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# **‘Absolutely local’: Narratives of higher education at island colleges in and around the UK**

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## On every island...

All islands have a boundary, and you live your life within it, and you love it, or you break out and make a life elsewhere. On every island in the world, no matter how magnificent, there are those who cannot leave, and those who cannot stay.

(Call the Midwife Christmas Special, 2019)



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# Why look at island higher education?

**Global or  
local higher  
education?**

**Higher education  
for employability,  
social mobility or  
social justice?**

**Virtual  
learning and  
the physical  
university**

**Educational  
mobilities**

**College-based, dual-  
sector or non-  
university higher  
education**

**Education  
and the  
materiality of  
place**

**'Learning to leave:  
The irony of  
schooling in a  
coastal community'  
(Corbett, 2007)**





# Why look at island higher education?

## **Educational geographies:**

Mobility/immobility  
Mobility-privilege/immobility-disadvantage  
Education outside of urban centre

## **Islands and island-ness**

The island as metaphor  
The island as microcosm  
The island as contradiction  
The physicality of the island

## **Social geographies**

Place as concept  
Place and belonging  
Place and safety  
Rural, remote, coastal, island, urban  
places



## Literature review:

Educational  
geographies  
Islands and island-  
ness  
Social geographies

## Documentary analysis:

Policy documents  
Marketing documents

## 3 case colleges:

Interviews with HE  
managers and tutors  
Interviews with students on  
two HE courses  
Participatory mapping as  
part of student interviews

Narrative analysis of interview  
data:  
Findings presented  
today



## Case study colleges:

Located on islands ranging from around 60km<sup>2</sup> to around 1,000km<sup>2</sup> in size, and from around 20,000 to 90,000 in population.

A range of relationships to the UK mainland, from crown dependencies to Scottish jurisdiction.

Two independent colleges offering higher education through partnerships with UK universities. One member of the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Each at different stages of developing or responding to policy shifts at island-specific, UK-based and global levels



‘There is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers. In this organization, the story plays a decisive role’  
(de Certeau, 1984, p. 123)

‘Leaving home to go to university is a deep-seated part of the English culture’  
(Augar, 2019, p. 195)







## Findings 1: Local or global higher education?

On the island, we identified that there was **a demand** for cyber security skills and it was very difficult to get people here with those skills and so it was felt that a good way to do that would be **to grow in-house** as well so that we would actually have the course running here on the Island that would **then seep out into the local community.**

So do we **put ourselves up in competition?** Do we try and take students from the UK and **bring them across?** What can we offer from that perspective because our students don't have a fresher's week.

So, if we become an awarding body in our own right we are going to have to **bring in international students** so, therefore the student experience would have to be more **akin to an HEI in the UK** albeit smaller. You know so again, it's what our **unique selling points are** which is the key thing.



## Findings 2: Materialities and practicalities

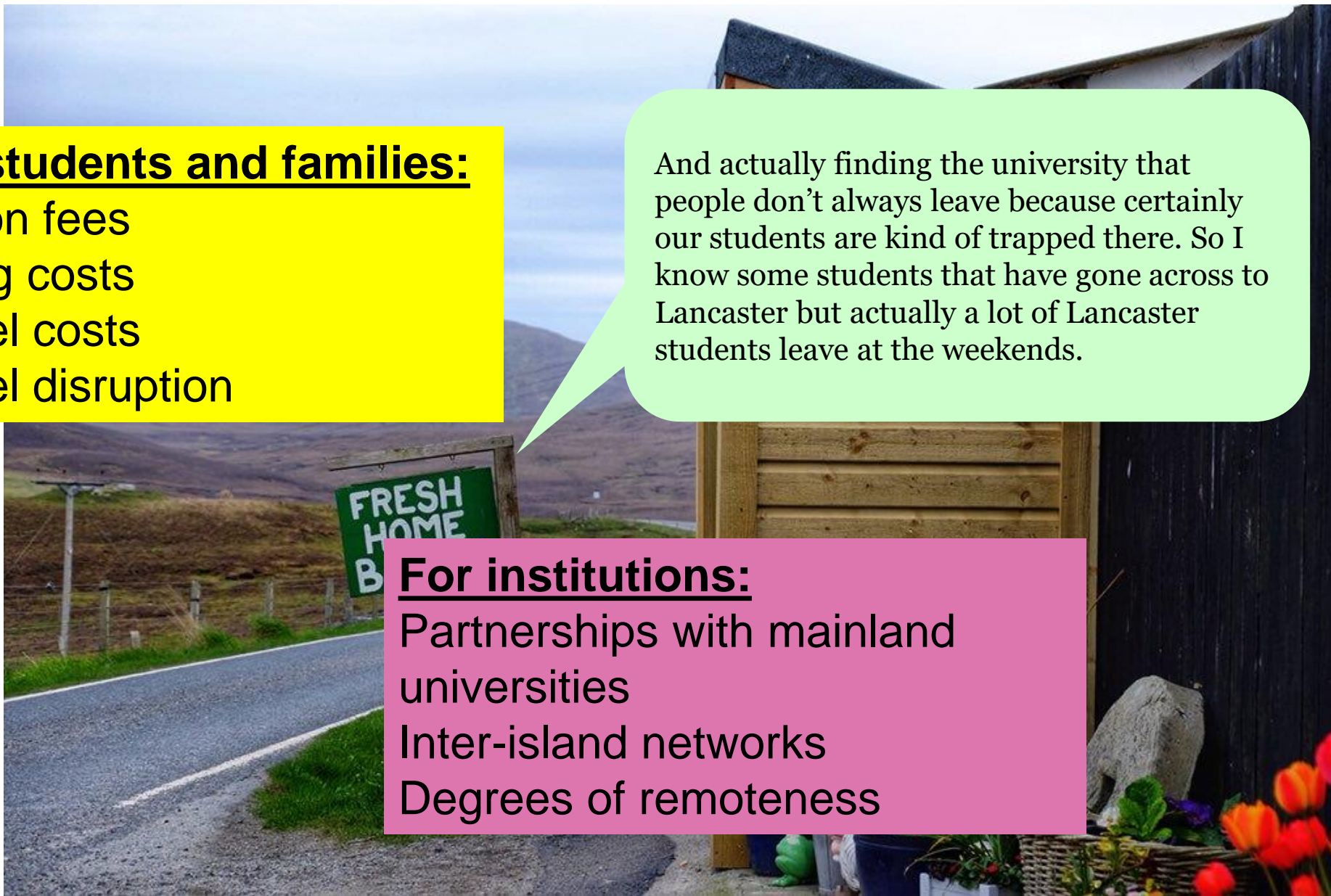
### For students and families:

