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Staying and studying: narratives of local higher education in small island colleges

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ABSTRACT

Due to the unequal geographical distribution of HE institutions in many national HE systems, living in a rural or remote area *and* attending HE can be mutually exclusive. The implication is that those who remain in a rural area beyond school age do not study at the undergraduate level. In discussions of rural stayers, HE is therefore understood as a crucial point of transition between staying and leaving; HE requires or offers the opportunity to move from a rural or remote location in order to continue education. This article asks how the figure of the rural and remote stayer is changed by the relatively recent provision of HE opportunities in some rural and remote contexts in and around the UK, making it possible both to 'stay' *and* to study for an undergraduate degree. The article brings together literature on HE mobilities and on remote and rural staying to develop the new figure of the 'stayer-student', using a spatial narrative framework to analyse findings from a multi-sited case study of HE providers on small islands with relationships to the UK. The analysis identifies three types of spatial story that articulate the boundaries of students' remote location and HE. In the first of these stories, the boundary around the island is solidified by the decision to stay for HE, reinforcing belonging to and possibilities within place. The second focuses on the role of the spatial boundary in distinguishing between common definitions of the role and purpose of HE. In the final story, the boundary enables the disruption of linear and normative HE trajectories. Each of these findings challenges traditional understandings of the role of HE in prompting social and geographical transition away from remote and rural areas.

Introduction

Due to the unequal geographical distribution of higher education (HE) institutions in many national HE systems, both living in a rural or remote area *and* attending HE are sometimes mutually exclusive. The implication is that those who 'stay' in a rural area beyond school age do not study at undergraduate level. A frequent association with

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the figure of the rural 'stayer' (Hjälm, 2014) is, therefore, a decision not to attend HE. A lack of undergraduate education and 'staying' are cyclically reinforced in this association; a decision to stay in a place without access to HE results in a lack of degree education (Schmidt, 2017) and a decision not to attend HE results in not leaving the remote or rural location (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006). In discussions of rural stayers, HE is therefore understood as a crucial point of transition that offers the opportunity to move from a rural or remote location and to continue education (Theodori & Theodori, 2015). The point of transition is social and temporal as well as being geographical, where the undergraduate degree acts as a marker of a shift into a professional or educational social class, a progression to adulthood and independence, and a geographical relocation (O'Shea et al., 2019). This constellation of associations with HE and rural or remote 'stayers' is based, however, on the geographical inequalities of HE systems that have seen degree-level education made available only in urban centres (Chankseliani et al., 2020; Turner, 2020), thus requiring that students from rural and remote places relocate in order to study. This article asks how the figure of the rural and remote stayer is changed by the relatively recent provision of HE opportunities in some remote contexts in and around the UK. How are understandings of the decision to 'stay' in a rural or remote place challenged if it is possible both to 'stay' *and* study for an undergraduate degree?

In order to explore this question, the article presents findings from a project looking at access to and experiences of HE on small islands with relationships to the UK. The student participants in this project were all studying for a HE qualification in a small island location. While acknowledging the problematic urban-centric positioning of these locations as 'remote' (Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011), the article uses the term in commonality with other scholarship on islands and islands education (see, for example, Alexander, 2016; Royle, 2002) in order to identify the particular challenges for students and providers of HE working at the geographical margins of urban-oriented education systems. With its visible boundaries, the small island location also exaggerates the distinction between staying and leaving that is used to define relationships to place where HE mobilities as well as rural or remote 'stayers' are concerned (Haukanes, 2013); in these island locations, the sea represents a clear marker and students either stay within the boundary or move beyond it when attending HE. Drawing from islands studies scholarship in combination with de Certeau's concept of the 'spatial story' (1984), this article develops a conceptual framework through which to understand the ways that boundaries around place are experienced in these particular island contexts, with the aim that this framework can be applied to other contexts where boundaries might be less materially visible but experienced in related ways. In particular, the framework can be used to explore the global changed or changing role of place boundaries that have resulted from the reduced mobilities (Thatcher et al., 2020) and shifts to online and distance learning (Bryson & Andres, 2020) during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the following sections, the article first develops a working understanding of the remote HE 'staying' student by drawing on scholarship on HE mobilities and the 'local' student in combination with scholarship on rural 'staying'. The subsequent sections explain the theoretical framework and methodological approach taken in the article, before findings from interview data are set out in three sections. Each of the findings sections presents spatial stories of staying that disrupt conventional

understandings of the connections between remote places and HE and the role of HE as a point of social and geographical transition.

