



**The influence of place:**

**Geographical isolation and  
progression to higher education**

February 2019



*A powerful urban-rural divide, as much as a regional one between north and south, is marked in terms of the way urban centres operate as foci of cultural capital and social capital.<sup>1</sup>*

*There is a stark contrast between the widening participation and outreach activities (both university and third-sector provided) that exist in London and what is present in culturally and economically deprived communities in peripheral areas. London has an infrastructure for widening participation and outreach on a scale which simply does not exist in more peripheral parts of the country. Student mobility on entry to university occurs against a backdrop of highly unequal access to cultural enrichment and outreach for students post-16.<sup>2</sup>*

*The combination of poor transport links and lack of local higher education provision can mean that moving away from home is the only option for young people living in some rural communities. This appears to be a barrier for some. The higher costs and the added risks involved in studying away from home make this option less appealing to some young people and those who are less confident that higher education is right for them.<sup>3</sup>*

*The moralistic coupling of education and leaving generates a discourse of schooled salvation that, as usual, elevates the already privileged.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Savage. (2015) *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, London: Penguin, p. 296.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Donnelly and Sol Gamsu. (2018) 'Home and Away: Social, ethnic, and spatial inequalities in student mobility', The Sutton Trust, p. 16. Retrieved from: <https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/home-and-away-student-mobility/>

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education. (2017) 'Understanding the changing gaps in higher education participation in different regions of England', p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Corbett. (2007) 'Travels in Space and Place', *Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol 30, Issue 3, 771-792, p. 789



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# Foreword

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Take a minute to think about where current education policy is likely to take us in England, and to some extent in Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland run things a little differently.

I went to school in England in the years immediately after most state schools had been made comprehensive. In the city in which I grew up, no one really knew whether the old secondary modern (located in the affluent north of the city) was better or worse than what had been the county grammar (located near the manufacturing plants), and most children went to their nearest school.

But when league tables were published in the 1990s, the social divides between local schools began to widen and widen. House prices around good schools soared upwards and those schools were increasingly perceived as 'better' and more successful. Upper middle class parents began to calculate whether to avoid the house price hike and instead move their children from schools in weak catchment areas to private schools. Average, but not upper, middle class parents could not afford that option, but they could at least shun the worst areas with greater determination, and so sink and substandard schools became more common. To where will all this logically lead?

Today young people are told to compete ever harder to go to university and to try to go there as quickly as they can, preferably at age eighteen. Since 2012 the cap has been lifted on the number of students any university can take. This shift to competition amongst universities has contributed to devaluing other non-university routes into employment. Muddled attempts to bring back apprenticeships were made, but the educational maintenance allowance was abolished. And then English and Welsh universities began to market themselves everywhere they could with hoardings at bus stations and advertising in social media and even adverts placed on local TV. The message was 'winners go to university', especially to universities with the right brand image.

The successful institutions grew and grew. If this continues the city of Durham could soon become seen as solely a university town, the same with Loughborough, and Exeter, and any number of places that stole some advantage in the early rounds of the introduction of 'the market'. Other institutions will shrink, just as the overall number of eighteen year olds is shrinking. Some smaller universities, particularly those serving peripheral communities, may no longer be financially viable and have to close.

The closure of a university will be disguised as a merger with a neighbouring town's institution. This withdrawal of provision of higher education from some places will inevitably have a negative impact on the most economically deprived and vulnerable. Coastal towns on England's North West coast, for example, will become places from which the talented young will flee. We will end up with more and more student ghettos and weaker, diminished communities unless initiatives such as those documented in this report are begun.

British post-war politicians once talked of the brave new world to come in which the old would live in comfortable housing in mixed communities, and through their windows they

would watch as ‘parades of perambulators’ passed by, pushed by parents who smiled and waved at both the old and young around them. Some of the children went on to local higher education, others didn’t, but all could be happy and the pay-gap between graduates and non-graduates was soon at its lowest ever. Polytechnics were built for local people, just as universities had been before them. For instance, long before both World Wars, the University of Sheffield was founded with the money raised from thousands of penny subscriptions paid by steelworkers so that their grandchildren would have a university they could attend. The introduction of the market into higher education cruelly stole those dreams and the principle behind that initial investment.

The recommendations in this report will help to initiate the changes required to begin to mitigate some of the worst effects of the opportunity landscape we have created. In a normal small European mainland city there is a normal small European university. It does not boast on its website to be the best (better than all the rest in similar towns). The buildings are often not flashy, but the teaching tends to be excellent, as are the outcomes: a highly skilled multi-lingual, technically able and imaginative workforce.

Opportunities across much of the rest of Europe exist for well funded, good quality further education. That is not the same in Britain where institutions are constantly competing with their neighbours for ‘student FTEs’ and working with the perennial fear of being ‘market failures’. Good education requires some stability. In mainland Europe, the young mostly live with their families, not in student ghettos, or in apartments funded by private finance initiatives with huge returns to recoup. Remote schools and universities are helped out, not penalised.

We have a very long way to go, but with reports such as this we can begin to point the way towards a better destination and a fairer distribution of resources across the higher education sector to support high quality local provision. In Britain, young people from more isolated rural areas and poorer social backgrounds may be particularly vulnerable to losing out in our increasingly market-driven higher education system. Sorting this all out will take time. And will require many small steps.

## Executive summary

There has been a welcome increase in attention to geographical inequality by Government and policymakers over the last couple of years. The Social Mobility Commission, the Sutton Trust, and the Education Policy Institute, amongst others, have been active in highlighting the importance of place in the social mobility debate.

In 2016, the Social Mobility Index exposed a ‘new geography of disadvantage in England’. It identified huge differences between different parts of the country in terms of the opportunities available for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Improving understanding of the complex features of this ‘geography of disadvantage’ is vital to address social inequality. But this knowledge and rhetoric has not been coupled with meaningful action, particularly around improving the collection and availability of data to enable deep insights into the influence of place on school-level attainment and progression to higher education.

At all stages of a child’s educational journey place matters and shapes outcomes in various dynamic and complex ways. For children and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, place can have a particularly strong effect on outcomes. Typically, the more affluent you are, the more mobile you are, and therefore place is less limiting with regard to opportunities and outcomes. Social mobility is closely entangled with geographical mobility – in ways that this report will go on to explore and challenge.

The drive to achieve social mobility has meant that wider, structural issues relating to social equality have been overlooked. In the context of thinking about the influence of geographical remoteness, the concentration of policy on ‘fair access’ and ‘widening access’ has taken precedence over more material matters regarding physical access to educational opportunities and the distribution of resources across the further and higher education sector. A preoccupation with ‘fair access’ reproduces organisational structures and hierarchies and diverts attention away from the challenges associated with distance.

This study contributes to the debate on geographical inequality by focusing on the impact of living in isolated rural and coastal areas on progression to higher education amongst young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This is an under-explored area of educational research and an overlooked dimension of government policy. Along the coasts and across the countryside of England, large numbers of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds are failing to achieve their full academic potential, and are being neglected by interventions more focused on urban areas where the concentration of economic deprivation is higher. We expose the way that socio-economic and geographical factors collide and therefore increase the barriers faced by those who experience financial hardship.

We have produced this report in collaboration with a team of experts and experienced practitioners – from schools, colleges, universities, charities, and government departments – that we convened to assist us in better understanding the challenges facing young people in isolated areas, and in identifying possible solutions: the Rural and Coastal Disadvantage Working Group (contributors are listed in the appendix, and we are deeply grateful to them).

We share case studies on outreach activity not as exemplars, but as illustrations of diverse ways of responding to the barriers of dispersal, distance, and transport. Additionally, we highlight the role of the higher education institution as ‘place maker’, rethinking widening



participation and expanding its dimension to make regional economic growth a strategic component.

We make practicable recommendations for government, schools, the higher education sector, and third sector organisations to promote socio-economic reform. These highlight the urgency of building knowledge and understanding to inform policy to narrow the gap in attainment; increasing widening participation activities in remote communities; promoting flexible and part-time study; and enhancing and extending local higher education provision. Our recommendations are derived from reviewing the literature and historical data, conversations with members of the Working Group, and interviews with school leaders. They are supplemented with case studies that address some of the challenges faced by schools, the third sector, and higher education institutions with regard to engaging and supporting school pupils in remote areas.

We hope that our report will initiate action to improve the educational outcomes of young people living in remote areas – particularly through a sustained and joined-up approach to rural proofing policy – and give rise to further research to strengthen the evidence base. More widely, our aim is to shift attention away from the social mobility debate to increase focus on efforts to achieve greater social equality.

## Key findings

- The prevailing model of social mobility is widely regarded as unhelpful for remote communities. It places too much emphasis on supporting young people to achieve highly in school in order to leave their local area for higher education and training and secure a graduate job. This means that communities in remote areas are depleted of highly talented young people who have a vital part to play in energising local cultures and economies. Additionally, its focus on the individual detracts from wider issues, such as distributing resources across higher and further education providers to give rise to greater geographical and educational equality.
- There is a weak evidence base on the relationship between geographical isolation, socio-economic deprivation, school-level attainment, and progression. We have encountered numerous obstacles in trying to redress this deficiency through quantitative data collection and analyses. Since the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) in 2013, no national body has been responsible for improving the evidence base and there has been little imperative for change.
- Pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds in rural areas have lower levels of attainment compared to their peers in urban schools. Recent aggregate figures from the Department for Education show a higher percentage of pupils attaining a 9-5 pass in English and mathematics GCSEs for rural pupils (47.8% versus 42%). But examining this by IDACI decile shows that the percentage of pupils achieving 9-5 in English and mathematics GCSEs is lower for rural pupils at every IDACI decile.
- A pupil's distance from school can impact on their capacity to engage in after school enrichment activity; and a school's isolation from other schools, employers, charities, colleges, and higher education institutions may affect their capacity to offer a diverse range of additional high quality provision. The pressures on resourcing are more keenly felt without the support of external providers.
- Educational and widening participation interventions are predominantly focused on deprived areas rather than on the location of deprived individuals, often disregarding the dispersed nature of rural poverty. This has a negative effect on those from lower socio-economic backgrounds living in remote areas.
- Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds living at a distance from higher education institutions, who do not have the option to commute, are faced with more complex decision-making around participation.

- Deprivation indices have been consistently shown to be dominated by the characteristics of urban populations and are less able to describe rural deprivation.
- The higher education sector lacks hard evidence on the spatial distribution of outreach activity and there is no imperative for institutions to consider place in their approach to targeting.

## Key recommendations

A full list of practicable recommendations is given in the report's penultimate section. The key ones are outlined here.

### Social mobility policy

- Government and policymakers should weaken the link between geographical mobility and social mobility and recognise the attraction of place. For too long, there has been a connection between 'moving on' and 'moving up' which involves treating people as 'a-spatial' and assumes a narrow, economic idea of mobility. The economic domination of London and large urban centres has meant that the greatest career rewards, in economic terms, are received by those who are mobile and willing to move to large, 'escalator' cities. This yoking of social mobility with geographical mobility has a negative impact on those who have a strong attachment to place and choose to remain in more remote areas.

### Strengthening the evidence base

- Government departments must work collaboratively to improve access to the evidence base regarding sparsity, deprivation, attainment, and progression to higher education. Improving on the current processing time for data requests to the National Pupil Database (NPD) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is key, whilst also ensuring that publicly available data include place as a dimension. Currently available Department for Education attainment data based on pupil residency could easily be manipulated to incorporate sparsity; currently available HESA data on entrants to higher education could similarly build on existing postcode data to include remote geography, with additional dimensions along part-time/full-time entry and young and mature entrants.

### Schools

- Schools with average or below average levels of Pupil Premium pupils should work cooperatively to pool expertise and resources to narrow the gap in attainment. Clusters of schools need to be established with shared strategic objectives to develop and offer a range of interventions to better support pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds and ensure on-going professional development. These might include increasing one-to-one or small group tutoring; creating a cross-school teaching post focused on the needs of Pupil Premium pupils; cross-school learning skills workshops; and specialist careers, information, advice and guidance.
- Schools should monitor participation in 'enrichment' activities and make provision to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. For instance, vouchers could be provided for transport; and incentives provided to promote participation in extracurricular

activities. Reporting should be a requirement for all schools.

- Schools serving sparsely populated areas should have additional, ring-fenced funding to recognise the increased costs associated with supporting progression to further and higher education. These may include: providing beyond school learning opportunities; cross-school collaboration (shared teaching and professional development) to support the progress of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds; access to external expertise; and careers and employability activities.

#### Further and higher education

- Improve understanding of the geographical distribution of outreach activities, particularly those to raise attainment and promote progression. We need to better understand the way that each higher education institution spends its widening participation budget in terms of place.
- Increased investment in further education and the creation of a national qualification structure at level 4 and 5. For many young people living in isolated areas who choose to remain at home, the lack of choice, quality, and funding available for sub-degree qualifications has a huge impact on their employment outcomes. Increased funding and status needs to be awarded to further education colleges to recognise the vital role they play in remote parts of the country in providing opportunities for learners of all ages.

#### Third sector

- Greater flexibility towards measures of deprivation by grant-awarding bodies and increased recognition of the influence of geographical isolation on educational outcomes. Grant-awarding bodies need to adjust their measures of deprivation to recognise the influence of geographical isolation on attainment and progression to higher education and scrutinise their reliance on Free School Meals (FSM) and POLAR as proxies for economic deprivation. This would encourage more charitable organisations to intervene to narrow the gap in attainment and promote progression in remote areas.
- Increased recognition should be given to the role that the third sector is already playing in identifying remote areas and working with higher education institutions to deliver impactful outreach programmes. The Office for Students (OfS) could do more to identify organisations with particular expertise in working in remote areas to help higher education institutions to develop new creative partnerships.