Tuition fees  
Living costs  
Travel costs  
Travel disruption

And actually finding the university that people don't always leave because certainly our students are kind of trapped there. So I know some students that have gone across to Lancaster but actually a lot of Lancaster students leave at the weekends.

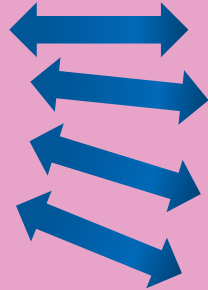
### For institutions:

Partnerships with mainland universities  
Inter-island networks  
Degrees of remoteness



## Findings 2: Materialities and practicalities

Financial security



Off-island social connections

A clearly imagined educational or career future

A particular world view

Social confidence

A lot of people whose children go to university from here have contacts in the UK or even if they go abroad somewhere else, so there's somebody. Whereas **a young person who is absolutely local, who is from a certain financial income**, won't have those mechanisms.

It is down to the individual student and so some of them will be smart and gregarious and **that's always where they see their future** and that's the right thing

Some of the **less well-off students' families**, they have probably never been off the island. They may have been to one of the nearby islands if they're lucky. So **their world view is completely different** to what you would assume and that changes everything.

Corbett, 2007 'mobility capital'

## Ties to locality

- Practical in multiple unpredictable ways
- Not always stories of limit or lack
- Challenge the spatial language of higher education

I'm happy to go travelling but **I like the island**. Everything that I want to do is on the island: I've got my car; I've got my family; I've got my job potentially. I've got my job that I do now, my fitness, everything. **I can fit in everything that I want to do.**

I quite like that I've been in the same room all the time. So **my whole journey's** been in this room

It's just been really quiet, and I've had my own space; when I think of my friends away at Uni, a lot of them are at art colleges down south. **It's very crushed up and very busy there,** and it's just a city. **I don't really respond to that.** I like peace and quiet.



## Findings 3: Staying, leaving and the spatial story of higher education

At 18, you're not necessarily ready to go and do that, there's a lot of people that aren't, **there are people that will, in the UK, opt to go to a university that is down the road**, so they can still live at home, for instance. That wasn't an option here at all, so **all of a sudden, the only option is stay here or jump, literally jump** and I think that's quite a big decision to make, for a lot of them, at that age.

There's nothing to do up north. And if you get someone from the north, they'll probably tell you the same thing, there's nothing to do in the south. Various insults will be exchanged between the north and south.

At one point I thought if I did my Master's I could go away, and my husband from Glasgow said, "Well, we could go for a year if you want". He'd get a job, so it's not completely out. **I could do it now definitely more than I could have done when I was younger.** Maybe it's giving you that bit more confidence.

Finn and Holton, 2019; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018



## Island locations show that:

- Institutional associations between student mobility and progression are pervasive and powerful
- There are place-specific barriers to higher education within and around the UK that are not widely known or discussed beyond the places themselves
- Normative patterns of higher education mobility are only one way of seeing the journeys, times and spaces of higher education
- The spatial story offers a way of challenging the deficit approach to staying 'local' for higher education.



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