

Understanding the contexts of widening participation in: **RURAL & COASTAL AREAS**

Introduction:

The University of Cumbria-based research group, Health and Society Knowledge Exchange (HASKE), carried out a research project that examined the rural and coastal contexts of widening participation.

Key research objectives:

- To understand what constitutes 'rural and/or coastal context' in relation to Widening Participation
- To explore the full significance of rural and coastal contexts, and how it affects young people's view of accessing Higher Education (HE)
- To assess how contextual dimensions of Widening Participation can be understood and accounted for when outreach activities are delivered

Research Aims: The research will help to inform future outreach activities and evaluation by providing a detailed and nuanced account of the rural and coastal contexts from the perspective of young people, including recommendations that can be used by the Hello Future central team and their partners to support outreach activities.


➤ Methodology:

Literature Review




73 sources (inc. academic and grey literature, papers, reports and websites) between the years 1973 and 2019 were reviewed and synthesised.

Focus Groups with learners



Three focus groups were held at three schools between November 2018 - January 2019.

Outreach & education-related professionals



Supplementary data were collected from outreach practitioners and education-related professionals, attending an outreach programme review event, hosted by Hello Future in December 2018.

What is Coastal?

The House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee (2007) identified that **coastal towns share unique characteristics that differentiate them from those of inland communities including:**

- Distinctive physical features and landscapes
- Physical and social isolation
- High proportions of older people together with higher levels of outward migration among young people
- Low-wage, low-skill economies and seasonality of employment
- Frequent dependency on a single industry
- A high incidence of poor housing conditions and a high proportion of private rented homes

What is Rural?

In the UK, physical settlements with **populations greater than 10,000 are generally defined as urban, those below as rural**; as defined by a number of governing organisations*.

A rural 'context' refers to the accessibility of a settlement, the sparsity of population within a broad area and the potential costs of overcoming distance to supply that settlement with various public and private services.

