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A case study of Higher Education pathways of rural students

How does living in a remote and rural community impact on higher education choices and subsequent career pathways? In the literature surrounding higher education and graduate employment an assumption seems often to be made that all students regardless of location have equal access to opportunities. Rosie Alexander, Careers Manager at the University of the Highlands and Islands, presents us with an exclusive insight into her on-going doctoral research study of the pathways of rural students from the Orkney and the Shetland Islands.

Introduction

Research shows that there are geographical differences in the provision of higher education (HEFCE, 2015) and the availability of graduate jobs (Ball, 2011). It also shows that not all students are equally able to migrate to access these opportunities, with migration rates varying according to a range of individual differences such as human capital, gender and ethnicity (Faggian, McCann and Sheppard, 2007a, 2007b 2006). Finally, employment outcomes for graduates may be associated with different migration patterns (Ball and Higgins, 2009; Ball, 2015).

In an ongoing project I am concerned to consider some of these issues in relation to two very specific rural and remote places – the Orkney and the Shetland Islands, which are two groups of islands situated off the north coast of Scotland, each home to approximately 21-24,000 people. As part of this research I have been considering the statistics from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey for full time first degree students originally domiciled in the islands for the period 2008/9 - 2012/13, and in this article I will present some key features of this data, each presented by theme.

Entry to HE: Location

The DLHE data demonstrates that students from the islands show a clear preference for the universities that are geographically closest (fig.1). The most popular university is Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen (attracting 13.96% of students), with Edinburgh the second most popular (13.02%) and Aberdeen the third (11.14%). The University of the Highlands and Islands (with campuses in Orkney and Shetland) shows a reasonable level of popularity (6.31%) – having a comparable popularity to the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde, which are over twice UHI’s size.

This is important because although research has shown that location is a key consideration for all students (Purcell et al, 2008) in rural and remote areas the impact of location may be even more marked. So, for example, whereas students based in Edinburgh or Glasgow have the choice of three or more institutions within their own city, and many more within a couple of hours’ travelling time, for Orkney and Shetland students, there is only one choice locally – the University of the Highlands and Islands. In addition, Aberdeen being the main port for ferry travel to the islands may give this city a disproportionately large draw.
Entry to HE: Subject choice

The courses that students from Orkney and Shetland choose to study are relatively comparable to the national averages (fig. 2). However, it is notable that Creative Arts and Design and Education appear to be relatively more popular, and some subjects that appear less popular are Languages, Computer Science, Social Studies, Medicine and Dentistry.

Because numbers are small it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from these statistics. However, it may be that there is a relationship between the local labour market and subject choice. So, for example, the creative industries sector is a key sector in the Highlands and Islands (Skills Development Scotland, 2014) whereas the islands have lower than average employment in sectors like finance and insurance (Highlands and Islands Enterprise 2014a, 2014b). Therefore it is perhaps unsurprising that creative arts and design are more popular subjects, and business and computing are less popular subjects in the islands than nationally.
Data for Orkney and Shetland taken from DLHE figures between 2008/9 - 2012/13 for full time first degree students originally domiciled in Orkney or Shetland. Data for Scotland is given for 2012/13 only and is calculated from HESA (2015c): Table 3a - Destinations of full-time first degree leavers.

Graduate destinations: Location and employment

In terms of destinations of graduates originally from Orkney or Shetland six months after graduation, the statistics show location continues to be important, with almost 40% of students (whose location is known) living in Orkney or Shetland (38.57%). Aberdeen remains a popular destination after graduation (with Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire accounting for the location of 13.93% of graduates of known location). However, overall graduates are more dispersed geographically, with for example, just over 14% of graduates whose location is known living elsewhere in the UK (other than Scotland) or internationally.

These patterns show that graduates are typically more mobile than students, but also that a significant proportion return to, or stay in their home locations. The high level of students returning or staying in the islands is important to note as it suggests that patterns of migration may be more complex than simply representing a ‘brain drain’ from rural and remote areas.
Graduate destinations: Employment

Overall, graduates from Orkney and Shetland have destinations comparable to national statistics. However, graduates who live in the islands after graduation appear to be more likely to be in non-professional work. In 2011/12 - 2012/13, 71.01% of students from the islands were in professional-level work compared to 69.2% of graduates from all Scottish HEIs (HESA, 2015c). However, only 66.67% of Orkney and Shetland graduates living back in the islands were in professional-level work. A similar pattern is observable in the statistics for 2007/08 - 2010/11, with professional-level employment of Orkney and Shetland graduates generally being comparable to the national average (at 66.15% compared to 66.53% nationally) but with lower levels of professional employment for those graduates living back in the islands (55.91%). Again, there is a potential relationship with the local labour markets of the islands which have lower than average rates of employment in professional and associate professional and technical occupations (Highlands and Islands Enterprise 2014a, 2014b).

In terms of the jobs undertaken by graduates, limited patterns can be observed because of the low numbers of students in each employment sector. However, it is perhaps notable that about half of those graduates from 2011/12 - 2012/13 who worked as teaching professionals were living in Orkney or Shetland six months after graduation (eight out of sixteen) and almost half of nursing and midwifery professionals (11 out of 24). This suggests that some graduates may choose subjects based on a planned return to the islands, and may help to explain the popularity of education as a subject choice.

The role of gender

In addition to the patterns noted, the statistics indicate some interesting patterns in relation to higher education and gender. Firstly, there is a very marked gender division in uptake of higher education, so in the five year period covered by the DLHE data, 36.38% of graduating students from Orkney and Shetland were male, and 63.62% were female. This compares to national figures for 2013/14, which show 54.7% of full-time first degree graduates are female and 45.3% are male (HESA, 2015b). The gender division is even more marked for graduates who choose to return or stay in the islands after graduation – with 74.07% of those living in Orkney or Shetland six months after graduation being female.

Therefore women are more likely to enter higher education, and those entering higher education are also more likely to return to or stay in the islands. The reasons behind this pattern are no doubt complex but the local labour market again may be significant, with both islands having above the national average employment in the male dominated sectors of agriculture, forestry and fishing, construction, and transport and storage, and having a greater share of employment in skilled trades (which do not typically require higher education qualifications) (Highlands and Islands Enterprise 2014a, 2014b).

It is potentially the case that for men career routes on the islands after school are relatively strong, whereas for women there may be fewer perceived options available locally straight from school.

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1 Percentage calculated on the basis of data taken from HESA (2015c) Table 4a – Occupation of full-time first degree leavers.
However, given the marked pattern of return in teaching and nursing professionals and the fact that these are female dominated professions it is possible that for women career routes after school may be more commonly perceived to involve a period of study ‘away’ before returning.

Conclusions
The data we have discussed shows some potential ways that student and graduate journeys may be impacted by rural and remote location. However this brief statistical overview also raises a number of areas for further research including:

- Analysis of how variables such as gender, subject choice, career choice and migration may be interrelated and how they may interact.
- Analysis of the motivations and perspectives of individual students - understanding why people make the choices that they do.
- Analysis of some of the differences (in terms of student choices) between rural and remote places like Orkney and Shetland as well as similarities.

Through qualitative interview based research with graduating students from Orkney and Shetland, my current research project will address some of these questions.

References


Faggian, A., McCann, P. and Sheppard S. (2007a) ‘Some Evidence that Women are more Mobile than Men: Gender Differences in U.K. Graduate Migration Behaviour’ Journal of Regional Science 47 (3), 517-539