Literature review

HE, mobility and the 'local' student

This section highlights the often implicit associations between mobility and HE in places such as the UK, the US, Spain and Chile (among others) where geographical relocation for undergraduate study is a strong and historically embedded tradition (Whyte, 2019). These associations can be seen in scholarship on two interconnected aspects of spatial practice. Firstly, literature on the exclusionary nature of 'studentification' (Garmendia et al., 2012; Prada, 2019; Smith & Hubbard, 2014) and of student accommodation (Holton, 2016), demonstrates how spatial practices perpetuate homogenous social expectations of student life by reinforcing heteronormative gender norms (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015), exposing minority ethnic students to casual racism (Haynes, 2019), and assuming a particular level of familial income (Bland, 2018). Where each aspect of exclusion is identified in these literatures, the accompanying argument is that students who are excluded from communal student living lose access to one of the central tenets of the HE experience, again reinforcing relocation as key to undergraduate study. Secondly, research looking at inequalities in access to HE students identifies how structures of privilege and disadvantage determine whether and how far students travel to attend university (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018), with students from more socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to attend institutions closer to the familial home (Prazeres, 2013), and students who have not moved for HE being defined as 'non-traditional' (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013). In drawing attention to the barriers to accessing this aspect of HE attendance, this literature also further normalises geographical mobility as the desired choice.

A further area of scholarship on HE mobilities seeks to complicate discursive associations between mobility and HE. This research works against the conflation of undergraduate education with geographical mobility (Holdsworth, 2009a) as well as that of geographical relocation and transition to adulthood or independence (Christie, 2007; Holdsworth, 2009b). Similarly, explorations of 'local' students' spatial practices highlight both the ways in which these students' pre-existing place-based knowledge works as an advantage rather than a limitation in their HE experience (Holton, 2015), and the oversimplification of the common designation of local students as immobile (Finn, 2017; Finn & Holton, 2019; Henderson, 2020a). While acknowledging the structures that shape access to HE, including those that limit or constrain mobility for HE, this literature points out that, if privilege is discursively associated with relocation for HE, the 'local' student becomes typified as both immobile (because they have not moved to begin degree study) and as disadvantaged (because they are seen as having been unable to move for degree study) (Henderson, 2020b; Reynolds, 2020). This tension between noting the structural and geographical inequalities of HE mobilities and complicating the typical discursive positioning of the student who has not relocated is crucial to understand alongside the notion of the rural or remote 'stayer'; the following sub-section demonstrates the common connections in these literatures.

Rural and remote 'staying'

Research on the phenomenon of 'staying' in place from the diverse contexts of Scandinavia, Scotland and Australia identifies a common discursive association between mobility and success; 'staying' therefore risks being defined, by default, as a kind of failure (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; Erickson et al., 2018; Haartsen & Thissen, 2014; Morse & Mudgett, 2018). Both Laoire (2001) and Hjälm (2014) argue that this definition is represented in the language of 'staying'; Laoire points out how easily the term 'staying' becomes the more negatively inflected 'staying behind', while Hjälm highlights the comparative number of more nuanced words used for different types of mobility, in contrast to the bluntness of the language of 'staying'. Challenging these discursive constructs requires, as Forsberg (2019) argues, an assertion of the 'right to immobility' which involves a theorised exploration of the intersections between the structural inequalities that limit mobility, the connections between geographical and social mobility, and the rewards of long-term place attachment.

The figure of the 'stayer' is problematised in this literature through the development of different understandings of place attachment and of staying itself. Turner (2020), for example, argues that feelings of belonging to place do not always result in long-term attachment to the place, and that neither place attachment nor belonging necessarily determine decisions to stay or leave. This interplay between place attachment, belonging and staying is similarly explored in research that develops categories within each concept; categories such as the 'contented' stayer (Morse & Mudgett, 2018) as well as distinctions between 'rooted' and 'tied' stayers (Barcus & Brunn, 2009) and 'stuck' and 'still' stayers (Haldimann et al., 2021) identify discourses of choice and agency in relation to staying in place. Forsberg (2019), Henderson (2020a) and Bjarnason and Thorlindsson (2006) point out that remaining in place does not simply equate to not having imagined or planned to leave and that planned future mobility can play a contingent role in present-tense decisions to stay. Similarly challenging simple definitions of 'staying', Barcus and Brunn (2009) ask how the boundaries around an area in which a person is seen to have 'stayed' can be definitively drawn, while Haartsen and Thissen (2014) further blur the binary and linear distinction between staying and leaving. They argue for the expansion of this binary to acknowledge 'non-serial transitions' between places, including the possibility that staying can be a psychological rather than material state. Haartsen and Stockdale (2018) suggest that incoming migrants to a place can become stayers, stretching the definition to include long-term place situatedness as well as lifelong situatedness.