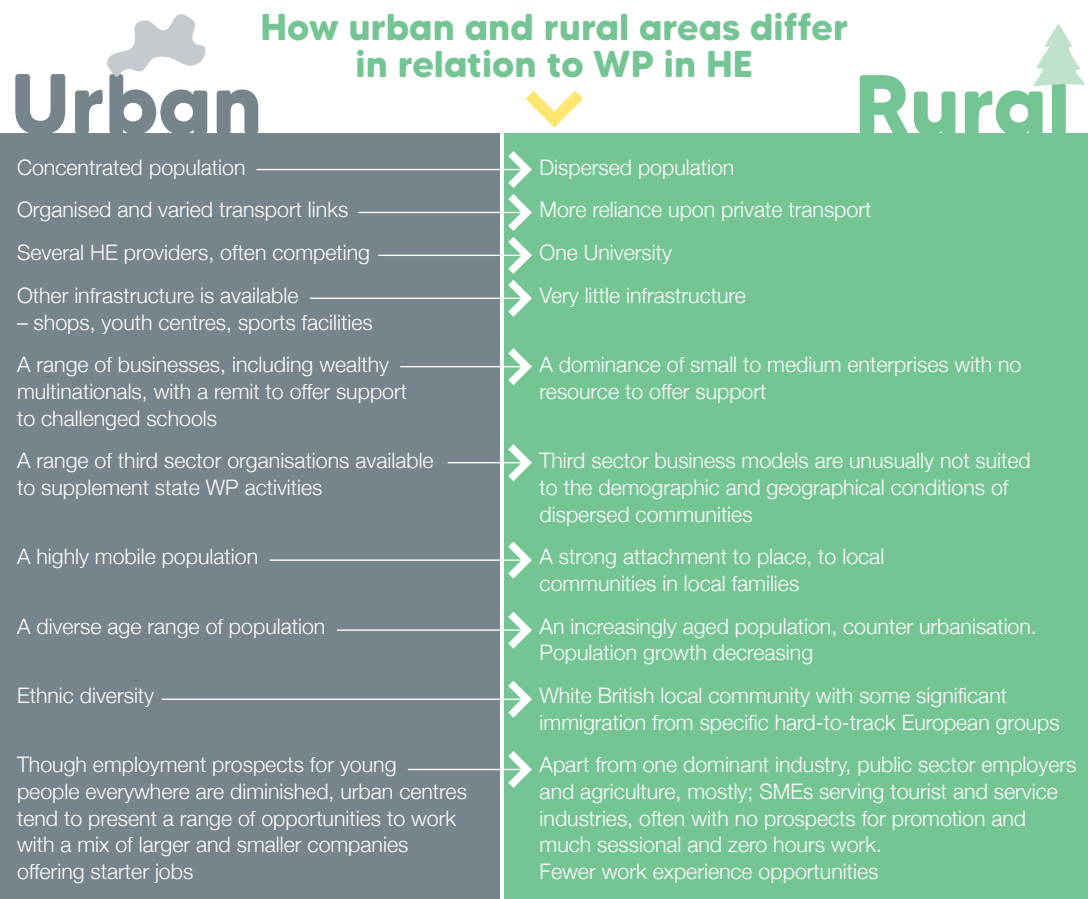


Chart 1

Chart 1 - Difference between urban and rural/coastal settings of relevance to Widening Participation in Higher Education (adapted from IntoUniversity 2015, p.64)

*Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), Department for Local Government and Communities (DLGC) and Office for National Statistics (ONS)

CUMBRIA Rural or Urban?

Cumbria is classified as mainly rural with urban areas to the north (Carlisle), and south (Barrow-in-Furness).

It is the second largest county in England with an area of 6,767 km sq (Cumbria Observatory, 2018), the second most sparsely populated county in England and home to some of England's highest mountains and largest lakes.



Widening Participation context in Cumbria

The following themes are informed by conceptual models and theories that identify factors influencing young people's decision making process when considering Higher Education.

Moving away:

Distance

Travelling to University Open Days can be prohibitively expensive for young Cumbrians.

Outreach practitioners **report that travel and transport links, including being able to access Open Days, are one of the most frequently cited barriers to HE** mentioned by young people they work with.

Fear of the unknown

Strong perception of places away from Cumbria as 'other'. Current provision of trips out of the area are not sufficient in alleviating any anxiety or concerns students may have on settling into new surroundings and living in 'other' places.

This can strongly influence their decision-making about post-compulsory progression.

Constant close contact with family

Perceived loss of constant contact with people (notably family).

For some West Cumbrian young people, constant close contact with family is such a fundamental part of their identity that being on your own, with unfamiliar people and surroundings is an alarming prospect, with many willing to adapt their aspirations to avoid it.

Gender and identity issues in rural areas

For male participants, the **prevalence of apprenticeships available offer a real alternative to HE that fits in with male rural identities.**

Female participants perceived that they have fewer opportunities to realise their aspirations and may thus be more likely than boys to progress to HE.

It is also of note that the subject choices reflect the gendered structure of the local job market.

Timescale of 'moving away'

Another important dimension of 'moving away' was whether or not young people viewed this as short-term and temporary or long-term and permanent. For some, going away to University represented the start of moving away permanently.

Variability in local environments & infrastructure:

Transport & travel

Transport and travel Distance is a **major decision-making factor for West Cumbrian** young people, in deciding what to do after their schooling finishes. In this context, distance has **two main impacts:** whether or not they will move away, and how far they are prepared to go.

Travel and transport are interrelated with distance, **and a significant dimension of the rural and coastal context in West Cumbria** through their effects on:

- Access to public transport
- Access to curriculum choice
- Experience of independent travel
- Choices about progression from post-compulsory education

Local job traditions, community attitudes to HE, apprenticeships or jobs and the effect of a single dominant industry/employer

Another characteristic dimension of the West Cumbrian context for WP is the variability in local job traditions and the effect of apprenticeships and jobs that the dominant employer may have on young West Cumbrians' aspirations and choices.

Jobs with that employer are highly prized and there is a strong traditional, culture of encouraging young people to get an apprenticeship with the industry, building on the previous local tradition of working in the coal mining or steel industry.

