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Barriers to higher education entry – a Scottish rural perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the unique issues in accessing Higher Education (HE) faced by pupils living in some Scottish rural communities in Argyll & Bute, Highland, Eilean Siar (Western Isles), Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. Many of these communities are hard to reach and in some of the least deprived areas of Scotland. Despite this, some pupils come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. All pupils face large pecuniary and non-pecuniary costs in studying at HE. This paper presents views of barriers to HE entry drawing on interviews with S5 and S6 pupils and their educators living in these areas. All respondents believed that those in rural areas faced higher barriers than for their peers because of additional costs due to their location. The paper also highlights the need for better information about access to HE and improved communication about the transition between secondary schools and HE institutions for all.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores some of the unique issues in accessing Higher Education (HE) for pupils living in some Scottish rural communities in Argyll & Bute, Highland, Eilean Siar (Western Isles), Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. Many of these communities are hard to reach and in some of the least deprived areas of Scotland. Despite this, some pupils come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. All pupils face large pecuniary and non-pecuniary costs in studying at HE. This paper gathers views regarding barriers to HE entry from people living in those areas, i.e. pupils, school staff and quality improvement officers. They all feel that the level of some of these barriers to HE is higher for them than for their peers because of additional costs due to their location. The paper also highlights the need for better information about access to HE and better communication about the transition between secondary schools and HE institutions for all.

The participation rate in HE is usually studied through socio-economic factors. In Scotland, the majority of students come from middle-class backgrounds and there is strong evidence that those from more affluent backgrounds are more

likely to study at more selective universities (Croxford and Raffe, 2013; Riddell, 2014; Weedon, *et al.*, 2014; Raffe and Croxford, 2015). This has led to continuing concerns over social mobility (Iannelli and Paterson, 2006; Iannelli, 2008). The low participation rate of students from lower social and economic backgrounds can be explained by multiple factors. In Scotland or elsewhere in the UK, financial, personal or educational barriers potentially prevent them from applying to HE (Connor and Dewson, 2001; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Gorard *et al.*, 2007; Lasselle *et al.*, 2009; Kintrea *et al.*, 2011). Financial obstacles such as the cost of moving away are the most cited factor. Personal barriers include the lack of confidence, role of family and peers or cultural awareness of HE. Educational barriers are multiple. Some can be linked to the portfolio of subjects taught at secondary schools or the lack of provision in some particular subjects for instance. In addition, some HE institutions may fail to attract some of these students because of more traditional and non-vocational degree portfolio or their high entry requirements.

Several studies have analysed the links between geographical access and participation in HE. These include Frenette (2004) for Canada, Gibbons and Vignoles (2012) for England and Wales and Walsh *et al.* (2015) for Ireland. Lower participation rates in HE could be explained by geographical obstacles because of the multi-faceted costs involved in attending a university far from 'home'. These costs could be particularly felt by those living in remote areas, far from the urban settings where HE institutions are usually located. Moving away from home implies additional accommodation and travel expenses. It also implies emotional costs as the entrant to university will leave family, relatives, peers and a close-knit community. Spielhofer *et al.* (2011) methodically explored young people's aspirations in some English rural areas. They highlighted transport and distances, limited employment opportunities and lower wage, parents or neighbourhood characteristics impact on their aspirations.

In the Scottish context, as Scottish students pay no fee (Minty, 2015), geographical aspects have never been far from the debate about access to HE. On 26 November 2014 Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland, announced that she wanted the Scottish Government 'to determine now that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities will, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities' (Scottish Government, 2014). This announcement was not too much of a surprise as a few months earlier her government set up a Widening Access Commission to report in 2016, in order 'to identify the action needed to ensure that 20% of university students are drawn from the most socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods' (CREID, 2015).

Socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods are captured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). In brief, Scotland is divided into thousands of zones ranked from the most deprived to the least deprived. The zones can then be grouped into quintiles. The first quintile represents the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland, the second quintile represents the 21-40% most deprived areas in Scotland, *etc.* The SIMD quintile of university students is determined by the postcode of their domicile before they enter into HE. Policy makers and the press report annually on the percentage of Scottish domiciled students according to the

SIMD quintiles per institution (Riddell, 2014; Commission on Widening Access, 2015, p. 21-22; Scottish Funding Council, 2015).