HE is addressed in this diverse literature in either direct or indirect ways. Some (see, for example, Forsberg, 2019; O'Shea et al., 2019; Turner, 2020) explicitly looks at educational decision-making in rural or remote places, arguing that educational decision-making should be understood in relation to spatial inequalities (Schmidt, 2017). Where HE plays a more indirect role in this literature, it is seen as a key point of possible transition from a rural place, so that relationships to place are seen as at least in part structured through educational choices (Clark, 2013; Haukanes, 2013; Morse & Mudgett, 2018). In common with the research on HE mobilities discussed above, this research complicates categories of immobility while retaining a focus on the structures that enable, limit and place value on movement (Forsberg, 2019).

By bringing together literature from research exploring HE mobilities and rural or remote 'staying', this article highlights that the HE student who has 'stayed', particularly in an HE system such as the UK that normalises large-scale undergraduate mobilities, is in a doubly described category of immobility. They are both a 'local' student, defined against the unmarked mobile student, and a 'stayer', defined against those who have left.

Conceptualising boundaries around place: spatial stories

This article takes a narrative approach to defining spatial experiences, particularly drawing on de Certeau's (1984) concept of the 'spatial story' which theorises the relationship between people and place in two interconnected ways. Firstly, de Certeau argues that place is fundamental to the process of subject formation; the subject's recognition of themselves is also a recognition of themselves as being *in place*. More than simply saying 'I am,' the subject says, 'I am *here*'. De Certeau asks how the 'here' works to define the self, asking what stories are told about a place that are integral to defining the self. Secondly, de Certeau sees the definitions of place that are part of the narrative of self as stemming from 'founding' processes of naming, mapping and owning place. These processes involve drawing boundaries to define where a place begins and ends as well as to whom it belongs. A subject's relationship to a place relies upon the place having discernable boundaries to differentiate it from other places. While boundary-drawing, in de Certeau's conceptualisation, originates from large-scale formal processes of 'founding' or laying claim to land and space, these processes happen in smaller, more complex and more fractured ways in everyday contemporary life (p. 125). Taken together, these two aspects of the spatial story suggest that (a) narratives of place and self are intertwined, as can be seen in accounts of belonging to or antipathy to places that suggest that being a particular kind of person is compatible or not with being in a particular location, and that (b) narratives of place and self rely on a (often implicit) process of boundary-drawing to determine where each place begins and ends.

The role of boundaries around the place and their position in self-defining narratives is of particular importance to this article because of its focus on the small island. The visibility of the boundary around the small island is fundamental to the ways that relationships to place are developed in these contexts (Gaini & Nielsen, 2020), so that ways of being on small islands involve a heightened sense of both isolation and connection, community and independence (Gill, 1994), as well as increased awareness of the sea as both barrier and bridge (Alexander, 2015). Understandings of both 'local' students and rural/remote 'stayers' already require that boundaries are created around place to determine who can be seen not to have left or travelled as far as expected; for the participants in this project, those boundaries were a particularly visible aspect of their definitions and experiences of place and HE. As well as providing insight into remote stayer students as an unusual category of HE student, then, the analysis that follows also demonstrates how spatial boundaries operate in HE experiences. The below methodology section outlines how the project sought to explore these experiences as well as how the conceptual framework of the spatial story has been used in data selection and analysis.

Table 1. Case college contexts.

Case study college	College	Island relationship to UK mainland	Total island population	Number in HE on UK mainland	Number in HE on island
College 1	Independent College of Further and HE	Crown dependency[a]	90,000	1,185	430
College 2	Independent College of Further and HE	Channel Island crown dependency[b]	63,000	Data unavailable	Data unavailable
College 3	College of Further and HE and campus of Highlands and Islands University	Island group governed by UK mainland	23,000	730	238

[a]The term 'crown dependency' describes a self-governing island with full authority over domestic issues, where defence citizenship is controlled through the UK.
[b]As a crown dependency island group made up of seven islands, the Channel islands includes four separate jurisdictions, with two islands operating independent jurisdictions, one pair of islands and another group of three islands.