Socio-cultural factors:

Parents experience of/attitude to education and HE

Outreach practitioners and education-related professionals reported **family attitudes as a major barrier to accessing higher education** for young West Cumbrians, however there was some evidence of attitudes changing.

Parental experiences of / attitudes to education and Higher Education, and whether it is 'worth' the investment can have a significant effect on young West Cumbrians' decision-making about HE.



Research conclusions

This study has identified a range of dimensions of the rural context in West Cumbria that may be important to young people who are thinking about accessing HE or other choices.

The thematic analysis of data was framed by a conceptual model used by Friesen and Purc-Stephenson to identify the interacting factors at work in potential student applicants.

Factors that influence rural young people's' decisions about accessing HE

Chart 2:

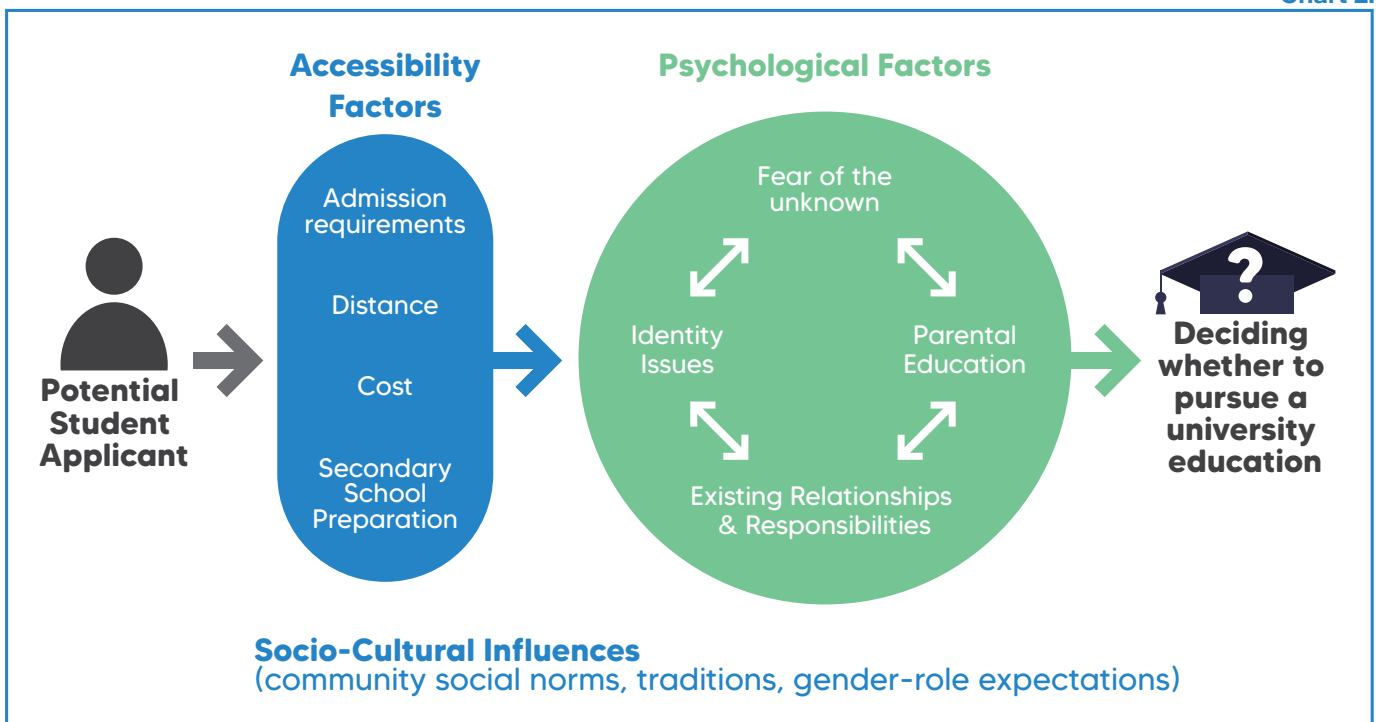


Chart 2: Conceptual model showing interacting personal, social and cultural factors influencing rural young people's' decision making about accessing HE (from Friesen and Purc-Stephenson, 2016, p.149).

