial burden that increased with the level of emotional response involved – the more homesick a student was, the more financially expensive their university experience might be. Underlying this cost are the unspoken assumptions on which undergraduate student mobility is based; while traditionally mobile students are understood to have relocated for undergraduate study, it is common for them to travel frequently between their university residence and their previous home; this pattern of mobility between the home and university residence is far more possible for students living a relatively short or inexpensive distance from the home. As a tutor at the Crown Dependency college noted, these normative patterns of student mobility varied by university and campus and were significant enough that the college adapted its advice based on the experiences of previous students: "I know some students that have gone to Lancaster but Lancaster students leave at the weekend" (Tutor 2, Other Crown Dependency College). For students in a remote location (Morse & Mudgett, 2018), then, a calculation of travel costs must include the impact of the relative ease of travel for other students and the particular mobility patterns of any individual campus. The specificity of the remote or island location (Stratford, 2017) is exacerbated by the ways in which the urban location sets a normative mobility standard (Corbett, 2007), with majority patterns of student movement creating a "ripple effect" (Waters, 2017) for students from these island locations.

In similar ways to the living costs discussed above, the extent to which travel costs were seen as prohibitive to university study also depended upon individual access to financial and other resources, which in turn impacted on attachment to place and social or familial networks beyond the island. A tutor at the Channel Island college explained that:

> Some young people perceive that they can't go to university; they know that there's the extra cost. I mean for us, it's not just about going to university and accommodation which I know young people in the UK absolutely struggle with. Even those with support struggle with that. But it's not just that, it's getting on and off this island. It's not like if you're having a really, really bad time at university, you can just suddenly think, do you know what, I'm going to go home and see my mum and dad or I'm going to go and see my gran or I'm going to go and see my brother. Some people who go to university from here have contacts in the UK. But a young person who is absolutely local, who are from a certain financial income, won't have those mechanisms. So if they're having a bit of a shit time and they need to see their mum, they've got to come back. (Tutor 5, Channel Islands college)

As this tutor identifies, when a decision is made about attending higher education, some options may already be considered impossible due to the multiple costs discussed in this article; travel costs are seen here both as particular to island life and as complicated by individual circumstance, where individual circumstance describes both available economic resource and the associated social advantages that make mobility more possible (Corbett, 2007). Here, the descriptor of "absolutely local" encompasses the geographical effects of financial inequality. For students in this category, travel costs are higher *because* financial resources are already limited; access to the resources associated with increased family income, including social and familial networks across geographical regions lowers the price to be paid for homesickness and the emotional impact of leaving home (Wiborg, 2001).

The cost of travel already implies geographical specificity; it stands to reason that travel to and from university depends upon the location of home, as well as the location of the university in question. As these data demonstrate, however, there are further geographical factors to be negotiated for students deciding whether to leave an island location. The cost of a single journey must be multiplied by the costs of attachment to place, which determine the number of times a journey home might be required. These costs must be understood in the context of the ease with which fellow students make similar journeys to different places, as well as in the context of the availability of social networks away from the island, themselves determined by economic and social circumstances and the effect of these circumstances upon relationship to place (Bright, 2011).

Conclusion

This article has focused on the role of place and mobility in student higher education decision-making, arguing that the familiar language of financial cost in relation to decision-making can be expanded to take account of these socio-spatial factors. Through analysis of the complex policy positions and remote geographical locations of small islands, the article demonstrates students' negotiations of inequalities of higher education distribution alongside their individual and collective relationships to place, where these relationships are structured through social inequalities and identities. While acknowledging the role of socioeconomic privilege in enabling both national and international educational mobilities, the article argues that perceptions of privilege must be held in tension with awareness of locally-specific spatial factors when considering student mobility decision-making. Just as a middle class identity is experienced and performed differently in different places (Benson & Jackson, 2013; Pahl, 2008), individual or familial resources and prior mobility experiences are also refracted through the structures of national and international policy relationships, higher education distribution and societal expectations of mobility both locally and nationally. Put simply, the prospect of relocating for higher education from any given location is qualitatively different from the prospect of relocation from another location, and consideration of these place-specific differences is crucial to the understanding of inequalities in access to and experiences of higher education. Further work from the project will take up related questions of how higher education decisions are part of mobility trajectories across the life course, with implications for graduate career decision-making and imagined futures.

The article develops a construct of higher education cost that offers a framework for asking what is included alongside or as part of a calculation of potential cost, loss, risk and debt in these decisions. The perceptions of cost and higher education explored here are likely to be altered by the geographical implications of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ho & Maddrell, 2020), which has shaped possibilities of student mobilities and higher education attendance in ways that have yet to be fully understood. Lagi (2020) argues that the pandemic provides an opportunity for small island higher education to strengthen its on-island provision, while Zuev and Hannam (2020) highlight the ways that mobility has become characterised by new forms of anxiety. The implications of these shifts must be understood as structured by the pre-existing geographical conditions of higher education as set out in this article, in which students already worked to balance risk and safety against educational opportunity.

Notes

1. References to specifc island policy documents have not been included in this summary in order to protect anonymity according to ethical guidelines.
2. In the UK, the term "college" refers to a college of Further Education, which offers a range of school, adult, community and higher education courses for students aged 14 and above, and which is distinct from and usually smaller in scale than a university. Higher education qualifications were provided by Further Education colleges on each of the case study islands in the project, and were awarded either through partnerships with universities on the UK mainland or, in one case, through the college's membership of a network of colleges making up the University of the Highlands and Islands.
3. In the academic year 2020–21, undergraduate tuition fees in England for "home" students were up to £9,250 per year. Undergraduate tuition fees for international students ranged from £10,000 to £26,000 per year.

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