Table 2. Participant information.

Case study college	Student interviews	Staff interviews
College 1	8	3
College 2	6	4
College 3	6	5
Total	20	12

Methodology

The findings reported in this article are taken from a multi-sited case study exploring experiences of HE students and staff in three colleges on small islands in and around the UK.[1] The project specifically aimed to capture experiences and perceptions of 'stayers' on these islands, focusing on decisions to remain on the island for HE. Table 1 sets out some key differences between the case institutions and the islands on which they were located. Where possible, statistics of students studying on the UK mainland have been taken from HESA data for the most recently available academic year (HESA, 2021), though this is not possible for College 2 because HESA does not record data for individual islands within this island group. Numbers of students studying on islands have been taken from publicly available policy documentation,[2] though again there are no official figures available for College 2. Overall participation in HE on each of the islands is lower than the UK average of 50%, ranging from 25% to 35% across the three islands.

Three fieldwork visits of five days each were conducted in May–September 2019 at each college. These visits included semi-structured interviews with 6–8 students and 3–5 staff at each college (see Table 2). Interviews focused on the factors involved in making the decision to stay on the island for HE as well as the day-to-day experiences of studying or working at the college and living on the island. Responses to the interview prompts were analysed as spatial stories, using de Certeau's definition of these as fractured and multiple narratives that offer simultaneous articulations of self and place. The analysis explored how these spatial stories established or referred to the boundaries around the island, identifying three common spatial stories connecting the students' definition of themselves, the islands' boundaries and HE.

Spatial story 1: HE strengthens place boundaries

For some student participants in the project, the opportunity to stay on their island of residence and study for a degree meant that the island's boundaries strengthened their belonging to place *and* their progression towards graduate futures. One participant explained that the island held everything she needed:

> 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 think you get more experience on an island because you're used to it and you know everyone, and you've got more opportunities. It depends what you want to do as your job, I suppose. You have to weigh up to what you want to do. If you don't have a clue what you're going to do, going off island is probably a good thing, but when I know what I want to do, I've got everything behind me that I need to do. (College 1, student 1)

This participant had progressed to HE directly from school and her choice of a degree in public health was directly related to her long-held ambition to enter the island's police force upon graduation. The island's boundaries were important in the participant's narrative of themselves as clear and ambitious about the future as well as spatially mobile in multiple everyday ways. These representations work against understandings of the 'local' student as immobile (Finn & Holton, 2019) and the 'stayer' as limited in future possibility (Laoire, 2001). The spatial story brought together familiar but ordinarily distinct articulations of educational opportunity on one hand and the 'contented' stayer (Morse & Mudgett, 2018) on the other hand in unusual ways; an instrumental definition of HE as enabling a desired career future was seen not just to be enabled by sustaining local connections (Forsberg, 2019), but more specifically by the small size of a remote place. There are more possibilities precisely because of the population size and familiarity of the island.

Another participant gave a similar narrative of opportunity as enhanced by HE within the island's boundaries. This participant had also progressed straight to HE study from school; in his interview, he discussed a growing recognition over the course of his degree study of on-island community links as being particularly important to a future career in his chosen subject of graphic design:

> You'll be working with people that are in the community and you're going straight out there, after the course. You'll have those links and if you intend to stay here, it's the best course for here. Whereas I think at uni [off the island], you're going to make those links but, in the community, around that uni and if you don't intend to stay there, it's useful but it's not important enough to where you're going to go afterwards. (College 2, student 5)

Working against the familiar association of success and mobility (Forsberg, 2019), this spatial story creates a clear contrast between the advantages of 'staying' for HE and the disadvantages of transient mobile student populations associated with studentification (Smith & Hubbard, 2014); this student saw HE mobilities as hindering, rather than creating, career opportunity. Whereas place attachment and belonging are frequently associated with concepts such as comfort and reinforced through repeated familiar practices (Yarker, 2019), here HE was understood as strengthening place attachment by allowing new 'links' to be made.

The connection between the size of the island and its labour markets (Alexander, 2015) and the graduate career opportunities available as a consequence was also noted

by another student from College 1, who stated that 'there aren't many people here, so there are a lot of vacancies in quite a few of the sectors'. It is important to note Forsberg's (2019) concerns that structural and place-based inequalities shape access to and perceptions of career and educational opportunity and that the wider discourses linking mobility, urbanity and success position rural and remote stayers outside of access to elite institutions and professions (see also Henderson, 2020b). However, the above spatial stories also offer a challenge to normative understandings of HE as a necessary social and geographical transition out of rural and remote living (O'Shea et al., 2019), suggesting a role for HE in sustaining rather than disrupting remote place attachment.