Unfortunately, it is well known that the SIMD captures areas of deprivation in urban areas better than in rural areas (Scottish Government, 2012, p. 7; Skerratt *et al.*, 2014, p. 79). This may mean that it is necessary to revisit the impact of the announcement of the First Minister for Scottish rural communities. According to the OECD (2008, p. 36), Scotland's '*predominantly rural*' regions account for 75% of Scotland.

Geographical access to HE in Scotland is diverse. Many universities are located in Edinburgh and Glasgow or their vicinity where more or less all transport connections are available. The Open University, as a distance learning university, is accessible to all without the need for transport, but it is rarely seen as the university of choice for S5 and S6 pupils, who are enrolled in the final two years of the six years of Scottish secondary education. The location of the universities might be a factor in the decision making process for going on to HE. For instance, Glaswegians or Dundonians may be more likely to attend a university in Glasgow or Dundee. Young people from the west coast of Scotland may be more likely to attend a university located on the west coast.

Lasselle *et al.* (2015) undertook an exploratory analysis of access to HE from some Scottish rural communities, in particular Argyll & Bute, Eilean Siar, Highland, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. In this paper, we focus on one aspect of the research, concerning perceptions of obstacles to HE access from people living in some of these rural communities. In these five local authorities, there are 47 state secondary schools and one independent school. Ten of the 47 state schools have a postcode in the 40% most deprived areas of Scotland, while 19 have a postcode in the 40% least deprived areas. However, whereas 17 of these 47 schools have a progression rate to HE which is higher than the three-year average, i.e. 36%, 28 have a lower than average progression rate to HE and two have attained exactly 36%. The discrepancy in terms of SIMD quintiles and attainment is expected. It should be interpreted with caution because of the rural factor. Indeed, secondary schools in these areas can have large catchment area and can be small. In the first case, the school postcode is only a good representation of the pupils domiciled in the close vicinity of the school. In the second case, any change in number can impact the percentage rate. However, the Scottish students domiciled in these local authorities prior to studying a full-time course at university mostly attend universities in Glasgow or Edinburgh or the University of Highlands and Islands.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the research questions and the methodology. Research findings are gathered in Section 3 and discussed in Section 4. Section 5 concludes.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

This paper explores the perception of barriers to HE entry among people living in some Scottish rural areas. In what follows, we consider that the perception of the height of the barrier is closely related to the perception of ease of access to HE. In other words, if the level of barriers is high, people perceive that access to HE

is difficult (and vice versa). In particular, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- What barriers do S5 or S6 pupils living in these Scottish rural communities perceive?
- Are the perceived barriers identified by these young people similar to those described by their educators?
- How high are these perceived barriers?

These questions are answered from the exploratory analysis of qualitative interviews of educators and pupils from eight state secondary schools located in Argyll and Bute, Eilean Siar, Highland, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. 26 adults from the eight schools were interviewed. They comprised ten head teachers or deputy head teachers, 13 teachers, support learning officers, guidance teachers or careers advisers and three quality improvement officers. 35 young people attending S5 and S6 in seven out of the eight schools were interviewed. They were aged between 16 and 18 and not all planned to go on to HE upon leaving school. Adult participants were selected because of their position. As the guidance teachers helped in the selection of young participants, the latter cannot be considered as representative of all S5 and S6 pupils in their respective schools. All participants gave their consent to being interviewed. Parents or guardians gave their consent for their child to be part of the research.

All interviews took place in schools between January 2015 and March 2015 with the exception of those with the quality improvement officers, which took place in the councils' offices. The list of possible questions was given to the interviewees prior to their meeting with the researcher and covered two areas. First, the questions dealt with the perceived barriers to HE entry. Second, interviewees were about the role of skills and qualifications in progressing to HE or labour markets. As each interview could not last more than 30 minutes, not all questions could be asked systematically. This paper focuses only on people's responses to the issue of barriers and there is no indication of gender, location or job title in order to avoid possible identification.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

All participants were asked for their opinion as to what the main barriers were to HE entry for young people living in their rural communities. The exploratory analysis of their responses allows us to identify four types of barrier: financial, geographical, educational and personal. This taxonomy is not surprising as these are commonly experienced by young people from non-affluent backgrounds and discussed in the literature. However, during the interviews, the participants talked about the impact of their location on financial, geographical and educational barriers. On the one hand, the participants emphasised that these barriers were perceived as being higher because of the pecuniary and non-pecuniary costs. On the other hand, they indicated how some aspects of these barriers were specific to their location. Personal barriers were usually not considered to be affected by where they lived and were therefore seen as pretty similar to those experienced by young people elsewhere. This is the reason that in what follows we focus on financial, geographical and educational barriers only.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS: DEBT AND HIGHER PECUNIARY COSTS

Whatever their age, the vast majority of participants considered that financial barriers were the most significant.