The themes identified from this qualitative research suggested that accessibility factors and psychosocial factors are potentially more interlinked in the rural context of West Cumbria than in other geographical contexts.

For example, infrastructure (accessibility) can affect the range of subjects available at a school (accessibility) which in turn is embedded within historic and cultural expectations of what constitutes a 'good job' for that area (psychosocial), and the existing responsibilities a potential applicant has (psychosocial).

In particular, the notion of 'distance' raised a number of interlinking dimensions which were rooted in both accessibility and psychosocial factors.

The Patchwork Effect

West Cumbria is characterised by a highly variable 'Patchwork Effect' in the local environment.

Thus, young people can have completely different experiences of these dimensions of rural West Cumbria, depending on precisely where they live.



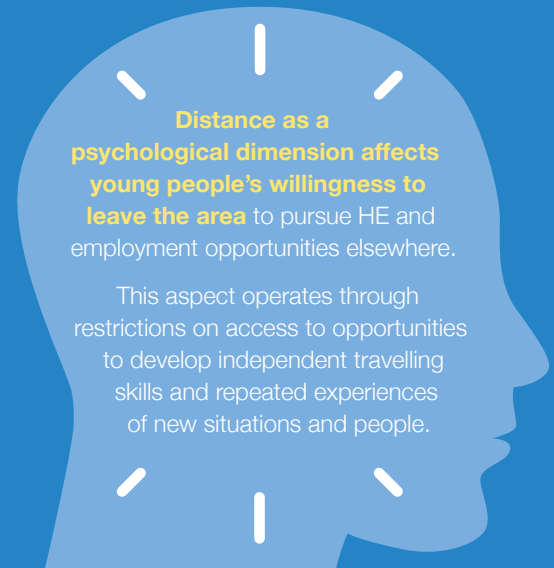
D I S T A N C E

The remoteness of West Cumbria and distance within and beyond Cumbria plays a significant role in young people's decision-making.

Distance is experienced both physically and psychologically. Thus, **distance as a physical dimension affects young people's access** to educational and employment opportunities throughout their educational development.



Pursuing HE at distant Universities is often regarded as a permanent move, **carrying risks of breaking family and community ties** and being changed by the experience so that they might not want to come back.



Distance as a psychological dimension affects young people's willingness to **leave the area** to pursue HE and employment opportunities elsewhere.

This aspect operates through restrictions on access to opportunities to develop independent travelling skills and repeated experiences of new situations and people.



Boys

Gender can be a highly significant dimension of the rural West Cumbrian context and can be closely linked to identity in rural areas.

In combination with gendered traditional industry norms and the structure of the local job market, **young West Cumbrian males and their parents, are more likely to favour locally based apprenticeships or employment options.**



Attitudes

The attitude to HE and ability of parents to support young people's aspirations is likely to be affected by traditions of low educational qualification, unemployment and intergenerational socio-economic deprivation that is characteristic of many areas in West Cumbria.

Parents attitudes to HE and ability to support their children's aspirations range from active disapproval to enthusiastic support, even if they do not have personal or current knowledge or experience of the options available.

Girls



Girls reported experiencing tensions **between their educational and employment aspirations and their desire to remain in their communities, maintaining close family, social and community relationships.**

Young West Cumbrian females, and their parents, may be **more likely to seek HE or training as there are perceived to be fewer employment opportunities available to girls**, unless they are interested in engineering related subjects.

Aspirations

The **low population, sparse distribution and distance and travel characteristics of West Cumbria may limit the access Young West Cumbrians have to numerous and diverse social networks** which may, in turn, limit aspirations and expectation formation.

As such, there is an atypical **dependency on teachers, careers and outreach organisations** and their existing close networks of family and friends for information and advice about future choices.

The timing of information about apprenticeships tends to be somewhat earlier than that about other choices, which may also affect aspiration and expectation formation.



Cumbria Collaborative
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