Spatial story 2: place boundaries strengthen HE opportunities

As discussed in the above literature review, the remote stayer-student can be positioned not only as a stayer, against normative discourses of mobility, social transition and success, but also as a local student against the normative social practices of the traditionally mobile student. The narratives in this section demonstrate how the opportunity to stay in a remote location for undergraduate study is also an opportunity to challenge these conflations of place with HE.

One participant defined the place of the island as enabling academic success by maintaining spatial distance from social distraction. He had progressed to HE from a technical qualification in the same island college, and saw his chosen degree in cyber security as a subject in which he could establish a successful educational record:

> It's [the island is] a very good place to be. Because you're closely connected, you can't get distracted a lot. Whereas, if I was away, I'd want to go and visit places and you'd find other people that party more and stuff like that. I know that you want to enjoy that while you're young – in your twenties and teens and stuff, but you still want to succeed in your education and it's a very good place to do it. (College 1, student 5)

For this participant, the island's boundaries created a clear spatial distinction between two definitions of HE. HE away from the island was associated with serial mobility and social life, while HE on the island was associated with a close social connection that guards against distraction, resulting in academic success. A similar spatial story was given by another participant from College 1, who described HE away from the island as 'more distracting – there are people in dorms and other people around you whereas I can just go home.' The powerful and exclusionary figure of the traditionally mobile student in UK HE (Bland, 2018; Prazeres, 2013) is noticeable in these narratives; students who had never experienced this traditional trajectory nevertheless defined their education against it. The boundaries around the island were therefore important in representing a resistance to and spatial distance from a normative HE experience.

Other participant narratives showed that remote stayer-students offer a challenge to the understanding of HE as a primary point of geographical transition. For the below participant, the progression from school to an HE qualification in graphic design was made simpler because it did not require a move away from the island:

> I thought going away and then having more work on top and learning new things, I'd just not do it but now, finishing this course, I feel like I probably could do that, if I wanted to, which is really good. (College 2, student 1)

The spatial story of another participant from College 3 had realised the importance of HE qualifications during his five-year post-school career in marine engineering. This participant, studying computer science, similarly positioned HE as a precursor to relocation, stating that they 'would like to go away, but I'm just waiting to get some qualifications and I'll do it then.' As well as demonstrating the role of imagined mobility in decisions to stay in place (Henderson, 2020a; Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006), these stories also re-defined HE as a precursor to geographical mobility rather than as a mobility opportunity in itself. The gaining of qualifications was seen as enabling future mobility beyond the island's boundaries, so that the boundaries were made temporarily solid for the duration of degree study, in order to be more porous in the graduate future. These narratives spatially separated the experiences of studying and of moving away into different temporalities. The separation of these experiences is often denied to students in remote and rural places, where HE and relocation are understood to be synonymous (Corbett, 2007; O'Shea et al., 2019).

Spatial story 3: place boundaries and HE challenge narratives of 'staying'

For some participants, HE on the island had come to represent a different kind of social or spatial transition than is commonly associated with degree study. One participant described the prospect of leaving the island for her degree study as something that 'would have been a "no"', but also saw herself as having travelled significant distances without having been geographically mobile, using the rooms in the college to represent these distances:

> The first year students are taught in that room now, which used to be the textile room when I first started. So it's all moved throughout; but I quite like that I've been in the same room all the time. So my whole journey's been in this room. Yeah, it's nice. (College 3, student 5)

This participant began her degree study comparatively early, having completed her school qualifications by the age of 17; in her interview, she discussed her relief at finding that the college offered her preferred subject of art and design so that she was not required to choose between the subject and her desire to stay on the island. This participant's story of educational progression as its own kind of mobility accords with arguments that definitions of 'staying' should take into account imagined and non-linear travel within and away from place (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006), as well as challenges to perceptions of 'local' students as limited by their decisions to remain in place for degree study (Finn & Holton, 2019; Holton, 2015). The seemingly paradoxical idea of a journey without mobility disrupts the common association between progression through education and spatial mobility (Symes & Drew, 2017). Here, the boundaries around place surround the island (leaving would have been a 'no') and then the teaching rooms of the college. The small scale and spatial familiarity of on-island HE provision enabled a journey for this participant by ensuring that she could remain in place.