## Research methodology and scope

1. This report is driven by the practitioner focus of our Working Group to: synthesise knowledge on the influence of geographical remoteness on school-level attainment and progression to higher education; gather examples of existing and effective practice; and identify practical solutions for policy.
2. Our report addresses the following research questions:
  - A. To what extent does living in a geographically isolated place influence school-level attainment amongst individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds?
  - B. What is the effect of geographical remoteness on progression to higher education?
  - C. Are there any significant gaps in the evidence base that limit our understanding of the influence of remoteness on progression to higher education?
  - D. What practical recommendations can be made to strengthen the evidence base and reduce geographical educational inequality?
3. We conducted desk-based research on a number of key themes associated with geographical educational inequality to establish a theoretical context and to assess the state of the evidence base. This led us to see the importance of gathering new quantitative data to better understand the relationship between remoteness, socio-economic deprivation, and school-level attainment; and supplementing this with interview data from school senior leaders to develop an in-depth appreciation of the effect of remoteness on pupils' educational outcomes and attitudes towards higher education.

### Data analyses

4. To answer research question A, we interrogated a number of publicly available national datasets from the Department for Education (DfE). These included the most recent (2016/17 academic year) Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 attainment datasets. These present data on a school-level basis and can be linked to Rural/Urban geographical data via the DfE 'Get Information About Schools' tool. But analysis revealed the extent to which school-level data can obscure understanding of pupil-level experiences of geographical isolation. For example, schools are primarily in urban areas; and their location,

therefore, does not describe the influence of geography on its pupils who may commute to attend. Additionally, schools in sparse geographies may have fewer pupils, meaning that school-level data regarding an even smaller 'disadvantaged' group may be suppressed. Limited data is publicly available from the DfE on the basis of pupil-level residence which is required to enable analysis of the degree of rurality of pupil residence and how it interacts with attainment and deprivation measures.

5. To answer research question B, we interrogated the most recent publicly available DfE Key Stage 5 destinations data, which are also published at the school-level.
6. Our capacity to answer our research questions A and B was limited by the availability of data in this area. The process of interrogation has given rise to substantial responses to research questions C and D. Publicly available data are limited because of: the absence of sparsity (see Appendix 1 for definitions) as a dimension of attainment datasets;<sup>5</sup> the absence of detailed geographical information in publicly available higher education progression datasets; and an increased focus on place at the school-level.<sup>6</sup> As stated above, school-level data may mask variation in socio-economic deprivation, attainment, and progression linked with geographies of pupil residency.
7. In the following sections, crucial findings from the literature are therefore synthesised and viewed alongside analysis of the most recent publicly available data. Combined, these findings highlight the lower attainment of socio-economically deprived pupils in rural areas and the multiple limitations of publicly available data. These findings, along with others, give rise to a compelling case for the re-prioritisation of geographical inequality in line with current policy agendas regarding socio-economic background and progression to higher education.

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<sup>5</sup> The DfE previously published 'Residency-based small-area pupil attainment information' using the ONS Neighbourhood Statistics (NeSS). This platform closed in May 2017, and the most recent data using this system is for the 2013-14 academic year. These data comprised maps indicating, for example, the percentage of pupils in state-funded schools achieving 5+ A\*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent including English and mathematics GCSEs by Middle Layer Super Output Area (of pupil residence). (MSOAs are smaller areas within a local authority boundary, with a minimum of 5,000 residents and 2,000 households, and an average population size of 7,500.) Available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-neighbourhood-absence-and-attainment>.

<sup>6</sup> For example, HESA figures regarding entrants to HE. These are currently limited to the number of higher education student enrolments by domicile and country of institution attended; the percentage of entrants from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN, using POLAR3) and from state schools/colleges by UK Government Office regions; and the percentage of part-time undergraduate entrants by LPN. HEFCE research on POLAR3 and part-time young HE entrants found that entrants from more disadvantaged POLAR3 quintiles were more likely to study part-time than those from more advantaged POLAR3 quintiles. The report found that around 9% of young entrants in 2011-12 from Q1 studied part-time compared to 6% from Q5. The report also found that Q1 entrants accounted for 11% of the young HE entrant population but 14% of those studying part-time. Report available here: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180319114753/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201401/>.

## Scope

8. This report examines the English educational and policy context. On occasions, it refers to evidence and practice from Scotland where research and policy are more developed with regard to the influence of geographical remoteness on school-level attainment, progression to higher education, and the wider context of social mobility.
9. It does not attempt to represent all remote areas of England. Rather, it identifies key themes and challenges facing government, schools, and the higher education sector, to guide policy and highlight the imperative for a more joined-up and sustained approach to rural proofing.
10. The study focuses on school-level attainment and young entrants to higher education. The impact of geographical isolation on mature students and career progression are subjects for future research.



# Place matters: geographical isolation and educational experience

This chapter outlines some of the most distinctive evidence with regard to the influence of geographical isolation on school-level attainment and progression to higher education.

## Key points

- Pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds in rural areas have weaker levels of attainment than their urban peers.
- The attainment gap is more pronounced in rural areas.
- There are geographical and social inequalities in access to choice of type of institution and course.
- There is a lack of data on the intersection of place (at the lowest geographical level), social background, and progression to higher education to meaningfully inform policy

11. Historic data exposing gaps in attainment by socio-economic background and place has been overlooked. There has been a systematic failure to address the needs of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds who live in remote areas and have limited access to support beyond home or school. A policy focus on narrowing the gaps in urban schools, with high concentrations of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds, has had some positive results; but this should not take place at the expense of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds living in remote areas.
12. These failures in school educational policy are intensified by a weak commitment to economic regional development and to the generation of employment opportunities for people in remote communities. The commitment to driving growth in rural areas in the Industrial Strategy has not been matched with implementable policies and investment in public transport infrastructures.<sup>7</sup> For example, the County Councils Network has recently reported on the inadequacy of funding to enable rural and coastal areas to respond to the challenges facing them. 'The perception of counties as affluent areas has masked deep-seated socio-economic challenges and deprivation in

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<sup>7</sup> HM Government, Industrial Strategy. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf)

shire counties, while additional costs of delivering rural services are also not fully recognised in the way funding is allocated to councils.<sup>8</sup> An inequitable funding model has meant that funding has been disproportionately devoted to London and large urban areas.

13. Consequently, rural and coastal areas are amongst the worst performers in terms of supporting and enabling individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Devon, Kent, Cumbria, Northumberland, Worcestershire, Dorset, and Norfolk are perceived as social mobility 'coldspots' according to evidence from both Localis and the Social Mobility Commission.<sup>9</sup>
14. Importantly, the prevailing model of social mobility is widely regarded as unhelpful for remote communities. It places too much emphasis on supporting young people to achieve highly in school in order to leave their local area for higher education and training and secure a graduate job. The model means that communities in remote areas are depleted of highly talented young people who have a vital part to play in energising local cultures and economies (APPG, p.16; Donnelly and Gamsu, p. 26).

### **School-level attainment**

15. Pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds in rural areas perform less well compared to their peers in urban schools. Data produced by Defra in 2009 shows that pupils living in rural areas tend to have higher secondary school-level attainment than those living in urban areas.<sup>10</sup> But research has not discovered any characteristics specific to rural areas that gives rise to higher attainment; rather, rural areas are generally more affluent, and the higher levels of attainment are most likely a result of higher social levels. Defra data reveals significant variations between rural areas – particularly regarding sparsity – and weaker attainment levels of 'disadvantaged' pupils living in rural areas in comparison to their urban counterparts.

*Research into inequalities has shown that disadvantaged people who live in affluent areas can actually be worse off than those who are surrounded by other disadvantaged people. Our results may indicate a similar pattern, in that some types of disadvantaged pupils living in the generally more affluent rural areas of England appear to make less progress than disadvantaged pupils in the less affluent urban areas. These include rural pupils with low qualified mothers, those living in the affluent South East and those attending higher-attaining schools.*

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<sup>8</sup> All Party-Parliamentary Group (APPG), 'Social Mobility in Counties'. Retrieved from: <https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/unfair-council-funding-holding-back-social-mobility-in-rural-counties-mps-warn/>

<sup>9</sup> APPG, Social Mobility in Counties; Social Mobility Commission, State of the Nation 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Defra. (2009) 'Educational Attainment in Rural Areas'. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/rural-education>

(Defra, 2009, pp. 8 – 9)

16. Defra has not produced any recent detailed research on the differences between rural and urban areas; however, its latest statistical release shows that the pattern of weaker attainment amongst pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds in rural areas continues. At an aggregated rural level, English and Maths GCSE attainment results are on average better than in urban areas; but when the results are contextualised and examined by the level of deprivation in the area where the pupil lives, the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), rural areas had lower levels of achievement in English and Maths across the lower deprivation levels compared with urban areas.

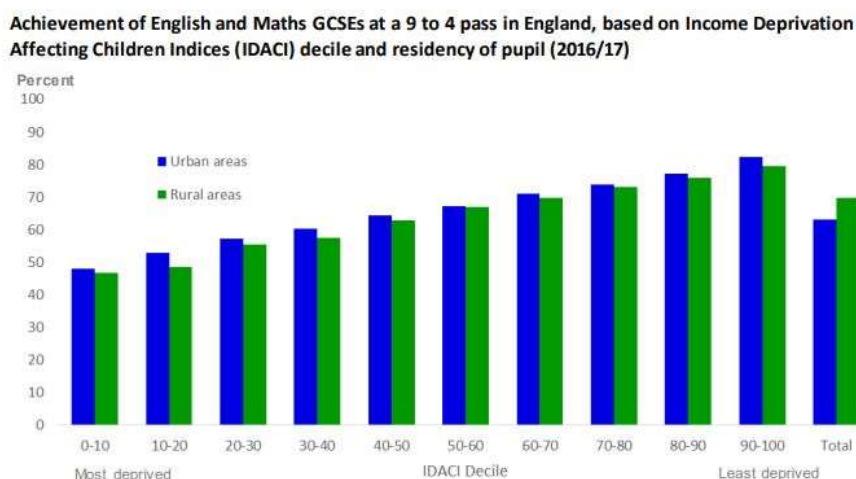


Figure 1: Defra, Rural Education Statistics

17. These patterns are born out in more recent, publicly available data from the Department for Education which examine how the degree of rurality of pupil residence interacts with IDACI and attainment. These data are limited to the overarching 'rural' and 'urban' classifications, preventing analysis of variation relating to sparsity/remoteness.
18. The figure below shows the percentage of rural and urban pupils residing in the different IDACI deciles, with 0-10 representing the most deprived areas. 23% of pupils live in rural areas within the lowest 5 deciles (0-10 up to 40-50) compared to 60% of pupils residing in urban areas. The majority of rural pupils are thus resident in relatively less deprived areas, which has an impact on attainment figures when examined at the aggregate level.

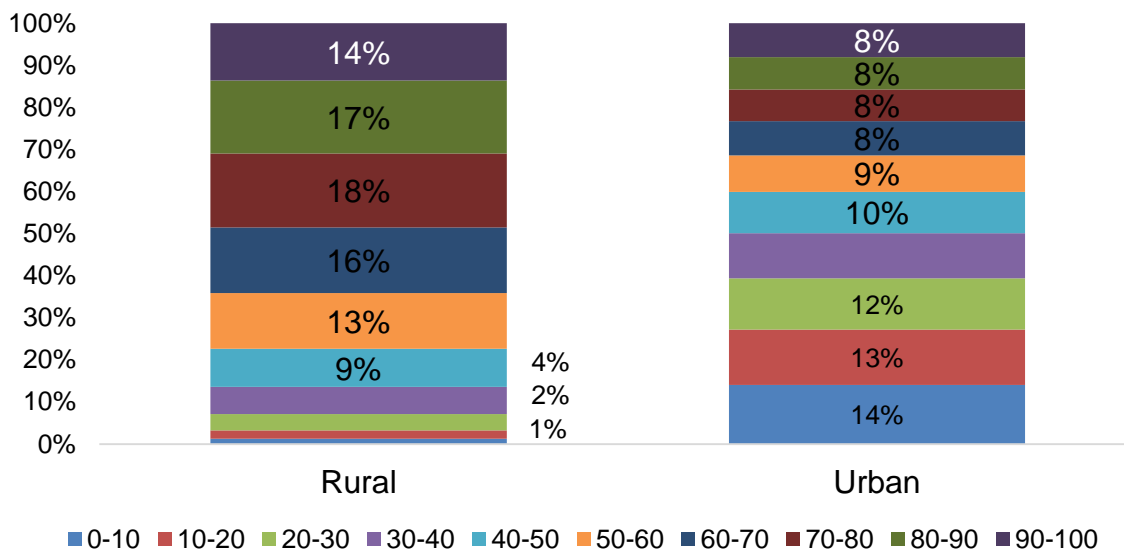


Figure 2: IDACI deciles of pupil residency by rural/urban geography

19. Hence, while aggregate figures show a higher percentage of pupils attaining a 9-5 pass in English and mathematics GCSEs for rural pupils (47.8% versus 42%), examining this by IDACI decile shows that the percentage of pupils achieving 9-5 in English and mathematics GCSEs is lower for rural pupils at every IDACI decile.<sup>11</sup>

