

Student mobility and local economy

Whether or not a student leaves home to study is strongly influenced by social and ethnic background, affecting career choices and local retention of skills after studies.

About the research

The local skills base is an important part of regional and local economies. A key factor for retaining skills locally is student mobility – whether or not a student leaves the local area to study, how far they choose to commute or move, and whether they stay in the local area after completing their studies.

The Sutton Trust report *Home and Away* draws on ESRC-funded research to examine student mobility for students from different backgrounds across the UK. It highlights that patterns of student mobility have changed little over time, and that those from lower social class backgrounds and some ethnic minority groups are much less likely to be travel out of their local area for university. As elite Russell Group universities are unevenly spread across the country, students' access to top-level universities can be severely limited without travelling significant distances.

There are conflicting policy tensions around regional mobility and regional development. Encouraging working-class students to attend elite universities in economically successful urban areas may improve their chances of finding better paid employment, but simultaneously draw them away from more marginalised regions, depriving the local economy of talent and entrenching geographical inequalities. A more sustainable regional economic policy would seek to place universities with large numbers of local commuter students, who are far more likely to stay locally following graduation, at the centre of regional development.

Universities vary enormously in the geography of their intake – some attract nearly all of their students from their

immediate vicinity, whereas others draw their intake from a far greater distance away. The locally recruiting universities do the most to provide access to higher education for those from working-class backgrounds, but are often the least well-funded and the most vulnerable to economic and policy changes.

Key findings

- The majority of young people going to university choose to stay relatively local, going to a university less than 55 miles away from their home address. Only one in ten students attend a university over 150 miles from home.
- Social class is a key factor which drives the mobility choices of young people, with disadvantaged students less likely to leave home. Over three times more students in the lowest social class group commute from home, compared to the highest group.
- State school students are 2.6 times more likely to stay at home and study locally than their privately educated peers.
- Overall numbers of commuter students over all distances has increased since 2009-10 (from 72,310 to 77,945). Many institutions have seen substantial increases in the proportion of commuter students.

Key findings - continued

- The increase in tuition fees has not substantially affected student mobility overall; there is no evidence of a substantial rise in students attending their local university.
- Students in northern regions of England, especially the North East, are much less likely to be mobile compared to those in the south.
- There is a stark contrast between the widening participation and outreach activities that exist in London and what is present in culturally and economically deprived communities in peripheral areas.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The Sutton Trust report *Home and Away: Social, ethnic and spatial inequalities in student mobility*, authored by Michael Donnelly and Sol Gamsu, builds on ESRC-funded research to explore student mobility trends. The research shows that the majority of young people stay relatively local for university. Social class and ethnicity are key factors driving the choice of staying at home, commuting or moving away for studies.

Web: www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/home-and-away-student-mobility

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Geographies of Higher Education: spatial and social mobilities (ESRC Future Research Leader project)
www.bath.ac.uk/projects/geographies-of-higher-education-spatial-and-social-mobilities

The views expressed in this evidence briefing are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the ESRC.

Policy recommendations

- Top-level universities can do more to recruit locally and ease the university experience for students that live at home.
- Greater financial assistance, including restoring student maintenance grants and lowering tuition fees, could be provided for young people from poorer backgrounds to help cover the increased costs associated with moving out.
- Financial support could also be provided for long-distance commuter students. The Young Persons Railcard is not valid on peak fares, at the time when many will be travelling to attend lectures. In more rural areas without train services, petrol vouchers and subsidised bus services could also be considered.
- Increasing financial resources for local post-1992 universities – which educate the majority of commuter students from marginalised areas – is vital if a social and spatial mobility policy is pursued.
- Future university access agreements should include a specific spatial element, with a focus on outlying geographical areas. There is currently a marked lack of university outreach activity in peripheral areas.
- Universities should consider more flexible timetabling of lectures where there are large increases in students commuting from the family home to attend university.
- Selective universities should consider reserving a proportion of places for local working-class students.
- Universities could actively reassure families who may discourage their children from studying away from home for cultural reasons through outreach activities, open days and summer schools.

There are conflicting policy tensions around regional mobility and regional development.

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