Pupils' first responses to the barrier question were independent of the school location. Young people were always keen to emphasise how important finances were, as going to university was expensive. A few expressed their fear of getting into debt and others mentioned that they would take a gap year to pay for their university studies. Many elaborated on their answers. They compared their situation with that of some of their peers living in urban areas or closer to a university. All believed that their financial costs were higher compared with those of these peers because of the additional travel and accommodation costs. They would not be able to come home every evening or every weekend because of the distance or cost of travel. Among the most common replies were:

'The accommodation would probably be the same as for most students but the fact that we'd even have to pay for a plane ticket or a boat ticket to home, we can't just take a bus.'

'You need to pay for the accommodation because you cannot stay at home.'

'You need to pay a lot for accommodation, and most of us don't have that kind of money so you're relying on your mum and dad, or you have to get a student loan. But then again that's the same for a lot of people, but then we have the added costs of transport and travel.'

'It would cost so much to get back if you were staying on the mainland.'

As with the younger participants, the adults first pointed out the financial barriers. They elaborated more often on their pupils' fear of going into debt by going on to HE.

The prospect of going to HE is a very very expensive thing for young people. That maybe is the particular case in some rural communities where perhaps parental income isn't particularly high [e.g. seasonal employment or zero-hour contracts].

They were quicker to link these barriers to their location. Indeed, adults perceived the barriers to be higher because of the 'logistical' implication. Their responses were similar to those of the young participants, mentioning how much it costs to leave home and not being able to return home every weekend. The perception of those living in the Scottish islands was sometimes expressed in vivid terms: 'that bit of water between home and where [their pupils] are [at university]' makes travel and distance 'slightly more complex and slightly more expensive'.

GEOGRAPHICAL BARRIERS: HIGHER EMOTIONAL COSTS DUE TO DISTANCE

Irrespective of age, the second type of barrier mentioned by the vast majority of participants was geographical. As noted by some pupils and many adults, many young people looked forward to leaving their communities to experience a different kind of life, including new (and 'better') job or educational opportunities.

In the first set of responses, some young participants considered that 'distance [was] the main thing', 'where [they] lived [was] an obstacle' or '[they] would prefer to stay closer to home'. Although the pecuniary cost element was never too far from their minds, the fact that they would not be able to see their family on a regular basis was a real concern. Some did not hesitate to link their university destination to the ease of travelling back home. One of the most representative replies was:

I'd rather go to Glasgow [Strathclyde] than Edinburgh or somewhere and I think it's handy for me as well because it's next to the train and the bus station, I can get home if I need to, see my mum and dad quite easily.

A second set of responses addresses the fear of the big city and its attractions that could lead to failure to progress.

I think a downfall for people from [name of the location] would be them getting really excited to be in a big city and going out the whole time, and not passing their exams, failing their coursework and stuff because they're enjoying being in a big city too much.

Finally, the last set of responses was about their possible missed opportunities as prospective students. Quite a few pupils, in particular the islanders, regretted that because of where they lived they could not benefit from all opportunities given to prospective students in terms of visiting days and interviews.

I think people from mainland Scotland get to visit a lot of universities before they apply, we don't get much of an opportunity to do it. (...) You're also going on school hours, it's usually on a school day, if I go down on a Tuesday night and come back on a Thursday, that's three days you've missed of school already. (...) You are at a disadvantage if you apply and if you can't go and make the interview [because the boat won't sail].

The only other thing [first thing was finance] I'd say would be travelling to see the open days and things when you're deciding which one you want to go to, it's pretty difficult from here to go to places like St Andrews and Edinburgh – Glasgow's not too bad, just a train journey away but it's a long way, bit of a trek to go for a one-day trip.