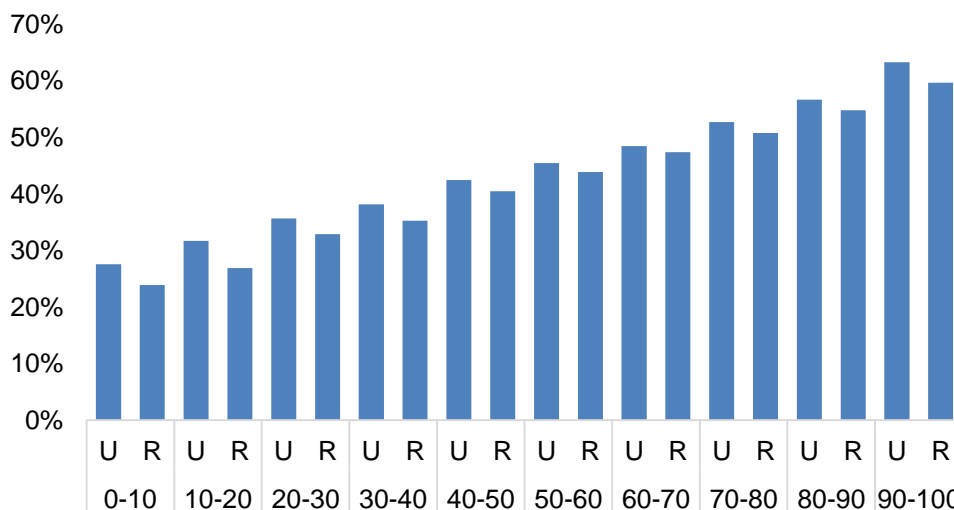


Figure 3: Percentage of pupils achieving 9-5 pass in English and maths GCSEs

20. Similarly, while aggregate figures show rural pupils as achieving higher Attainment 8 scores on average (48.6 versus 46.1), rural pupils have lower average Attainment 8 scores per pupil than their peers in urban areas at every IDACI decile (see below). This pattern is replicated in Progress 8 data.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-gcses-key-stage-4>

21. Sparsity has a negative impact on attainment amongst pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. (This includes pupils living in sparsely populated and remote areas, see Appendix 1). Analysis of GCSE achievement data linked with Output Area data allows for deeper understanding of the relationship between geography and educational attainment.<sup>12</sup> A report by the Office for National Statistics in 2010/11 revealed the influence of sparsity. 'There is a broad pattern: the more rural an area is, the better its pupils' results; the more sparse it is, the worse.'<sup>13</sup> This pattern is duplicated in the qualifications of the adult population.
22. With rural areas having a higher proportion of employed adults with qualifications from Level 2 – 4, and sparse areas having below average levels of employed adults with no qualifications (ONS, p. 43). This leads to the conclusion: 'where remoteness or sparsity can be shown, "two countrysides" often emerge' (ONS, p. 71). The report highlights the importance of gathering data at the lowest possible geographical level to obtain meaningful evidence to inform policy; and the need for further research to understand the influence of geographical isolation on educational outcomes.
23. The attainment gap is more pronounced in rural areas. The Education Policy Institute (EPI) released a report in 2017 examining the gap in performance between pupils from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds and their peers. It looked into the performance of economically 'disadvantaged' pupils over time and found that while the gap has narrowed slightly, 'persistently disadvantaged pupils end primary school over a year behind their non-disadvantaged peers and are over two years behind by the end of secondary school.'<sup>14</sup> By looking at trends in the 'disadvantage' gap by local authority area, they discovered significant geographical variations in performance. Most notably, they found that the gap becomes more prominent in rural areas by the end of secondary school. 'In areas such as Cumbria and Northumberland, the gap is 9 months at the end of Key Stage 2 but widens significantly to over 25 months by the end of Key Stage 4' (EPI, p. 6).
24. The Social Mobility Commission has repeatedly highlighted the challenges facing young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds as a result of living in remote parts of the country. In their most recent State of the Nation

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<sup>12</sup> Evan Odell also found evidence of geographical isolation having a negative impact on GCSE-level attainment by analysing attainment data linked with the data on the level of school isolation. See 'Lonely schools: the relationship between geographic isolation and academic attainment', Educational Research. (2017) Vol. 59, No. 3, 257-272.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Pateman. Office for National Statistics. (2010/11) 'Rural and Urban Areas: Comparing lives using rural/urban classifications', p. 57. Retrieved from: file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/rt43ruralurbanarea\_tcm77-221319%20(6).pdf

<sup>14</sup> Education Policy Institute. (2017) 'Closing the Gap? Trends in Educational Attainment and Disadvantage', p. 10. Retrieved from: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/closing-gap-trends-educational-attainment-disadvantage/>

Report, their analysis ‘shows that people who grow up in a remote rural or coastal area or in a former industrial area face far higher barriers to improved social mobility than those who grow up in cities and their surrounding hinterland.’<sup>15</sup>

*Many of these areas combine bad educational outcomes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with weak labour markets that have a greater share of low-skilled, low-paid employment than elsewhere in England. Remote rural and coastal areas also suffer from poor connectivity by transport, so restricting opportunities still further.*

*(Social Mobility Commission, 2017, p. 12)*

25. There are a number of school-based factors contributing to the weaker educational attainment of pupils in remote areas from lower socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, the Social Mobility Commission identifies the following: the difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers; the difficulty of establishing effective school partnerships because of the distance between schools; and limited investment in education in remote areas in comparison to London.

### **School enrichment and outreach activity**

26. Terminology is used inconsistently in this area: ‘out of school’, ‘after school’, ‘extra-curricular’, and ‘enrichment’ are often used interchangeably and are not clearly defined, therefore making it difficult to achieve a comparative analyses of particular kinds of provision and who has access to it. School ‘enrichment’ activity might encompass a diverse range of clubs and activities provided internally by schools but also by external organisations, such as charities and higher education providers. The variations in terminology, combined with the array of providers, means that research in this field tends to be small-scale, localised, and descriptive.
27. In addition to variation in terms relating to ‘enrichment’, research lacks common definitions of place, such as rural and coastal. And, until very recently, there has been little imperative for researchers to examine the singular features of places and how they impact on educational provision. The introduction of Opportunity Areas, however, may give rise to new research that devotes greater attention to the interaction of geography, local communities, and schools in the delivery of ‘enrichment’ activity.

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<sup>15</sup> Social Mobility Commission, ‘State of the Nation Report 2017’, retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/662744/State\\_of\\_the\\_Nation\\_2017\\_-\\_Social\\_Mobility\\_in\\_Great\\_Britain.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf)

28. There is differential access to out of school provision based on geographical isolation and social background. There is evidence to suggest that school 'enrichment' activity has a positive impact on pupil attainment at Key Stage 2, and theoretical frameworks indicate the importance of such activities for schools.<sup>16</sup> They are an integral – if implicit – part of a school's responsibility to offer a balanced education. But only recently is empirical evidence beginning to emerge to underpin this perspective and inform policy. This is important in the context of evidence from our interviews with Heads that highlights differential access to out of school provision based on geographical isolation and social background. Many pupils who live in remote locations are unable to participate because of their dependence on school transport at the end of the school day.
29. A pupil's distance from school can impact on their capacity to engage in after school enrichment activity, but, additionally, a school's isolation from other schools, employers, charities, colleges, and higher education institutions may affect their capacity to offer a diverse range of additional high quality provision. The pressures on resourcing are more keenly felt without the support of external providers. More particularly, geographical isolation can limit a school's capacity to engage in widening participation outreach activities. This uneven access to widening participation resources is well documented by Donnelly and Gamsu and is demonstrated in our case study of two coastal schools (Donnelly and Gamsu, 'Home and Away', p 5).
30. The imperative for outreach activity to focus on areas of deprivation has meant that insufficient attention has been given to remote areas where deprivation is widely dispersed. The measures used to identify and target schools can mean that schools in remote areas are overlooked. For instance, the percentage of pupils in receipt of Free School Meals is often below average. Additionally, logistical and practical issues can present barriers for organisations and institutions in the design and delivery of interventions.
31. We have found some evidence from schools to indicate that widening participation activity is most effective for remote areas when it is embedded in schools, begins at Key Stage 3, and is on-going. Our engagement with schools and members of the Working Group has repeatedly exposed the limitations of short-term interventions, particularly those targeted at pupils in Years 10 and above; in part, because of the barriers of distance and transport. Where schools have the resource to create widening participation posts, or where external expertise is regularly available, interventions are more likely to be sympathetic to the local community and its culture, recognising the determining role of place in career decision-making.

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<sup>16</sup> J. Chanfreau et al. (2017) 'Out of school activities during primary school and KS2 attainment', Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

32. We found no evidence of rural proofing of policy related to fair access and widening participation. This means that funding is not allocated in a way that recognises the ‘sparsity factor’: the additional ‘unit costs’ associated with providing services in remote areas. This has implications for: the funding of schools and higher education providers; the policies of grant-making bodies and philanthropists supporting the third sector to deliver outreach activity; and for student finance.

### Progression to higher education

33. Defra’s latest statistical release (April 2018) suggests that the rate of entry to higher education by 18 – 20 year olds in 2016/17 was slightly lower in ‘predominantly rural areas’ than in ‘predominantly urban areas’. This data draws on the Local Authority Rural-Urban Classification,<sup>17</sup> and does not consider the influence of sparsity or social background.<sup>18</sup>

#### Full-time entrants to higher education

Full-time entrants to higher education per 1,000 people aged 18 to 20 in England

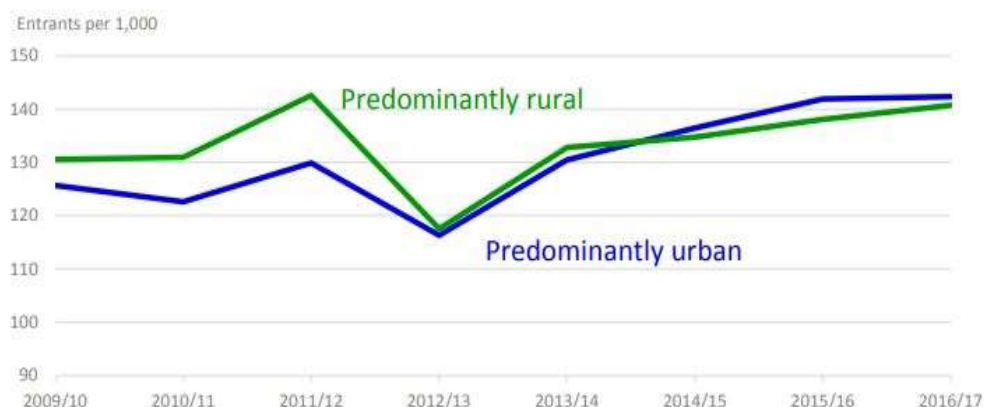


Figure 4: Defra, Statistical Digest of Rural England, 2018

34. ‘Predominantly rural areas’ have had a consistently higher rate of part-time enrolment to higher education for 18 – 20 year olds than ‘predominantly urban areas’. These findings indicate the need for further analyses, at a more granular level, to understand the influence of place and socio-economic background on the type of engagement with higher education.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-rural-urban-classification>

<sup>18</sup> Defra. (2018) Statistical Digest of Rural England. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/702710/03\\_Statistical\\_Digest\\_of\\_Rural\\_England\\_2018\\_April\\_edition.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/702710/03_Statistical_Digest_of_Rural_England_2018_April_edition.pdf)



## Part-time entrants to higher education

Part-time entrants to higher education per 1,000 people aged 18 to 20 in England

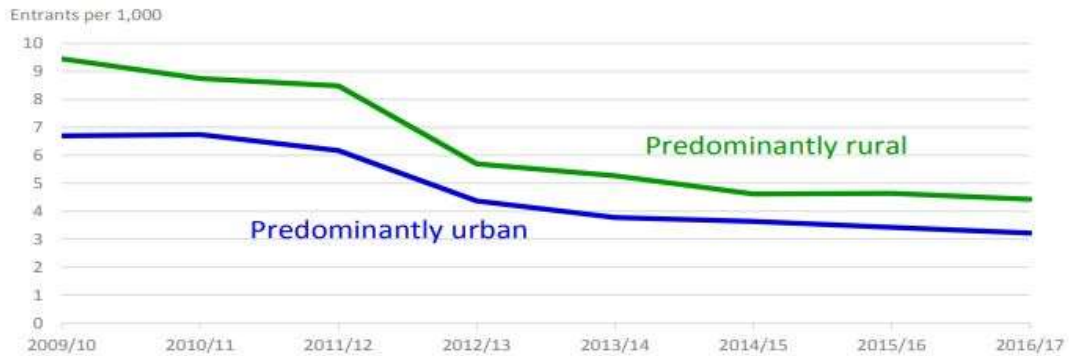


Figure 5: Defra, Statistical Digest of Rural England, 2018

35. Whilst broad geographical patterns in progression to higher education have been observed, until recently, there has been little attention to understanding the features of place in any detail, such as geographical isolation, and their interrelation with socio-economic background. As stated previously in our 'Methodology', without access to HESA pupil-level data, to link with Output Areas, it is not possible to observe the influence of sparsity on progression to higher education.
36. In remote rural and coastal areas, participation in higher education amongst those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds is significantly lower than in urban areas. The Social Mobility Commission has played an important role in researching geographical inequality in participation in higher education. It has identified the gaps between regions (unexplained by prior attainment) and recognised the influence of remoteness, at local authority level:<sup>19</sup>

*In remote rural and coastal areas, disadvantaged young people are half as likely to gain two or more A-levels (or equivalent qualifications) and half as likely to enter university as those in our country's major cities. There are six local authority areas in the country where just 9 to 11 per cent of disadvantaged young people go to university – less than half the average rate. These areas tend to have limited access to higher education locally, which restricts choice for low-income youngsters who wish to live at home while studying.*

*(Social Mobility Commission, 2017, p. 17)*

<sup>19</sup> The Social Mobility Commission uses the 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Local Authority Districts in England to determine remoteness:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/591464/RUCLAD\\_leaflet\\_Jan2017.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/591464/RUCLAD_leaflet_Jan2017.pdf)

37. But closer scrutiny of the data is required to understand the intersection of factors, remoteness and social background, to arrive at an in-depth understanding of progression to higher education to inform the rural proofing of policy.
38. Studies uncovering patterns in student mobility that are spatially and socially determined are revealing in the context of analysis of the influence of remoteness on participation in higher education. Whether they commute or move out of their parental home, the majority of young people now attend their local higher education institution (55.8% in 2014/15), within 55 miles of their home address when they apply (Donnelly and Gamsu, 'Home and Away', p. 4). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are significantly less likely to leave home to attend a higher education institution, along with those living in northern regions, compared to those from higher socio-economic backgrounds and those living in the south. These findings are important in highlighting the spatial and social inequalities in access to choice of type of institution and course. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds living at a distance from higher education institutions, who do not have the option to commute, are therefore faced with more complex decision-making around participation.
39. Distance from higher education may be a barrier for some individuals who are unsure about the merits of higher education and its value for money. The Department for Education conducted a study to understand the gaps in participation that are unexplained by attainment. It examined some of the local factors behind participation to try and account for the gaps between regions (even when attainment is accounted for). The study exposed the barrier of distance from higher education institutions for some individuals living in remote communities:
40. The combination of poor transport links and lack of higher education provision can mean that moving away from home is the only option for young people living in some rural communities. The higher costs and the added risks involved in studying away from home make this option less appealing to some young people and those who are less confident that higher education is right for them.<sup>20</sup>
41. The evidence base regarding the influence of remoteness on progression to higher education is far from conclusive. A large-scale study by Gibbons and Vignoles found no evidence to indicate a connection between proximity to a higher education institution and the *probability* of participation in higher education. But it did disclose the influence of distance on higher education

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<sup>20</sup> DfE. (2017) 'Understanding the changing gaps in higher education participation in different regions of England', p.11. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-understanding-participation-gaps>

choices amongst those who participate.

