Migration, education and employment: socio-cultural factors in shaping individual decisions and economic outcomes in Orkney and Shetland

Rosie Alexander
University of Derby and the University of the Highlands and Islands
United Kingdom
rosie.alexander@uhi.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: Migration is a common feature of island experiences, with young people especially likely to migrate to mainland communities for education and employment opportunities. Within the British island communities of Orkney and Shetland, concern about youth migration is clear. However conceptualising migration as simply an economic decision based on accessing 'better' opportunities elsewhere risks overlooking the significant social and cultural influence in the career and migration decisions of young people. This paper presents the results of the first stage of a research project into the experiences of higher education students from Orkney and Shetland. The project involved interviewing twenty three students about their higher education choices, and their plans for the future. The results demonstrate the importance of social and cultural influences in students' decision making. This paper also discusses the role of the island 'habitus' in students' narratives of their journeys, drawing from the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.'

Introduction

Youth out-migration is a concern in many island communities (Connell & King, 1999, 2009; Royle, 2001, 2010). Typically this out-migration is seen not as part of "being on an island *per se*... [but] because of the circumstances [islanders] face and given the constraints imposed by insularity" (Royle, 2001, p. 87). However, although the economic reasons for migration from an island are important, contemporary challenges to rational models of decision making have identified that motivations for migration and career decisions are complex, often involving personal and cultural elements. This paper starts by discussing the role of personal, social and cultural elements in career and migration decision making. The second part presents a recent research project involving interviews with 23 higher education students from two specific island communities: Orkney and Shetland, Scotland, U.K. By presenting some initial findings from this research project and discussing some key themes, the paper concludes by offering some suggestions about the influence of the social and cultural context in the career and migration decisions of islanders.

Literature review

Sustainability is often of key concern in island communities, with a particular area of concern centring on maintaining sustainable populations. Many island communities experience high levels of out-migration, particularly of the young working age population as they are drawn to better career and employment prospects in larger communities (Connell & King, 1999; King, 2009; Royle, 2010). The result can be an ageing population – placing pressure on services for the elderly and reducing the pool of working people to sustain the economy (Royle, 2001). The situation is often compounded by some islands experiencing high levels of in-migration from 'lifestyle migrants' who are often older and of independent means but may also require an enhanced level of services (Connell & King, 1999; King, 2009).

Within the island communities of Scotland the same concerns are evident. Statistics show that the whole Highlands and Islands region has a lower proportion of 15-29 year olds than elsewhere in Scotland (HIE, 2014c) and research has been commissioned to identify policy interventions that may help address this deficit (HIE, 2015). Specifically within the island communities of Orkney and Shetland concerns about population sustainability and the outmigration of young people are also evident, and population change research was commissioned in 2009 in Orkney because of the 'current population projections [which] identify a potential threat to the available workforce on the islands … and … a growing cost for providing care to an ageing population' (Hall Aitken, 2009, p. 1).

Consistent with other remote and island communities, within the Highlands and Islands region and in Orkney and Shetland specifically, key motivators for the outmigration of young people have been identified as education and employment (Hall Aitken, 2009; HIE, 2014c; HIE, 2015). Given that education and employment are key factors in prompting out-migration, it may seem logical that the provision of education and employment opportunities should reduce out-migration. Accordingly for the Highlands and Islands the provision of education and employment has been identified as a key priority in reducing out-migration,

> In looking to the future, the driving force for change is to give young people who choose to make their home in the Highlands and Islands the *same* range of opportunities in terms of education, training and employment that are open to their peers in other parts of Scotland (HIE, 2009, p. 74, italics added).

However, the simple link between migration and education and employment, although well established by survey-based research seeking key 'factors' in decision making, has been questioned by research within a different epistemological framework, which has challenged the use of rational models of decision making.

In the field of migration, Halfacree and Boyle propose a new 'biographical model' for migration research explicitly situating their model against traditional approaches which have been based on "positivistic behaviourist conceptualisation of migration… from [which], 'migration' was to be regarded solely as an empirical event; a largely preordained 'response' to the 'stimulus' of the potential for a higher 'income' at some other residential location" (Halfacree & Boyle, 1993, p. 334). Rather than migration decisions being made simply on the basis of weighing up 'push' and 'pull' factors, Halfacree and Boyle (1993) propose that migration is "rooted… in everyday life" which means that "a large number of issues will be entangled in and expressed through the migration" (1993, p. 339). In addition, rather than

being viewed as a moment in time, they propose that the decision to migrate should be viewed in a much wider time frame, taking account of a person's wider biography. From this perspective, research into migration should take account of individual biographies, and the "experience and context of migration" (1993, p. 344).