In contrast to the young participants, the adult participants were quick to mention the HE destination of some of their pupils would depend on the means of transport. Their responses also raised a new set of issues. For instance, some insisted that some of their pupils were better prepared than others to face the geographical barriers as their commuting journey to go to school could already be long. The catchment area for rural schools can be large and some pupils had long daily journeys to and from school, while others were already unable to go home during the week.

This possible positive insight was often overshadowed by other elements. Many participants emphasised that living in a remote area meant that their pupils could be not as well prepared as other prospective students to go to university. Their concerns were twofold. First, their pupils were not living in the proximity of an HE institution. Second, the size of the school and the size of the community

and its rural location were in no way comparable with the size of universities and their urban settings. These led them to pursue two lines of argument. They felt that the fear of the unknown or the intimidating nature of the big city could be detrimental to their pupils' aspirations of going to university, in particular when job opportunities were available in the local community. They also felt that this could make the transition to HE more difficult for their pupils than for others living in more urban areas because of the tightness and closeness of small rural communities.

EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS: SOME SPECIFIC CURRICULUM ISSUES

Whatever their age, the third type of barriers mentioned by the vast majority of participants was educational. Educators tended to elaborate on these more than the younger participants.

As in the case of many of their peers not living in rural communities, most pupils knew that offers from HE institutions were linked to the number of passes at Highers. Most also knew the subjects or the name of the course they wanted to study in HE. Many appreciated the level of support they received from their schools. A few talked about the entry requirements and noted that these have increased.

I still have to finish a couple of Highers to actually get into university because last year I kind of did really badly (...), but I know I am going to do better this year, 'cause I want to do a [name of the subject] course, but I only either want to go to [name of the university] or [name of the university], because they're the best ones.

The universities don't really care that I am doing that course, so they just want me to pass the two Highers that I am doing at school and then they'll take me.

Nevertheless, as for some of their peers living elsewhere, some were unsure about the subject they would study at university or indicated that they would need more information before they made their decision.

It is hard to be motivated to go for more unusual courses, like [name of the course], when you've always hearing these horror stories in the news about 'OK I did such and such a course for five years and now I am working in a bank'. (...) It is hard to keep your motivation when you are not sure you're going to get the job you want.

This year I decided not to apply to uni or college. I had initially but because I wasn't too sure that the course I had set out to do was right for me, I've decided to spend a year working at home just to figure out what I want to study.

Some felt that due to their location and the size of their school they did not have access to the 'full range of subjects available' in their secondary education. The range of subjects available to islanders was thought to be even more restricted.

In mainland Scotland they have much more specialised choices of courses that they can do during school.

I guess most subjects are offered, but I know from other schools like on the islands, there are so many subjects that aren't offered. So you would not be able to go just because you can't get the qualifications.

This usually led some of them to consider first a transition to a Further Education institution and not to an HE institution.

When educational barriers were discussed, many school staff first elaborated on the various educational progression routes within their own secondary school. Some felt that some of their pupils realised too late the amount of work needed to get their Highers. This could compromise their subsequent possible progression into HE as access to university was competitive and based on Highers.

The conversation with the researcher then continued around the topic of the admissions process to HE. A few felt that it was becoming more difficult for their pupils to access HE as the university requirements were getting higher and higher. However, many expressed their difficulty in understanding the whole admissions process.

The frustrating thing for us as a school is that we see no difference in the candidates from year to year, so there's an ebb and flow of different requirements that are not clear to us that the universities seem to be imposing, which means that more academic, more gifted children, haven't gotten in, compared to less gifted, less academic pupils that did get in previous years, and that seems unfair.

Adult participants occasionally mentioned the difficulty experienced by their pupils and their relatives in understanding the reality of HE and its range of possible pathways.

For others it might be a lack of understanding as to exactly what is involved in higher education. (...) And I think the other big thing is a lack of knowledge of the diversity of courses that you can study at HE, it could be HNC/HND, it could be apprenticeships, it could be part-time, full-time, there's just a huge amount of stuff.

The second set of answers can be linked to the specific educational and institutional barriers faced by their pupils or their schools. In the first instance, some feared that their school could be disregarded by some universities, as these 'did not see their area as a place from which they are going to draw students', and wondered if they 'cared'. Some indicated that this feeling was embedded among their pupils, who '[had] the perception that coming from this area [was] not as good as coming from central Scotland, Edinburgh or a private school. (...) They [thought] the universities [saw] a difference.'