*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.<sup>21</sup>*

42. Whilst further research is required to gather robust data on the relationship between sparsity, attainment, and participation in higher education, evidence is mounting of the geographical inequality in access to choice of type of institution and course. As Vignoles has indicated in more recent research, this gives rise to unequal graduate outcomes by social background.<sup>22</sup> There is significant variation in earnings by course and type of institution, with attendance at the most selective institutions offering the greatest premium in terms of earnings. A consideration of geographical inequality in progression to higher education cannot take place in isolation from analysis of uneven outcomes by place and social background.
43. The strength of local economies and the visibility of graduate jobs may have an impact on participation in higher education. The Department for Education found evidence of a relationship between the visibility of graduate level jobs to young people and their parents, and attitudes towards higher education. 'A lack of local employment opportunities can be a spur to aspirations to leave, but where young people have close local ties, lack of local opportunities and optimism could also create lower aspirations' (DfE, 2017, p. 11).
44. Place is a key, but under-explored, determinant of choice. Donnelly and Evans conducted a study which highlights the influence of local cultures on young people's decision-making around higher education. There are variations in the degree of attachment to place which need to be factored into research on progression.<sup>23</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that individuals feel a stronger attachment to place in more rural areas.

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen Gibbons and Anna Vignoles. (2009) 'Access, Choice and Participation in Higher Education', Centre for Economics of Education, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Jack Britton, Lorraine Dearden, Neil Shephard, and Anna Vignoles. (2016) 'How English domiciled graduate earnings vary with gender, institution attended, subject, and socio-economic background', Institute for Fiscal Studies.

<sup>23</sup> M Donnelly and C Evans. (2016) 'Framing the geographies of higher education participation: schools, place and national identity', British Educational Research Journal. Vol 42, Issue 1, 74-92.

# Research review: deprioritising the needs of remote learners

This chapter assesses the state of the evidence base and factors contributing to educational and geographical inequality.

## Key points

- There is a weak evidence base on the relationship between place, socio-economic deprivation, school-level attainment, and progression to higher education.
- The higher education sector lacks hard evidence on the spatial distribution of outreach activity and there is no imperative for institutions to consider place in their approach to targeting.
- The narrative on low aspirations in remote communities is unhelpful and is not supported by evidence. It detracts from the structural barriers to progression uniquely faced by individuals in remote communities.
- Policy has consistently overlooked the dispersed nature of rural poverty and the needs of remote pupils have been disregarded.

## The state of the evidence

45. Geographical terms are used inconsistently and rural can be understood to mean 'sparse' without recognising variations across England or the complex interrelation between sparsity, remoteness, and settlement size. Additionally, the singular issues of coastal communities are overlooked as they are subsumed in rural/urban definitions. It is not within the scope of this report to respond to the limitations of these designations. But it is important to recognise the singularity of coastal 'sparsity' in relation to rural, particularly when it refers to sparse town and urban fringe settlements; and the need for further research to ensure the lived experiences of communities are recognised in national reporting to inform policy design.
46. Data is collected by institutions and government departments using various geographical levels, not always at the lowest possible geographical level, Output Area, and this makes it difficult to observe the effect of sparsity and to make comparisons between datasets. It would therefore be useful to establish different geodemographic classifications, such as a rural-specific output area

classification.<sup>24</sup>

47. Government departments are unable to access each other's data and this limits the gathering of meaningful and rich data that links place and attainment. For instance, the Office for National Statistics is unable to access the National Pupil Database and link it with Output Area data.
48. We have observed a weak evidence base on the relationship between place, socio-economic deprivation, school-level attainment, and progression in rural and isolated areas. We have encountered numerous obstacles in trying to redress this deficiency through quantitative data collection and analyses. Since the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) in 2013, no national body has been responsible for improving the evidence base and there has been little imperative for change. The CRC played a key part in ensuring that:

*The government, other public authorities, and Parliament had access to detailed and unbiased research on rural communities. (...) The loss of the Commission has diminished the Government's understanding of rural society, rural economies, and rural communities, and the ability of Parliament and others to hold the Government to account.<sup>25</sup>*

49. Deprivation indices have been consistently shown to be dominated by the characteristics of urban populations and, consequently, are less able to describe the nature of rural deprivation.<sup>26</sup> Poverty that is measured by the proportion of all households falling below the recognised poverty threshold (based on the percentage of the mean weekly income) can prove unreliable in sparsely populated areas containing small proportions of the total population, making estimations difficult. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) has a strong urban bias. For instance, even when datasets are available at the Lower Super Output Area level, they include 1500 people. But many settlements in rural areas are far smaller than these, meaning a LSOA may cover settlements and households that are vastly different from each other as small deprived areas or isolated cases of deprivation are surrounded by more affluent areas. The same problems extend to information derived from postcode data which is used in both POLAR and IDACI – measures

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<sup>24</sup> See work by Alex Singleton, in this context. For example, 'Creating open source geodemographics: Refining a national classification of census output areas for applications in higher education' (2009), *Regional Science*, Vol 88, Issue 3.

<sup>25</sup> Select Committee on the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. (March 2017) 'The countryside at a crossroads: Is the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 still fit for purpose?', p. 64. Retrieved from:

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldnerc/99/9902.htm>

<sup>26</sup> See D. Fecht et al. (2017) 'Inequalities in rural communities: adapting national deprivation indices for rural settings', *Journal of Public Health*.

commonly used by higher education institutions and the third sector to identify schools to target.

50. Alternative geodemographic classifications (such as OAC, ACORN, or MOSAIC) should be explored and rural proofing of policies associated with identifying socio-economic deprivation at both institutional and government level is vital. According to Acre (Action with Communities in Rural England):

*Rural areas are substantially more deprived based on the location of deprived people than based on the location of deprived areas. This level of understanding is a critical tool in influencing resource allocation for small and rural communities.<sup>27</sup>*

51. The higher education sector lacks hard evidence on the spatial distribution of outreach activity and there is no imperative for institutions to consider place in their approach to targeting. The Office for Fair Access did not require higher education institutions to report on where widening participation outreach activity took place through their Access Agreements. This limits us from observing any historic patterns in the types of places that benefit most from outreach activity and contributing to the knowledge base on geographical inequality. Our own interview data, combined with that collected by Donnelly and Gamsu ('Home and Away', 2018), suggests that there are 'stark' differences between the structures of widening participation activity in London in comparison to those in more peripheral communities. Although the Office for Students has yet to introduce a formal requirement for institutions to report on the specific places that are benefiting from their activity, we welcome the statement made in the Ministerial Guidance to the Office for Students in February 2018:

*We would like the OfS to map the coverage of outreach activity across the country to identify where there are potential cold spots in the coverage, building on any existing activities that have mapped such provision, and developing measures to address any cold spots through the levers it has.<sup>28</sup>*

52. There is a weak evidence base associated with the design and delivery of effective outreach programmes in remote areas. There is an urgent need for greater guidance on high quality, impactful interventions to promote progression to higher education amongst children and young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds living in isolated areas. This is important work for the Evidence and Impact Exchange to be established by the Office for Students.

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.rural-evidence.org.uk/pages/about/>

<sup>28</sup> Department for Education. (February 2018) 'Access and Participation: Secretary of State for Education Guidance to the Office for Students'. Retrieved from: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1112/access-and-participation-guidance.pdf>

## Cultural attitudes and perceptions

53. Cultural attitudes towards poverty in rural areas may play a part in concealing it. This contributes to the weak state of the evidence base and highlights the importance of treating data on rural poverty with caution. There is some evidence to suggest that the take-up rates of welfare benefits are lower in rural areas (Commission for Rural Communities, 2006) and this is supported by our interview data from school Head teachers. In areas where poverty is dispersed, parents may be less likely to take up the opportunity of Free School Meals (FSM) for their children. In schools where the percentage of FSM pupils is below the national average, which is common in rural areas, there is an increased risk of stigma. One Head spoke candidly of the complete failure of the system to recognise the local culture which values self-sufficiency and privacy. He regarded the FSM data in his school to be woefully inadequate in describing the scale of rural 'disadvantage'.
54. Policy has consistently overlooked the problems associated with dispersed deprivation because rural areas are often perceived to be affluent. It is likely that this is a product of unreliable data along with prevailing representations of the countryside as an idyll.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, policy has neglected to address important issues for social equality, such as access to further and higher education and key services; digital exclusion; poor transport links; and the outward migration of young people. These are significant issues for rural and coastal communities and economies which impact on young people's career trajectories.
55. All of the findings noted above converge to highlight the hidden nature of rural deprivation and create a significant challenge for researchers in understanding the influence of rural and coastal isolation on educational outcomes and participation in higher education.

### 'Places left behind'

56. For too long, people have been treated as if they are 'a-spatial' and can be understood in isolation from the place in which they live. Social mobility has been a key feature of government policy for over 20 years, informing initiatives across departments, from housing to education and skills and employment. But, while policies have been developed (with varying degrees of success) to weaken the link between social background and life chances, to-date, insufficient attention has been given to the role of geography in determining the outcomes of young people. In particular, there has been a lack of regard for the way in which geography – conceived in terms of both culture and

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<sup>29</sup> See Local Government Association, 'Health and wellbeing in rural areas', March 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.local.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing-rural-areas>; and Mark Shucksmith, (2018) 'Re-imagining the rural: from rural idyll to good countryside', Journal of Rural Studies, vol. 59.

topography – intersects with social background and shapes both opportunities and outcomes in education and employment.

57. The publication of the Social Mobility Index in 2016, by the Social Mobility Commission, has raised awareness of the influence of geography on educational and employment outcomes for policymakers. It measured the performance of local areas – using a suite of indicators – in promoting social mobility. By doing so, it exposed a ‘new geography of disadvantage in England’ and looked beyond social and educational inequalities simply defined by social background to highlight the determining force of place.<sup>30</sup> Significantly, the Social Mobility Index uncovered the reality that many of the most affluent areas of England ‘are doing worse for their disadvantaged children than places that are much poorer’ (p. 6). Affluent areas, which are often predominantly rural, cannot escape scrutiny simply because they have low concentrations of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
58. The Social Mobility Commission explored the significance of the findings revealed in the Social Mobility Index, amongst other evidence, to address geographical inequality in State of the Nation Reports. The Commission voices the influence of geography in determining life chances and identifies areas – particularly rural areas and post-industrial towns – that are being ‘left behind’ more affluent areas, such as the south-east; and describes them as ‘socially hollowed out’.<sup>31</sup> Whilst we welcome the increased focus on geographical inequality, we would urge the application of terms that place less emphasis on deficiency. A more enabling vocabulary is required to recognise, and value, the differences between places at the same time as voicing the uneven distribution of resources and power.<sup>32</sup>

## **Geographical mobility**

59. The way in which place shapes opportunities, and the decision-making process around education and employment, has startling implications for understanding progression to higher education and its segregated and steeply hierarchical structure. Historically, the primary beneficiaries of a university education have been young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Participation involved travel away from home to live on campus and this, in part, contributes to the association of the middle classes with increased geographical mobility. As the higher education population changes, however,

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<sup>30</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/496103/Social\\_Mobility\\_Index.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/496103/Social_Mobility_Index.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> Social Mobility Commission, State of the Nation 2016: Social Mobility in Great Britain. Retrieved from:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/569410/Social\\_Mobility\\_Commission\\_2016\\_REPORT\\_WEB\\_\\_1\\_\\_.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/569410/Social_Mobility_Commission_2016_REPORT_WEB__1__.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> D Beach et al. (2018) ‘Educational and spatial justice in rural and urban areas in three Nordic countries: a meta-ethnographic analysis’, *Education Inquiry*. Vol 9: Issue 1.



with increasing numbers of students from lower socio-economic background – combined with the higher level of student fees – the patterns of geographical mobility are varying along spatial and class lines.

60. Research by Dorling, Donnelly, and Gamsu, amongst others, is helping to introduce a geographical perspective into understanding participation in higher education and, therefore, into debates on social mobility. What is becoming increasingly apparent through the mapping of participation, by student characteristics, is that certain groups of students are more likely to attend a higher education institution closer to home. There may be a complex of factors behind this behaviour (financial, family commitments, attachment to place), but it is important that we begin to understand them, and their interrelation, to ensure greater social equality in higher education.
61. Research by Donnelly and Gamsu is also significant in illuminating the status of place – local and regional ties and affinities – in students' decision-making around higher education:

*We would argue that one interpretation of the regional variation in spatial mobility on entry to university is a regional structure of feeling too. These accumulations of regional ties, ways of being and speaking (accent styles), familiarity of landscapes and city-scapes all play into students' sense of self and feelings of fitting in. This deep historical and structural framing of young people's socio-spatial horizons represents a central yet under-theorised way of understanding the spatial patterning of student migration and HE choice.<sup>33</sup>*

62. Their study is limited to analysing HESA data by region and does not provide any insight into the particular characteristics of place that influence participation, such as remoteness. In signalling socio-spatial patterns of participation it does, however, point to the urgency of accessing geo-demographic data to enable researchers to build on their findings to increase understanding of the influence of geography on student choices and mobility.