Another participant's relationship to place, staying and HE represented a different kind of disruption to common associations between these factors. This participant articulated an ambivalence to the place of the island, saying explicitly, 'I don't want to be here', reinforcing Turner's (2020) argument that 'staying' does not necessarily equate to place

attachment; although this participant could easily be described as a 'stuck' stayer according to Haldimann et al.'s (2021) typology, he was also representative of a non-linear trajectory as both stayer and local student. He had left the island for post-school study, including the beginning of an undergraduate degree, but after encountering significant personal and financial difficulties, had made the decision to return to re-start his degree in computer science on the island. Due to his slightly interrupted trajectory into HE, this participant was in his early twenties when he embarked upon the degree at the island college.

> I decided to give it one last attempt here in [island], where I actually live, and my proper family is. And it seems to be working out. I know more people, and I'm up the road, so it's a lot easier doing education where you know the people. (College 3, student 3)

For this participant, the boundaries around the island enclosed local knowledge and connections (Turner, 2020) that he saw as conducive to continuing with his education; this spatial story highlights again the exclusionary nature of the traditionally mobile student figure, where the expansion of spatial and social horizons associated with undergraduate mobility (Holdsworth, 2009a) in fact rely upon networks of resources and support (Bland, 2018). Rather than staying in place because of a lack of experience of spatial mobility (Corbett, 2007), the importance of remaining within the island's boundary had been reinforced for this participant by his experience of having moved beyond it. Not being traditionally educationally mobile but having relocated for post-school study, not having a lifelong residence on the island but not being an incoming migrant-turned-stayer (Haartsen & Stockdale, 2018), this participant's simultaneous reliance on and resistance to the island's boundaries is a reminder of the inadequacy of binary distinctions between staying and leaving.

Conclusion

This article has used the example of students who have 'stayed' for HE on islands surrounding the UK to complicate the perception that staying in remote and rural locations is synonymous with a lack of undergraduate education. The figure of the 'stayer-student' addresses and offers a challenge to two distinct areas of scholarship – literature on HE mobilities and on remote and rural staying. Reinforcing existing findings in these bodies of literature regarding the everyday mobility and in-depth place knowledge of the local student and the non-linearity and complexity of the remote or rural 'stayer', this article extends these findings by considering the remote stayer as a particular type of local student and by asking how HE and remote staying work together to challenge dominant narratives of mobility and HE. The conceptual framework of the spatial story (de Certeau, 1984) allows for a consideration of how the visible boundaries around the small island (Alexander, 2015) exaggerate the role of the spatial boundary in narratives of place and HE. The island boundaries worked to (a) enclose and enhance place-specific opportunities, where these possibilities were made possible through a dual process of continued commitment to place and the gaining of HE qualifications in place; (b) spatially distinguish between definitions of the role of HE as educational or social, where on-island HE provision exposes and challenges the dominant conflation of HE with social and geographical transition in contexts with strong

traditions of undergraduate mobility; (c) enable unusual and non-linear spatial trajectories through HE, where these include journeys without geographical movement and staying while also relocating.

The spatial narrative approach to considering the role of place in HE can be extended to a range of HE contexts, offering ways of accounting for the specificity of individual locations alongside the ubiquity of place-based factors in HE experiences. In the example used in this article, the approach demonstrates the importance of increased opportunities to study at a degree level while 'staying' in remote or rural locations. As well as extending access to undergraduate education, these opportunities also offer crucial conceptual challenges to dominant societal understandings of the role and purpose of HE and the relationship between spatial mobility and degree study. The project on which this article has reported was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and consideration of the pandemic is not within the scope of the article, but the considerable implications of the pandemic on mobilities in general (Ho & Maddrell, 2021; Jensen, 2021; Pase et al., 2021), educational mobilities in particular (Thatcher et al., 2020), and institutional responses in contexts such as small islands (Lagi, 2020), only serve to reinforce the relevance of place and of staying in place to future HE scholarship.

Notes

1. In the UK, the term 'college' refers to a college of Further Education, which offers a range of school, adult, community and HE courses for students aged 14 and above, and which is distinct from and usually smaller in scale than a university. HE qualifications were provided by Further Education colleges on each of the case study islands in the project, and were awarded either through partnerships with universities on the UK mainland or, in one case, through the college's membership of a network of colleges making up the University of the Highlands and Islands.
2. Citation details for specific island policy documents have not been included in this summary in order to protect anonymity according to ethical guidelines.

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