Second, they talked about how subjects offered in rural schools could prevent the transition to HE. In some cases, it concerned the lack of a large curriculum choice before S5 that could lead to some restrictions in S5 and S6 in a larger secondary school. In other cases, it was about the restriction of choice in S5 and S6 in some rural secondary schools that could impact access to university. They were very concerned that the universities were not sufficiently aware of their specific context.

'[Pupils] aren't always able to have exactly the right subjects as per the entry requirements for uni, so that can be a disadvantage, and I'm not sure how well that's received from admissions officers from huge numbers, if somebody doesn't have the subject, they're just put on the no pile, how much that's taken into account that they may have come from a very small school with limited subject choice.'

'So the people coming from [location] where they've only been able to choose from a narrow field come in wanting to do their Highers in fifth year. They see the entry requirements set by unis, they may not have been able to take those subjects.'

'I could see a time where as our school roll falls, we're maybe not able to offer as many qualifications and courses. That could become a challenge. (...) It might be that we have to say to young people, if you want to do three sciences or get three Highers in the sciences, you might need to do two one year and one the other year. Now, depending on the university's entrance requirements, that might be a little bit of a disaster, if they're looking for five Highers at grade A in one year or three sciences at grade A in one year.'

'From a rural school I think because our roll is small which means our staffing can be small, that also means we have to limit the subject choice of our pupils, which I think diminishes the depth and the range of choice that our students can take'

DISCUSSION: WHAT ACTION FOR THESE COMMUNITIES?

The collection of responses cited above and their exploratory analysis have addressed our initial research questions concerning the barriers to university access in rural areas. Three main research findings emerge. First, young people living in these Scottish rural communities seem to face similar barriers to HE entry to some of their peers in more urban settings and/or from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or in less remote locations. Fear of debt is foremost.

Second, they perceive that some of the financial and geographical barriers are higher because of where they live. The distance between their community and the HE institution leads to additional journey durations and additional travel and accommodation expenses. It also makes more daunting the forthcoming experience of leaving parents, relatives and peers in their close and tight community to live in an urban setting. Third, to these pecuniary and emotional costs are added some involuntary educational barriers because of a restricted choice of subjects in secondary schools. Educators feel that not everyone is well aware of these barriers.

The above allows us to reflect on the responses to a question posed to the educators only about where they saw the greatest need for action. They highlighted the need for better ways of communicating between universities and schools. Many educators felt that there should be a better articulation between the final years of secondary school and the first year of university. Only mutual efforts on both sides, in particular in terms of communication, would mitigate some barriers that some pupils experience, in particular those related to the lack of familiarity of HE or education.

Some adult participants agreed that more could be done with their former pupils and that they should collect more information from universities. Many would like to have 'better information and better advice about entry to university'. In particular, some would definitely like an improvement in communications from universities about rejection:

[Universities] might have good reasons for the rejection, but the information they're giving us is that the offers are made based on the grades, but that's clearly not the case, so what is making the difference? Because unless we have that information we can't advise people appropriately.

Finally, some adult participants recommended efforts in promoting rural schools and increasing confidence among their pupils.

'There's a bit of a marketing issue, particularly around rural schools or country schools, in getting pupils from country areas to believe that the universities are not thinking of them differently [than those] from city areas.'

'The schools in the public sector need to do a lot more work in increasing pupil confidence and self-esteem, their ability to believe in themselves and to aspire to more than they can achieve.'

CONCLUSION

This paper gathered views regarding barriers to HE entry for those living in some Scottish rural communities in Argyll & Bute, Eilean Siar, Highland, Orkney Islands and Shetland Islands. It pointed out that the perceived barriers to HE entry among those people were similar to the perceived barriers to HE among those living elsewhere. However, financial and geographical barriers were always felt to be higher because of additional pecuniary and emotional costs due to where they lived. The description of the educational barriers given by the young participants was sometimes different from that given by the adult participants. First, whereas most pupils felt relatively confident in the information they were given regarding access to HE, educators thought that more could be done. Second, the latter indicated that their pupils could face involuntary barriers in terms of subject choice. As a result, they felt they could improve the information they give to HE institutions, for instance through better communication about the rural factor. They also felt that the HE institutions could improve their communication with them regarding admissions and articulation. This would be beneficial not only to them, but also to all stakeholders.

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