### **Uneven regional economic growth**

63. Coastal and rural areas have weaker labour markets than large, well-connected, urban areas. In general, they are characterised by low-paid, low-skilled economies with fewer opportunities for high-skilled and high-paid

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Donnelly and Sol Gamsu. (2018). 'Regional structures of feeling? A spatially and socially differentiated analysis of UK student im/mobility', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. Vol 39: Issue 7, p. 13.

work.<sup>34</sup> The Social Mobility Commission found that in social mobility coldspots, in remote rural or coastal areas, only a quarter of residents have managerial and professional jobs compared with over a third in hotspots.<sup>35</sup>

64. There is evidence of weaker economic growth, particularly in coastal economies, when compared with other areas.<sup>36</sup> Small and medium sized businesses comprise a greater proportion of the local economy than in urban areas. This may lead to fewer graduate opportunities and weaker rates of career progression in these areas.<sup>37</sup>
65. Much of this is due to the sectoral composition of rural and coastal areas: with energy, agriculture, and farming dominating in rural areas;<sup>38</sup> and leisure, tourism, and fishing dominating in coastal areas. This has left coastal and rural areas exposed as these industries have struggled in comparison with other sectors. In this respect, rural and coastal economies are similar to former industrial areas and, of course, the two categories are not mutually exclusive. Rural and coastal economies can be more broad-base than one might expect and we must be careful not to characterise *all* economies in rural and coastal areas as described above.<sup>39</sup>
66. Some reports have suggested that the presence of weaker labour markets may lead to lower aspirations among young people; in turn, translating into lower rates of progression to higher education. For example, a 2006 ECOTEC report suggests this is the case in rural areas,<sup>40</sup> and The Centre for Social Justice makes the same claim for those in coastal areas.<sup>41</sup>
67. The evidence, however, that there is a more widespread culture of lower aspirations among young people in coastal and rural areas, in comparison with urban areas, is mixed at best. In fact, many have well-formed, realistic aspirations for their futures, and do not significantly differ from their urban or inland counterparts in this regard, even if they may not always be clear about the routes they need to take to obtain their ambitions.<sup>42</sup> While research

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<sup>34</sup> Social Mobility Commission, 'State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain', 2017; Shucksmith, M. 'Young People and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas', Journal of the European Society for Rural Sociology, 2004; DEFRA, 'Statistical Digest of Rural England', April 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Social Mobility Commission, 'State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain', 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Scott Corfe, 'Living on the Edge: Britain's coastal communities', Social Market Foundation, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Wilkinson, S. and Lane, K. 'Rural and Coastal Participation in Higher Education', Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, 2010; DEFRA, 'Statistical Digest of Rural England', April 2018.

<sup>38</sup> DEFRA, 'Statistical Digest of Rural England', April 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Communities and Local Government Committee, 'Coastal Towns', House of Commons, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> ECOTEC, 'Research Into The Aspirations of Young People in the Rural West Midlands', Commission for Rural Communities, 2006.

<sup>41</sup> The Centre for Social Justice, 'Turning the Tide: Social justice in five seaside towns', 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Spielhofer, T. et. al, 'Young People's Aspirations in Rural Areas', NFER, 2011. See also work by Sam Baars: <http://sambaars.com/how-young-peoples-occupational-aspirations-are-shaped-by-the-areas-they-live-in/>

indicates that young people's career aspirations are shaped by the areas in which they live, these area effects are complex and a nuanced approach is required to fully appreciate the intersection of factors.<sup>43</sup>

68. The narrative about lower aspirations in rural and coastal areas, worryingly, comes from key figures of influence in these young people's lives, such as teachers and local politicians, which is at odds with most of the qualitative research on this topic.<sup>44</sup> This is unhelpful as it detracts from the structural barriers to progression uniquely faced by individuals in isolated communities. Further research and discussion should focus on the contributing factors of structural inequality, rather than shifting responsibility onto individuals through a narrative of low aspirations not borne out by the evidence.
69. Some research has suggested that the lack of local opportunities provides an incentive for young people to succeed in order to progress to higher education with the hope of improving their employment prospects. This can lead to tensions in local communities between those who choose to remain and find work and those who leave to pursue higher education and training.<sup>45</sup>

*One stark contrast presented itself between those young people in education and those in employment. Young people in work saw their future in the local area (although some planned to leave but return at a later date), yet none of the young people in education saw any future for themselves in their local area, many going to university and as a result leaving the area.*

*(Midgley, 27)*

70. 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 higher education institutions and graduate jobs tend to be located.<sup>46</sup>
71. This is also the perception among young people growing up in rural and coastal areas; even those who express a desire to stay in their local

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<sup>43</sup> <http://sambaars.com/how-young-peoples-occupational-aspirations-are-shaped-by-the-areas-they-live-in/>

<sup>44</sup> The Centre for Social Justice. (2013) 'Turning the Tide: Social justice in five seaside towns'.

<sup>45</sup> Midgley, J. and Bradshaw, R. (2006) 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?: Rural youth transitions', IPPR North/Commission for Rural Communities; Commission for Rural Communities. (2006) 'Rural disadvantage: Priorities for action'.

<sup>46</sup> Shucksmith, M. (2004) 'Young People and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas', Journal of the European Society for Rural Sociology.

community, due to the pull of place, reluctantly accept that they would have to move away to access the job opportunities that they are aiming for. Migration figures, at least for rural areas, add weight to this idea. There is net outward migration for 15-19 year olds in rural areas, despite net inward migration overall.<sup>47</sup>

72. The movement of young people away from isolated communities, for education and employment, can give rise to negative attitudes towards higher education. Institutions can be seen to take talented young people away.<sup>48</sup> This presents difficult challenges for policymakers, regarding the uneven geographical distribution of employment and higher education opportunities.
73. The 'brain drain' may also contribute to a lack of role models in professional employment to engage young people in discussions of the value of higher education. There are clear benefits to having access to local people in graduate employment who can engage with young people, whether that's to provide career advice or to help navigate the process of accessing higher education opportunities.<sup>49</sup> More research is required to understand the impact of weak labour markets, and the resulting flight of talented young people, on the availability of role models for those growing up in isolated communities. It is not a new phenomenon and therefore highlights the failure of policy to address its impact on remote communities.
74. The limited nature of employer engagement in schools in remote communities may play a part in determining students' choices around higher education. This is due to the prevalence of small companies and the distance from large employers with resource for attraction activities. The young people in these communities 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.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Defra. (April 2018) 'Statistical Digest of Rural England'.

<sup>48</sup> Into University. (2015) 'Rural aspiration: access to Higher Education in rural, coastal and dispersed communities'.

<sup>49</sup> Rolfe, H., 'Rural Opportunities', National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Rolfe, H. (2008) 'Rural Opportunities', National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

## Recent policy initiatives and case studies

This chapter examines the policy context and identifies relevant activity relating to geography and progression. Case studies are provided to illustrate ideas and practice.

### Key points

- The focus of area-based initiatives on identifying and targeting deprived areas has meant that pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds in remote areas, where poverty is dispersed, are overlooked.
- There is a problematic tension between policies to encourage regional economic growth and the practice of high tariff higher education institutions targeting high ability pupils across the country, thereby encouraging out-migration.
- For regional development to take place, it is vital that the status and resources of further education and the post-1992 sector are increased.
- There is no government agency responsible for collecting data on the impact of policies and interventions for remote communities to inform the rural proofing of policy.

### Area-based educational initiatives

75. Educational initiatives have been designed that are targeted to the needs of 'disadvantaged' pupils and their communities in specific places. For instance, the 'city challenge programme' focused on large urban areas where deprivation is concentrated and promoted collaboration between schools, charities, employers, and local agencies to address educational inequality.<sup>51</sup> The success of the programme, particularly in London, (in terms of addressing gaps in attainment and progression to higher education) has galvanised research and investment in area-based strategies, placing emphasis on achieving sustainable change through partnerships embedded in the community. There is a widespread move to better understand the context of schools, and the local infrastructure and economy, in order to design the most effective strategy for improvement.
76. One key government initiative, that specifically draws on the Social Mobility Index and aims to improve the outcomes for children and young people in areas defined as 'coldspots', is 'Opportunity Areas'. It builds on the success of London Challenge, and other area-based models of educational intervention, to increase social mobility in 12 of the 'worst' performing areas of the country,

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-the-city-challenge-programme>

based on the Index and school attainment data.<sup>52</sup> The Department for Education has recognised the impact of geographical inequality and invested £72 million to create local partnerships with early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, employers, local authorities, and the third sector. The scheme views education as the primary driver of social mobility and, accordingly, focuses attention on improving teaching and learning in schools and enhancing careers advice and opportunities, amongst other activity. Importantly, each Opportunity Area is able to define its priorities and partnerships and adopt a distinctive localised approach. All areas are required to share evidence of impact by 2020.

77. West Somerset and Fenland and East Cambridgeshire are the two primarily rural Opportunity Areas amongst the areas selected. Whilst distinct, the two rural areas share challenges relating to poor public transport and limited employment opportunities for young people. It is too early to capture the impact of activity. But it will be crucial to discover the extent to which geographical isolation poses specific challenges for pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds, giving rise to strategic interventions.
78. While the policy of distributing resources on an area basis has proved beneficial to some areas, questions have been raised about its capacity to fully address geographical inequality. In particular, we have concerns over the choice of indicators used to inform targeting following our research into the limitations of indices of deprivation to describe poverty in remote areas. For instance, the Social Mobility Index uses data on the proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals in each local authority;<sup>53</sup> but our interviews with Head teachers identify the limitations of Free School Meals as a proxy for socio-economic status in rural areas.<sup>54</sup> It is vital that greater emphasis is given to the location of individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds rather than to the location of areas characterised as deprived.
79. Area-based initiatives are at risk of overlooking the heterogeneity within areas and the presence of extreme poverty in affluent areas.<sup>55</sup> A more developed understanding of geographical inequality should underpin the process of distributing resources as well as a rigorous approach to rural proofing policy.

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<sup>52</sup> Ellen Greaves, Lindsey Macmillan, and Luke Sibieta. Institute for Fiscal Studies and Institute of Education. (2014) 'Lessons from London schools for attainment gaps and social mobility'. Retrieved from: [https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/docs/london\\_schools\\_june2014.pdf](https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/publications/docs/london_schools_june2014.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> Social Mobility Commission, Social Mobility Index: Methodology. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/496107/Social\\_Mobility\\_Index\\_-\\_Methodology.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/496107/Social_Mobility_Index_-_Methodology.PDF)

<sup>54</sup> Additionally, it is important to recognise that Free School Meals is a threshold characteristic with huge variation in the performance of pupils based on the duration of time they have received the benefit. See Stephen Gorard. (2016). 'A cautionary note on measuring the pupil premium attainment gap in England', *British Journal of Education, Society, and Behavioural Science*. Vol. 14; Issue 2, pp. 1-8.

<sup>55</sup> Neil Harrison and Sue Hatt. (2010) "'Disadvantaged learners": who are we targeting?', *Higher Education Quarterly*. Vol. 64; Issue 1, p. 85.

## Case Study

### *The pressures on school resources: widening participation activity and student mobility*

#### **Brockhill Park Performing Arts College (Kent) and Dyke House Sports and Technology College (County Durham)**

Brockhill Park College, Hythe, and Dyke House College, Hartlepool, have played a role in our Rural and Coastal Working Group. Both schools are located on the coast and whilst they are in very different regional contexts, they share problems associated with being in areas with weak labour markets, typified by low-skill employment. The schools' Head teachers are highly ambitious for their pupils and attach importance, and resource, to widening participation activity: forging strong links with local higher education institutions and creating in-school structures to facilitate activity to raise expectations.

#### **Local and embedded widening participation**

Widening participation activity is embedded – an approach that is vital in more peripheral places – but the budget is limited: 'universities have a widening participation budget, but in schools, there is no budget for this sort of thing so it has to come from somewhere else' (Head, Dyke House). The schools turn to their local higher education providers to engage in on-going programmes that enable pupils to encounter expertise, both in an institutional setting and in the familiar environment of their school.

For Dyke House School, in particular, distance from high tariff institutions poses challenges that are intensified by the poor public transport infrastructure. These factors have an impact on the feasibility of the school organising trips for pupils and on higher education staff visiting the school. When reflecting on access to Oxbridge, the issues associated with logistics are compounded by a perceived approach to widening participation which is limiting for schools located in remote areas:

Generally, Oxbridge is where widening participation is done *to you* rather than a collaborative programme or visit. In the past, organising a visit to Oxbridge is met with lots of dead ends, and if you're unable to fund transport, you basically can't go. Cost is always suggested in the literature to be such a barrier to widening participation students and we don't feel comfortable perpetuating this barrier by asking pupils to pay for a visit. It's ironic that widening participation activities then become selective by background. (Head, Dyke House).

The evident pressure on some remote schools to resource widening participation activity to ensure that interventions are on-going and holistic, rather than one-off visits that are 'done to us', gives rise to questions around the adequacy of rural proofing of policy in this context. The geographical isolation of Dyke House, heightened by the limited public transport infrastructure, indicates the importance of diverting a proportion of widening participation funding directly to schools.

Brockhill Park has strong links with the Kent and Medway Progression Federation (KMPF), a partnership between the University of Kent, Canterbury Christ Church University, the University for Creative Arts, and 40 schools in the region. The KMPF has responsibility for widening participation activity and the Universities are highly accessible. Significantly, 'the universities use their widening participation money to pay for transport which is crucial because coaches are the biggest cost for these types of trips' (Head, Brockhill Park).

The difference between the two schools' experience of widening participation activity, regarding the availability of external resources, is striking. It highlights the wildly uneven distribution of funding for outreach activity and service provision.

#### **The benefits of a strong public transport system**

Pupils travel long distances to reach Brockhill Park and this can impact on attendance at

afterschool clubs. Pupils are reliant either on parental pickups or on the 'late bus'. 'What makes the school viable in terms of afterschool clubs is the wonderful Kent County Council which provide the Kent Freedom Passes which allows students unlimited travel for free' (Head, Brockhill Park). In providing the travel pass, the County Council makes a substantial contribution to the school and to access to enrichment opportunities.

Unlike Dyke House School in Hartlepool, Brockhill Park is well connected.

To get to London from school is incredibly accessible and takes less than one hour which I think is less than in some London boroughs. France is only a short ferry journey for us as Dover is only 25 minutes away. We are exceptional geographically because we're well placed and the access is amazing. Kent has two big motorways running through it. Places like Cornwall are totally different. (Head, Brockhill Park)

But in spite of the strong transport links to London and elsewhere, the Head recognises the differential access to them by social background. Hythe used to rely heavily on the fishing industry and the local population is predominantly working class. The Head perceives the transport system to be used disproportionately by the more affluent.

### **Student mobility**

Both schools report the classed experience of geographical isolation. The factors of distance and transport are not as limiting for those from middle and higher socio-economic backgrounds.

Our working class children do not like to travel but the rest of intake will travel. We send students all over the country. Our middle class children travel and have gone to Edinburgh and Newcastle Universities. Widening Participation students don't travel. There is a town called Lydd and everyone says, 'you don't leave Lydd'. They don't like leaving the Marsh. Rural isolation only impacts on widening participation students. Deprivation for the rural community is the real problem, not the rural in itself. For our middle class children, I would say it is a huge benefit. (Head, Brockhill Park)

Parents' attitudes towards travel away from home inform their approach to higher education which, in turn, shapes pupils' decision-making. The socio-cultural geographies of Hythe and Hartlepool inform the approach to widening participation and wider interventions to narrow the attainment gap.



## Widening participation policy

80. The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) is the current flagship government programme (now managed by the Office for Students) intended to address low progression to higher education. It requires local consortia of higher education providers to agree and manage programmes of activity for young people in Years 9 to 13 in selected wards. Government funds previously directed to supporting widening participation outreach activity by individual higher education institutions are now directed to local NCOPs for use in this subset of wards.
81. The methodology for identifying NCOP wards has been controversial because it targets those where progression to higher education is lower than might be expected, given GCSE attainment. This means that wards where both attainment and progression are low miss out on access to funds and other support. Data relating to deprivation or low income is not taken into account at all, despite the stated aim of the scheme to support young people from deprived areas. Areas that are arguably most in need – due to low attainment and high deprivation – may not be eligible for NCOP support. Crucially, given the focus of this report, individual young people who live in ineligible areas are excluded, regardless of their experience of financial hardship or their personal potential to progress to higher education.
82. Future iterations of the programme should use a different scale of geography to achieve greater granularity, such as Output Area. This would enable more localised decisions on allocating funding to schools and ensure interventions are in tune with the needs and interests of communities.
83. More positively, the Office for Students encourages local NCOPs to link with local initiatives where appropriate, for example with Local Enterprise Partnerships, and there are examples of good sharing of information. However, the variations in targeting methodology between initiatives can restrict collaboration. For example, as noted above, Opportunity Areas are selected using the Social Mobility Index. Furthermore, there are only 12 Opportunity Areas across England, meaning that there is very limited overlap with NCOP wards.
84. The lack of longevity and coordination of area-based initiatives means that their capacity to effect change is limited given the sort of structural and socio-economic factors underpinning educational inequality that are exposed in this report. The proposals for NCOP to support longer term collaborations through 'outreach hubs' in the future are, therefore, welcomed. The 'hubs' will have cross-England coverage to help schools and colleges engage in outreach

activity and complement the provision of higher education institutions.<sup>56</sup>

85. Individual higher education institutions continue to run their own widening participation outreach programmes. They are required to maintain a level of investment in this and to demonstrate effective practice, through plans agreed with the Office for Students. The selection of schools for participation in activities is likely to be determined by high levels of school-level socio-economic deprivation (measured by FSM, IDACI and/or IMD), as well as low average attainment and progression to higher education (POLAR). As noted already, some of these metrics are less accurate when applied to remote areas. Individual students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may, therefore, not have access to these higher education outreach programmes if they attend an ineligible school. In spite of the best efforts of widening participation departments at higher education institutions, the money is not necessarily getting to where it is most needed. This raises significant questions about how funding is allocated.
86. Individual students may, however, be eligible for the extra-curricular activities (run by many higher education institutions) that assess participants on an individual basis. Unfortunately it is often impractical for students in remote areas or for those living at a distance from the host institution to travel there.

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<sup>56</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/ecb6618f-a376-4ce5-bd04-27f0be8e9b37/bd-2018-december-41-access-and-participation-annex-b.pdf>

## **Case Study**

### ***Using technology to overcome geographical constraints in outreach activities***

#### **Brightside Trust**

Brightside works with partners from higher education, business, and the third sector to provide online mentoring programmes to help young people by raising their aspirations and supporting them to make confident and informed career decisions. While the majority of its programmes are not designed specifically to target schools in isolated areas, it has worked with a large number of schools in such areas. The charity's online platform has the potential to overcome some of the geographical barriers faced by universities and other organisations looking to engage with schools and provide careers support. The platform networks mentors with mentees from large numbers of schools, and from disparate places, following some initial face-to-face interactions to engage pupils and encourage them to participate.

Recently, the platform has been used specifically to respond to some of the particular problems pupils face as a result of their geographical isolation. A programme in 2016, called 'Access for Rural and Coastal Communities' (ARCC), was funded by HEFCE and designed to give pupils access to mentors from universities and a wide range of industries otherwise not readily available in more sparsely populated areas. It involved collaborating with 13 schools, across 3 regions on the South Coast of England, to engage pupils in Years 9 and 10 and 12 and 13. The programme ran for 15 months and over 400 young people took part. The evaluation found that 82% of mentees were more aware of the higher and further education options available to them and 72% were more motivated to explore those options. In addition, 100% of teachers would recommend the project to other schools.

The ARCC programme recognised the potential of the Brightside platform to provide additional support for pupils in isolated areas and has helped to highlight the possibility of using technology to reach those traditionally regarded by widening participation teams as 'hard to reach'. Following the success of ARCC, Brightside has refined the model for a number of projects as part of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), which recognises the strong influence of 'place' on young people's aspirations and life chances. Brightside tailors its interventions according to the specific needs of the local community. For example, Brightside's project with Next Step South West, which provides online mentoring to Year 10 pupils in over 20 rural and coastal schools in Somerset, Devon and Cornwall, tackles the fact that geographical isolation often makes it difficult for young people to visit universities and meet students by connecting them with undergraduate mentors. In its project with Hello Future, which is being expanded into nine schools in Cumbria, Brightside took into account the needs of the local labour market by recruiting mentors with a background in engineering, as well as other professional careers. The Hello Future project is also specifically targeted at white males from disadvantaged backgrounds, demonstrating how online mentoring can be used to address not just geographical but also other intersecting dimensions of disadvantage.

Brightside recognises that one of the distinct features of remote areas is the limited opportunity for pupils to encounter a diverse range of graduate-level careers. Accordingly, it is building links with employers to respond to the problem through recruiting an increasing number of mentors from professional backgrounds. "One of Brightside's unique features is to be able to connect young people in remote areas with professionals and opportunities across the country". (Anand Shukla, Chief Executive). This commitment to generating opportunities for remote students is reinforced by Brightside's schools network, which will see the charity working more directly with schools to provide tailored Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) for their careers programmes.

This approach means that the charity is able to work with rural and isolated schools even if they have low numbers of pupils receiving Free School Meals – schools that are often overlooked by interventions focused on reaching areas where there are high concentrations

of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

This will utilise the potential of the Brightside platform to overcome geographical barriers that are not being fully realised at present because of the lack of priority universities and organisations currently place on engaging pupils in remote areas where disadvantage is dispersed and found in low concentrations. The charity's engagement with partners suggests that rural and isolated pupils are rarely the focus of interventions; therefore any impact with schools in remote places is often an indirect result of large-scale programmes across regions.

## **Case Study**

### ***The role of the third sector in bridging schools and higher education institutions***

#### **Push**

Push is a not-for-profit organisation that supports school-leavers and students, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, to make informed decisions about their futures and to have the skills and resources to make their choices a reality. It delivers sessions at schools across the country to engage young people in career thinking and planning.

The organisation is able to deliver services in geographical locations that may fall beyond the reach of higher education institutions. For instance, in 2017, members of the team visited around 55 schools and colleges in rural and coastal areas. The business model of the organisation means that the additional transport costs of working in remote schools are subsidised by work conducted in independent schools paying a commercial rate. Meanwhile, for all schools, the costs of delivering sessions are kept low: typically, one member of the Push team visits a school for an hour-long session.

Push is not limited to working with schools that meet a set of deprivation criteria. This allows the organisation to be flexible and identify schools to work with based around geography and destinations data. This is significant as the deprivation criteria widely used by higher education institutions and charities often leads to the exclusion of small schools or ones in remote areas where poverty is more dispersed. Consequently, Push has the opportunity to engage and inspire pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds attending schools with below average proportions of pupils eligible for Free School Meals.

The sessions delivered by the Push team, many of whom are stand-up comics or professional performers, are designed to be highly engaging, entertaining and informative. They aim to disrupt the pupil's default pathways (and their teachers' assumptions) and to stretch their imaginations about the possibilities for their future careers by sharing information and advice about different options, not limited to higher education. This emphasis on diverse possibilities and attaching value to them, rather than presenting higher education as the best option for everyone, is particularly important in schools that are distant from higher education institutions or where they are regarded with suspicion. Through making aspirations more focused, Push can support pupils' choice and skills and therefore raise expectations.

The organisation is currently delivering sessions for National Collaborative Outreach consortia, such as FORCE. But the rigid targeting criteria of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme pose challenges for Push, particularly when it comes to including schools in remote areas, many of which miss out on opportunities. The focus tends to be on towns as centres of delivery because it is more cost-effective for consortia to target larger schools which tend to be in larger centres of population. That way they can reach more pupils at lower cost. However this disadvantages pupils living in more remote places who are likely to experience fewer outreach interventions, if any.

Additionally, channelling funds to specific areas means that links between places that can be pursued along national lines – such as their rurality – are overlooked.

87. There is a problematic tension between policies to encourage regional economic growth – such as that outlined in the Industrial Strategy – and the practice of high tariff higher education institutions targeting high ability pupils across the country, thereby encouraging out-migration, and contributing to a phenomenon known as the ‘brain drain’.<sup>57</sup>
88. If the most able working class students in peripheral areas leave home and relocate to elite institutions in more economically successful urban areas, perversely, this could entrench the economic inequalities giving rise to socio-geographical inequalities (Donnelly and Gamsu, ‘Home and Away’, p. 25).
89. As long as spatial mobility is seen as a requirement for social mobility, policies will be weak in tackling regional economic and educational inequality. If we encourage the most able pupils to leave their communities for education and employment, the distribution of talent and wealth will continue to be uneven. For regional development to take place, it is vital that the status and resources of further education and the post-1992 sector are increased. This process will contribute to transforming the practices of large graduate employers, encouraging them to recognise the value of establishing hubs in various regions to attract a more diverse workforce.

### **Funding and rural proofing**

90. It is likely that the cuts in funding for further education colleges and the collapsed market for Level 4 and 5 qualifications have had a negative effect on skills development in remote areas.<sup>58</sup> This is combined with the retreat of higher education institutions from satellite campuses offering degree programmes.<sup>59</sup> The State of Rural Services Report, 2016, highlights the limited access to colleges and apprenticeship opportunities and the lower level of skills amongst people from rural areas.<sup>60</sup>
91. The Education Maintenance Allowance was introduced in 2004 to raise participation in post-16 education amongst young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In 2010 it was abolished and replaced with a less costly and more targeted scheme, the ‘16 to 19 Bursary Fund’. The Fund has been widely criticised for impacting negatively on young people from more remote areas who face higher costs associated with transport to school or college.<sup>61</sup> There has been insufficient analysis of the impact of the new fund

<sup>57</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> Dave Phoenix. (2018) ‘Filling in the biggest skills gap: Increasing learning at Level 4 and 5’, Hepi. Retrieved from: [https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/EMBARGOED-UNTIL-23-AUGUST-2018-Filling-in-the-biggest-skills-gap-Report-110\\_Final-web.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/EMBARGOED-UNTIL-23-AUGUST-2018-Filling-in-the-biggest-skills-gap-Report-110_Final-web.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> For example, the University of Brighton closed its campus in Hastings.

<sup>60</sup> <https://ruralengland.org/the-state-of-rural-services-2016-report/>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/oct/25/education-maintenance-allowance>

by pupil residency, although it has been found wanting, more broadly, in terms of narrowing the attainment gap.<sup>62</sup>

92. These issues around funding, and the provision of education and transport services in remote areas for young people, take place against the backdrop of the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities. There is no longer an advocate for rural communities at government level and there is no organisation responsible for articulating rural concerns in any coordinated way. Crucially, there is no agency responsible for collecting data on the impact of policies and interventions for rural communities to inform the rural proofing of policy.
93. It is important that all departments take responsibility for rural proofing policy rather than it being a specialised role within Defra. Policymaking, more broadly, needs to give greater attention to the influence of geography on social equality. Improved data collection and monitoring, following our recommendations, should help to inform this process.

### **The university as place-maker**

94. Higher education institutions can act as anchor institutions in coastal and rural areas to strengthen local economies and labour markets. 'The evidence shows that a doubling of universities in a region increases GDP per person by 4% to 5% on average.'<sup>63</sup> Institutions working with local business can help increase their productivity and innovation, as well as plug skills gaps.<sup>64</sup>
95. Where local higher education is provided by further education colleges, resources ought to be equivalent to a higher education institution. The uneven distribution of resources between tertiary and higher education means that further education colleges simply cannot play the same kind of pivotal role as a large higher education institution in fostering local prosperity.
96. The Office for Students recognises the potential of higher education institutions to contribute to local economic prosperity and is encouraging institutions to focus on improving the outcomes of graduates choosing to return to their home region. The Challenge Competition, for example, provides a way to foster innovative approaches to support progression into highly skilled employment. It is a response to uneven regional productivity and

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<sup>62</sup> Jack Britton and Lorraine Dearden. (2015) 'The 16 to 19 bursary fund: impact evaluation', Department for Education and Institute for Fiscal Studies.

<sup>63</sup> Universities UK, 'The role of universities in sustaining an industrial strategy for the UK', 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Universities UK, 'The Economic Role of UK Universities, 2015.

variations in levels of student mobility by social background.<sup>65</sup>

97. There are examples of institutions already acting as anchor institutions and having an impact on the local economy. For example, the University of Lincoln has established its reputation as a leader and influencer in responding to the needs of rural and coastal communities by creating courses to lead to jobs that would improve local services, such as health care. Intense policy focus has been given to graduate retention to improve student outcomes, but also to bolster the local economy. Many higher education institutions are also central to Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs), which play a role in attracting inward investment and promoting economic growth.

### **Case Study**

#### ***Joining up the dots: the role of universities in achieving regional economic prosperity***

#### **Professor Mary Stuart, Vice-Chancellor, University of Lincoln**

We are living in turbulent times with significant inequality within society, locales drained of up to date infrastructure, hollowed out economies and significant political turmoil. In recent months, there has been a burst of public debates on 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 seen as a priority, but until recently the connection between widening participation, place making, and economic growth has not been drawn. In other words, creating access to higher education and ensuring students complete their studies successfully in a large urban area where there are large numbers of graduate jobs is one thing, but in rural areas there is a need for universities to support economic development as well creating high skilled employment for the graduates to go into. In this short paper, I set out a case study of an anchor university in what is being called a 'left behind' area. I begin by examining the region of Lincolnshire and the development of the University of Lincoln.

Participation in higher education varies considerably across the country. In many of our major cities, participation is high but in many rural and coastal areas participation is much lower. Lincolnshire has one of the lowest participation rates in the country. It has considerably lower levels of graduates, 33% below the national average. Business density is also significantly below the national average. An 8% increase in the area would be required in order to reach the national average. It is also a county that until the turn of the century did not have a University. The University of Lincoln was established in 2001 and has grown from an institution of 2000 students, to 14,500 students in 2016. While being a national recruiter, the University of Lincoln recruits just over a third of its students from the region - now 44% of the University's graduates are employed in Lincolnshire.

The University is a major anchor in the region, bringing in new employment to the area and bringing high level skills to the region by working closely with local employers to both encourage them to take on graduates – some of the companies the University is now working with did not have any graduates in their companies and now have graduate training

<sup>65</sup> [https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/bb454c3a-6533-4347-b16d-ed19fc5fc850/ofs2018\\_38.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/bb454c3a-6533-4347-b16d-ed19fc5fc850/ofs2018_38.pdf)



schemes – and to develop new programmes to meet the needs of employers who cannot get graduates. One example of this integrated approach was a project with Siemens Turbomachinery, a branch of the Siemens Global Engineering firm, located in Lincoln. In 2008, Siemens were concerned that they could not attract or retain graduates into their business in Lincoln. This is a common issue for market towns and cities in rural areas. Through discussions between the University and Siemens, a new School of Engineering was established and now through an innovative project, Siemens recruits students during their study and retention rates of graduates are high. Siemens have also been able to reduce the graduate training in the company for these graduates from 2 years to 6 months because of the early engagement with the student Engineers. Similarly in Lincolnshire the NHS could not recruit nurses and pharmacists. So, the University responded and now trains nearly 250 nurses a year and 100 pharmacists.

Other anchor activities related to widening participation focus on school education where the University works in partnership with Schools to provide school-based training for new teachers, leading an academy chain which is developing higher attainment for pupils through deep emersion. In one area, only 7% of students used to go on to higher education, now it is up to 12% as a result of starting 6th forms and working with teachers to enhance the curriculum.

There are so many ways that Universities in rural and coastal areas can work with local people to enhance opportunities far beyond the basic tenants of widening access, and there is a real need to do so as there are few other resources that could provide this support. This approach is vital for social mobility.

98. Significantly, higher education institutions can establish campuses in more peripheral communities to respond to skills shortages, provide educational opportunities, and bolster the local economy. In the UK, the University of the Highlands and Highlands leads the way in responding to the needs of extremely isolated communities by creating strategic hubs, 13 colleges and research centres across the region.
99. In England, Coventry University's campus in Scarborough and the University of Exeter's campuses in Cornwall stand out as examples of models of establishing regional 'hubs'. The campuses demonstrate the possibility of large, successful higher education institutions extending their reach to create opportunities for remote communities and to contribute to rejuvenating local economies.

## Case Study

### *Flexible higher education in Scarborough*

#### **Coventry University and Scarborough**

Coventry University created Coventry University College, a highly flexible and lower cost HE model in 2011, admitting the first group of students in 2012 at a fee of £4800 for a full academic year of study. The thinking behind this was to create a highly flexible, quality alternative to the traditional academic model at a time of the introduction of increased tuition fees in English HE.

This led to conversations with Scarborough Borough Council, regional industry and commerce and local public sector bodies about the possibility of bringing this model to Scarborough, a recognised HE cold spot. CU Scarborough was created in 2015 and a new campus building was completed in 2016. The original academic offer was based on courses from CU Coventry but since 2016 CU Scarborough have developed a number of new courses which fit local and regional priorities.

One of the key areas where CU Scarborough has responded to local need is the introduction of BSc Adult Nursing. Local partners from health identified a forthcoming recruitment crisis in the Scarborough and coast area. CU Scarborough quickly developed the existing Coventry University adult nursing programme and were successful in gaining approval for delivery by the NMC in September 2017.

*“We are now working closely with CU Scarborough to offer a nurse training programme in Scarborough and hope to encourage local people to train as nurses and take up positions when they qualify.” (Dianne Swiers, Project Lead for Recruitment & Retention, NHS Scarborough And Ryedale GP Practices)*

Coventry has now developed significant experience in setting up campuses at some distance from Coventry. It is fair to say that the learning as to how to ensure corporate compliance and local freedom has been exciting, painful and instructive. The campus needs to be able to develop and respond to local need, from students, employers and all stakeholders. It is therefore a case of defining the red lines and openly discussing these, in the case of CU Scarborough, the red lines are around the flexible delivery model and the approach to curriculum structure. The greatest piece of learning has been about curriculum content and the response to local need. Aaron Armstrong, student on Primary Teaching and Education Studies:

*“Being a parent and having a family whilst studying a degree can be very difficult. CU Scarborough gave me the opportunity to study around work hours and still have time to be a parent. The BA (Hons) Primary Education and Teaching Studies course will allow me to pursue my career as a teacher and provide a better quality of life for my family.”*

The local community have engaged very positively with the project. This includes the leadership, political and executive, of the borough council, local industry, the arts and commerce, local public sector bodies including education and health and indeed the local population. The campus is now entering its fourth year of operation and has gained good profile for being part of the community. The next stages are going to be even tougher in moving on from new start-up to established and embedded provider.

## Case Study

### ***Establishing campuses in Cornwall and stemming the 'brain drain'***

#### **University of Exeter**

One of the founding principles of the University of Exeter was to “complete the education system of Devon and Cornwall by a university of their own to give ... children as good a chance in life as children elsewhere”. The University founded the Institute of Cornish Studies in 1970 and has had a presence in Cornwall since the Camborne School of Mines merged with the University of Exeter in 1993.

Prior to the development of the Penryn Campus, Cornwall had one of the lowest levels of Higher Education participation in the UK, which was recognised as holding back the growth of the Cornish economy. Today, despite the continued expansion of Higher Education across the whole of the UK, Cornwall remains in the bottom quartile in the UK for access to and participation in Higher Education. The University of Exeter's objectives are to widen participation in Higher Education, raise aspirations in young people and support the regeneration of the economy in Cornwall, however it is recognized that the gain will be cross-generational and not short term.

Our Truro Campus evolved from a partnership with the University of Plymouth and the NHS in Devon and Cornwall, establishing Peninsula Medical School in 2000, as part of a drive to increase medical student numbers in the UK.

#### **The impact of the campuses on the local communities: stemming the 'brain drain'**

In addition to our widening participation work with schools and colleges across Cornwall, and the County Council, we are increasing the number of HE places in the county and providing world-leading facilities for research, innovation and services to businesses; these measures are helping to transform the local economy and to make Cornwall more competitive.

The University of Exeter recently commissioned Viewforth Consulting Ltd to report on our economic impact. It found that in 2015/16 the University of Exeter supported £73.4m in output and 853 FTE jobs across Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly.

We have provided support to over 520 businesses (and growing) across Cornwall & Isles Of Scilly (IOS), through a number of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) projects. Our employability team work with local businesses to provide placements and consultancy projects for students. The 'Think, Try, Do' scheme also provides support and funding to aid students creating new start-up companies. The University of Exeter is a member of enterprise partnership SETsquared. Its objectives are supporting high tech start-up companies, providing student enterprise and enabling academics to maximise the impact of their research.

As a research intensive, TEF Gold rated institution, we are able to attract world-leading academics to come and live and work in Cornwall, generating research income and investment into the county. Our academics bring more than £16m of research income into Cornwall each year. As part of this, over the next few years the University of Exeter is working with a range of partners to deliver projects worth a total of £80M as part of the EU Structural Investment Fund. These projects will support around 400 businesses. For every academic post Exeter creates, around three additional jobs are created.

Our location in Cornwall is key to the University, and is often described as a living laboratory for our research and teaching excellence. Links with the Cornwall Spaceport, and Goonhilly Satellite Station will provide exciting opportunities for the future.

## Recommendations to build a stronger evidence base and inform practice

100. The following recommendations are designed to strengthen the evidence base to improve understanding of the influence of geographical isolation on progression to higher education; and to reform existing practice to increase resources and support for pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds living in remote areas.
101. Our recommendations are derived from:
  - conversations with members of the Working Group on Rural and Coastal Disadvantage;
  - conversations with school senior leaders;
  - desktop research, including analysis of publically available data;
  - and Bridge Group knowledge and expertise.
102. Some of the recommendations are specifically focused on identifying and targeting pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds living in remote areas, whilst others have a more general application. In some instances, recommendations to support greater social equality in higher education will inevitably have a positive impact on individuals from geographically isolated communities.
103. We have identified recommendations to be given priority by coding them green in the following list. These are ones we will be giving special attention to in our policy and advocacy activity over the coming year. We recognise, however, the importance of a concerted and joined-up approach in order to effect substantial social change.

Recommendations		Accountability and Implementation
<b>Social mobility policy</b>		
1	<p><b>Government and policymakers should weaken the link between spatial mobility and social mobility and recognise the attraction of place.</b> This involves reframing the narrative and changing the way that social mobility is measured to include indicators of wellbeing. The connection between ‘moving on’ and ‘moving up’ results in people being treated as ‘a-spatial’ (dislocated from their place and cultural context) and assumes a narrow, economic idea of mobility. The economic domination of London and large urban centres has meant that the greatest economic and career rewards are received by those who are mobile and willing to move to large, ‘escalator’ cities. But this conflation of social mobility with spatial mobility has a negative impact on those who have a strong attachment to place and choose to live in more remote areas, attend a local higher education institution, and secure a local job. For many, remaining in a particular place has more importance than earnings. This needs to be recognised and not seen as a sign of deficiency in socio-economic terms.</p>	Government and policymakers across sectors
<b>Strengthening the evidence base</b>		
2	<p><b>Government departments must work collaboratively to improve access to data to explore the evidence base regarding sparsity, deprivation, attainment and progression to higher education.</b> Improving on the current processing time for data requests to the NPD and HESA is of critical importance whilst also ensuring that publicly available data include place as a dimension (using Output Area Classification). Currently available DfE attainment data based on pupil residency could easily be manipulated to incorporate sparsity; currently available HESA data on entrants to higher education could similarly build on existing postcode data to include remote geography, with additional dimensions along part-time/full-time entry and young and mature entrants.</p> <p>Data is collected by institutions and government departments using various geographical levels, not always at the lowest possible geographical level, Output Area, and this makes it difficult to observe the effect of sparsity and to make comparisons between datasets. It would therefore be useful to establish different geodemographic classifications, such as a rural-specific output area classification.</p>	DfE, Defra, ONS, HESA

## Schools

### In-school teaching and learning

3	<p><b>Schools with average or below average levels of Pupil Premium pupils should place greater emphasis on working cooperatively to pool expertise and resources to narrow the gap in attainment and this should be incentivised.</b> Clusters of schools serving remote pupils need to be established with shared strategic objectives to develop and offer a range of interventions to better support relatively small numbers of pupils and ensure on-going professional development. These might include increasing one-to-one or small group tutoring; creating a cross-school teaching post focused on the needs of Pupil Premium pupils; cross-school learning skills workshops; and specialist careers, information, advice and guidance. Incentives to promote collaboration across schools will need to be introduced. These might include awards or accreditation for effective cross-school partnerships to distribute resources, skills, and educational programmes to support pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The Department for Education should create an award – with a financial prize to incentivise it – that recognises the development of effective school partnerships in remote areas to narrow the gap in attainment. The award could be a transport grant to promote on-going collaboration with schools, employers, charities, and higher education providers.</p>	DfE
4	<p><b>Schools should monitor participation in ‘enrichment’ activities to ensure accessibility and inclusivity.</b> For instance, vouchers could be provided for transport; and incentives provided to promote participation in extracurricular activities. Reporting should be a requirement for all schools.</p>	Individual schools, Local Authorities, DfE
5	<p><b>Increased scrutiny of schools’ curriculum offer is required to ensure that place does not limit the type of courses available to young people.</b> Many small and/or isolated schools are sometimes unable to offer a wide range of curriculum subjects at GCSE and A-Level because of difficulties in attracting and retaining specialist teaching staff. This can impact on pupils’ career decisions and choice of university course. Greater attention needs to be given to monitoring schools’ curriculum offer to observe any geographical inequality in access to subject choices. Laurence Lasselle has been leading research on this subject in the Scottish context and we would welcome further research in England to better understand the way that schools’ curriculum offer influences access to certain types of course.</p>	DfE, Ofsted
6	<p><b>Ofsted should increase the importance it gives to Careers, Information, Advice, and Guidance in its evaluation framework and carefully monitor the effectiveness of schools in their capacity to support their pupils in developing skills in career planning.</b> This is critical to expose geographical patterns in the provision of CIAG and to ensure that funding is targeted so that all pupils have access to employability skills and careers awareness provision. Anecdotal evidence suggests that isolated schools are often less able to attract a wide range of employers, colleges, and higher education institutions to engage with their pupils because of the barriers of</p>	Ofsted

	distance and transport. If substantial geographical variations in the quality of CIAG are disclosed through greater scrutiny, increased funding and resources should be targeted at the schools most in need of additional support to ensure their pupils have fair access to opportunities to improve life chances.	
7	<b>Schools serving pupils from remote areas should have extended lunch breaks.</b> Pupils relying on after school transport to get home are less likely to attend after school clubs, which might include academic support or other attainment-raising activities. It is therefore vital that extension and enrichment activities – provided internally or through external providers – are delivered during the school day.	Individual schools; academy trusts; and local authorities
Funding		
8	<b>Schools with large catchment areas that are defined as serving sparsely populated areas should have additional, ring-fenced funding to recognise the increased costs associated with supporting progression to higher education.</b> These may include: providing beyond school learning opportunities; cross-school collaboration (shared teaching and professional development) to support the progress of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds; access to external expertise; and careers and employability activities. Pupil Premium funding for pupils living in isolated areas should be increased to recognise the cost of securing the additional support they require, particularly regarding provision focused on attainment and career thinking and planning.	DfE, Education Endowment Fund
9	<b>Third sector organisations and funders should adjust their basket of measures to increase educational and careers support for young people living in remote areas.</b> We recommend adopting a more flexible approach to the way in which deprivation is defined and measured and attaching greater priority to the influence of place at the level of pupil residency. This will increase recognition of the way in which geographical isolation intersects with economic factors to compound the experience of ‘disadvantage’. At present, the third sector can be discouraged from designing and delivering interventions to engage pupils in isolated areas because grant-making bodies place emphasis on identifying schools in areas that are deprived and/or have high concentrations of ‘disadvantaged’ pupils, particularly through the use of FSM or POLAR data. Interventions in remote areas can involve higher costs, per pupil, and are therefore avoided. Resource allocation needs to undergo a process of rural proofing which may involve devoting greater attention to the location of <i>individuals</i> from lower socio-economic backgrounds and less on the location of deprived <i>areas</i> to ensure greater educational and geographical equality.	Third sector, funders
Further and Higher Education Outreach Activities		

10	<p><b>Improve understanding of the geographical distribution of outreach activities, particularly those to raise attainment and promote participation.</b> We need to better understand the way that each higher education institution spends its widening participation budget in terms of place. As higher education institutions are primarily located in urban centres, and outreach in remote areas can be logistically difficult and costly in comparison to focusing on more urban areas, incentives are required to transform the sector. Higher education institutions should be required to demonstrate the geographic reach of their widening participation outreach activity in Access and Participation Plans. This might include reporting on <i>where</i> higher education institutions spend their money to create a map of outreach spending. By knowing more about where higher education institutions focus their resources and efforts, we will be able to observe any gaps and see if they relate to levels of participation. This requirement for place-based information should drive forward changes across the sector to foster greater geographical educational equality.</p>	OfS
11	<p><b>The OfS could do more to identify third sector organisations with particular expertise in working in remote areas to help higher education institutions to develop new creative partnerships.</b> Increased recognition should be given to the role that the third sector is already playing in identifying remote areas and working with higher education institutions to deliver impactful outreach programmes. But this work needs to be rigorously evaluated and scaled up to engage pupils in parts of the country that are not currently benefitting from widening participation activities.</p>	OfS
12	<p><b>Increase the focus on place in the evaluation of outreach activities.</b> The Evidence and Impact Exchange established by the OfS should give attention to the role of place in the design and delivery of opportunities. The evaluation process provides an opportunity to increase understanding of the impact of interventions in communities where there is a strong attachment to place and reluctance amongst young people to leave the area. We would suggest the creation of a tool that would support higher education institutions in evaluating the impact of their activity in engaging geographically isolated young people.</p>	OfS
13	<p><b>A proportion of central Widening Participation funding should go direct to schools to be utilised to support the specific needs of its pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds and other underrepresented groups.</b> This may involve increasing resource on teaching and learning to support raising attainment and embedding widening participation activity in the curriculum and the life of the school.</p>	OfS
The Higher Education Institution as Place-Maker		
14	<p><b>Greater attention, and recognition, should be given to the role of higher education institutions in fostering</b></p>	OfS



	<b>local prosperity in Access and Participation Plans.</b> The OfS needs to consult the sector to agree appropriate metrics that should be publicly available to monitor progress. For instance, metrics on FTE job creation in the county. The OfS Challenge Competition is a welcome start to the process of increasing institutions' focus on regional economic growth for social equality, but a national strategy is required.	
15	<b>The metric used in the Teaching Excellence Framework on graduate earnings needs to be changed to reflect regional variations in earnings and to remove incentives for higher education institutions to promote moving to London to secure strong graduate outcomes.</b> Reporting needs to recognise the geographical context of higher education institutions and the impact of regional variations in the labour market. This would incentivise higher education institutions to support local graduate retention and give recognition to institutions doing good work in this area. At present, the metric scoring higher education institutions on graduate earnings reflects how far an institution is from London. Institutions located in the South East are disproportionately seen to be performing well for graduate salaries.	DfE
Admissions Process		
16	<b>The sparsity factor needs to be included in contextual data collated as part of the undergraduate admissions process.</b> Residential postcode is commonly used in association with ACORN to help the sector identify areas of particular deprivation. However, given the dispersal of deprivation in remote areas, combined with the way that sparsity can intersect with socio-economic factors to compound the experience of 'disadvantage', it is important that higher education institutions include a sparsity classification in their basket of contextual measures. This must be derived from pupil residency rather than from the location of the pupil's school.	Higher education institutions
Extended and flexible provision of higher education		
17	<b>More research is required to understand the influence of geographical isolation on part-time participation, particularly amongst mature learners.</b> Our report focuses on 18-19 year olds progressing to higher education, but further research is required to understand the influence of isolation on progression amongst mature students, particularly on a part-time basis. The evidence suggests that there is a strong demand for part-time courses in rural areas and therefore policy needs to respond to ensure that higher education institutions have sufficient incentive to offer places and that students are not deterred by student loans.	OfS

18	<b>For students commuting long distances to participate in higher education, increased support is required, including: flexibility over timetabling, online learning opportunities, subsidised travel, and affordable temporary accommodation.</b> Greater priority needs to be given to supporting part-time and commuter students to enable them to participate in college or university life, and this includes extra-curricular activities as well as academic study.	Higher education institutions, OfS
<b>Further Education and Alternative Routes into Employment</b>		
19	<b>Increased investment in further education and the creation of a national qualification structure at level 4 and 5.</b> For many young people living in isolated areas who choose to remain at home, the lack of choice, quality, and funding available for sub-degree qualifications has a huge impact on their employment outcomes. Our current system is unfair in disproportionately focusing resources and infrastructure on higher education. Increased funding and status needs to be awarded to further education colleges to recognise the vital role they play in remote parts of the country in providing opportunities for learners of all ages.	DfE
20	<b>Further education colleges that are offering higher education provision in more remote communities (such as Wiltshire College and Kendal College) should be given the funding required to support them in becoming anchor institutions, contributing to local economic prosperity through increased links with employers.</b>	DfE
21	<b>The introduction of a financial entitlement that is held by the individual and can be used for nationally recognised courses at further education colleges as well as higher education institutions whenever the individual chooses.</b> We support Professor Alison Wolf's recommendation to reform the funding system to improve tertiary education, ensuring greater parity of esteem between qualifications whilst granting greater agency and choice to the individual to encourage life-long learning. Our findings show the particular value of flexibility for those living in remote areas because of the barriers of distance, transport, and cost.	DfE
<b>Employers</b>		
22	<b>Employers should monitor applicants by residential postcode alongside factors to determine socio-economic status to understand geographical diversity and inequality.</b>	Employers

24	<b>Employers should give greater priority to target schools that serve remote communities in their outreach programmes, including but not only through digital experiences.</b>	Employers
25	<b>Employers concentrated in London should consider more actively developing regional hubs to distribute opportunities and attract a wider range of talent, and incentives for this should be in place.</b>	Employers

# Appendix 1: Glossary

## Rural and coastal

This report uses the Rural/Urban Definition, based on settlement type.<sup>66</sup> The definition utilises Output Areas which are helpful for understanding the sparsity of places. A number of data variables are adopted to make a rural/urban (sparse, less sparse) classification, such as population size, population concentration, and remoteness (defined as where people are in relation to each other). We use the terms sparsity and remoteness interchangeably as helpful terms to describe geographical isolation. Significantly, this definition does not discriminate between coastal or rural areas. This means that the singular features of coastal communities are not described and nor is it within the scope of this report to address this limitation in terminology.

The Rural/Urban Definition allows comparison between rural and urban areas; and its attention to sparsity means that urban areas, such as coastal towns and rural service towns, are understood in terms of their level of sparsity. This is important as coastal towns may be densely populated yet characterised by their distance from other urban centres.

This report is focused on the influence of remoteness and, therefore, is not limited to concentrating on areas defined as 'rural', although rurality and remoteness are often inextricably related. It avoids rural-urban binary thinking in order to draw out some of the shared features of places that are remote, uncovering factors that may influence individuals' academic performance and choices around higher education. Additionally, it recognises the deep, complex, and singular relationship between people and places, and we give voice to this in our commentary.

## Disadvantage

The term 'disadvantage' is often used to describe the intersection of factors disrupting school-level attainment and progression to higher education. We use the term self-consciously, recognising the way that it contributes to deficit model thinking, and, in the context of place, can lead to hierarchical assumptions around different types of places. But, at the same time, can be helpful in exposing the injustices of socio-economic policy – meaning that the distinct needs of some communities have been completely overlooked. In this report, we challenge prevailing narratives and assumptions around conceptions of place; proposing, instead, a more enabling spatial vocabulary to overcome classist assumptions and elitist models of thinking that are too often defined by large urban centres.

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/geographicalproducts/ruralurbanclassifications/2001ruralurbanclassification/ruralurbandefinitionenglandandwales>

## **Rural proofing**

Rural proofing is the term adopted by government, and other policymakers, to recognise the impacts of policy intervention and to ensure fair and equitable policy outcomes for individuals living in rural areas. 'Rural proofing is about finding the best ways to deliver policies in rural areas.' It is important that policymakers understand the specific characteristics of rural areas and how they may require the design of different solutions in comparison to urban areas.<sup>67</sup>

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/600450/rural-proofing-guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/600450/rural-proofing-guidance.pdf)

## Appendix 2: Participants of the Working Group on Rural and Coastal Disadvantage

Name	Role	Organisation
Jenny Ann	Senior Higher Education Policy Adviser/Manager for NCOP	Office for Students
Adrian Ball	Principal	Thetford Academy
Louise Banahene	Head of Educational Engagement	University of Leeds
Prof Stuart Billingham	Professor Emeritus of Lifelong Learning	York St John University
Anna Bird	Head of Policy	Social Mobility Commission
Paul Blagburn	Head of Widening Participation	University of Warwick
Dr Nicola Burns	Lecturer, Medical School	Lancaster University
Amanda Burnside	Principal	Wiltshire College
Emily Cannon	Access and Outreach Officer	Wadham College, University of Oxford
Jane Clark	Group Head of Graduate Resourcing and Development	Barclays
Jake McClure	Executive Director	City & Guilds
Michael McCluskie	Deputy Head	Scalby School, Scarborough
Dr Elspeth Lees	Head of Department: Science, Natural Resources, & Outdoor Studies	University of Cumbria
Ceri Dolan	Assistant Head	Dyke House College, Hartlepool
Dr Michael Donnelly	Lecturer, Department of Education	University of Bath
Felicity Dunworth	Executive Director	Kent and Medway Progression Federation
Sohail Faruqi	Director of East of England	Teach First
Tom Levinson	Head of Widening Participation/Lead of Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach Project	University of Cambridge
Sue Maskrey	Deputy Chief Executive	Brightside
Prof Julie Mennell	Vice-Chancellor	University of Cumbria
Richard Shiner	Head of Evidence and Effective Practice	Office for Students
Sonette Schwartz	Head	Brockhill School, Kent
Sharon Smith	Director	Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT)
Prof Mary Stuart	Vice-Chancellor	Lincoln University (and Deputy Chair of University Alliance)
Katy Theobald	Associate Director Research and Evaluation	Ambition School Leadership
Dr Chris Wilson	Co-CEO	The Brilliant Club







# About the Bridge Group

The Bridge Group is a not for profit consultancy, based at King's College London, that researches and promotes social equality.

Since its launch in 2010 at Google UK, the Group has established itself as an authoritative, independent voice, and has undertaken a wide range of high-profile commissions, including from the Cabinet Office, the Wellcome Trust, and KPMG.