Similar to traditional research into migration, traditional models of career choice have tended to emphasise rational decision making (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Yates, 2015). These approaches tend to suggest that individuals weigh up different factors such as their interests, skills and values, alongside the opportunities available in order to make a career decision. However, the sociologist Roberts has challenged the primacy given to individual choice in these approaches suggesting rather that "young people's opportunities are governed primarily by the interrelationships between their home backgrounds, educational attainments, local job opportunities and employers' recruitment practices" (Roberts, 1997, p. 345).

An intermediary position is provided by Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) and Hodkinson (2008) who, through their theory of 'careership', suggest that both social and occupational structures and the individual are important in career decision making,

> The central idea in careership theory is that career decision-making and progression take place in the interactions between the person and the fields they inhabit. Thus, career decision-making and progression are bounded by a person's '*horizons for action*' (Hodkinson, 2008, p. 4).

For Hodkinson then, career choices happen through interaction between the individual and their context. In addition the notion of context for Hodkinson does not simply include the objective opportunities (e.g. educational or employment opportunities) provided in a certain context but also includes the social and cultural contexts of an individual – the 'fields they inhabit'.

Hodkinson (2008), and to a lesser extent, Halfacree and Boyle (1993) both draw heavily on Bourdieu, and his notions of field and habitus to provide a theoretical underpinning for their approaches. Bourdieu's work provides a theoretical framework to explain how decisions are made in practice. He himself is highly critical of rational action theory and rational choice theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1977). In particular Bourdieu's criticism stems from the fallacy of "objectivism of action understood as a mechanical reaction 'without an agent' and the subjectivism which portrays action as the deliberate pursuit of a conscious intention" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 121). For Bourdieu, subjects are not free agents making 'rational' choices, nor are they unthinking and determined by their context. Instead Bourdieu's notion of habitus "assert[s] that the individual, and even the personal, the subjective is social, collective. Habitus is socialised subjectivity" (ibid., p.126). In effect, "social reality exists twice, in things and in minds …" (ibid., p. 127). The introjected social reality is habitus which functions as "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 82-83). Therefore social reality *influences* but does not *determine* individual actions. Instead action takes place within a complex dialectical relationship between a person's habitus and objective conditions.

Considering migration and careers within the context of Bourdieu's approach potentially explains "patterns" in career or migration choice that may be associated with different groups of people located in different environments. So, Halfacree and Boyle (1993, p. 338) note for example, that some kinds of migration are "promote[d]… to the status of a normative event in many people's lives", identifying how the 'service class' is associated with mobility and "the working-class habitus appears to be more associated with immobility" (ibid., p. 342). In terms of career progression the notion of habitus has been applied to diverse topics including how demographic characteristics may be experienced as barriers to accessing the film and television industry (Randle, Forson & Calveley, 2015), the access of different social groups to apprenticeships (Lehmann & Taylor, 2015) and the experience of working class students in higher education (Lehmann, 2014). Although in many of these analyses habitus is used effectively to analyse class divisions, the application of habitus can relate to a much wider kinds of social, temporal and geographical positioning. Specifically, in a previous paper I have argued that the concept of habitus can be successfully applied to island communities, suggesting that Orkney and Shetland may have an 'island habitus' which is different to the 'habitus' of mainland communities (Alexander, 2015a).

The notion of habitus, and in particular place-based habitus, may seem to sit in uneasy relation with the post-industrial world which for many theorists is characterised by globalisation and mobility (Urry, 2000; Giddens, 1991). In particular Giddens proposes that within the context of late modernity, "the lifespan becomes separated from the externalities of place, while place itself is undermined by the expansion of disembedding mechanisms" (Giddens, 1991, p.146). With local contexts being less defining, individuals may become more concerned with questions of identity, including the 'reflexive project of the self'. For Giddens the reflexive project of the self involves 'the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography' (ibid., p. 53). To some extent, within this framework place becomes "a matter of choice organised primarily in terms of the person's life-planning" (ibid., p. 147).

Although Giddens' work is quite different from that of Bourdieu, his focus on discursive consciousness and narrative processes has been drawn upon by Halfacree and Boyle (1993) and Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) to overcome what may be considered an implicit determinism in Bourdieu's theory. By recognising the importance of self-narration and discursive structures, individuals are seen to have slightly more agency, including an ability to learn and change – so Hodkinson and Sparkes say "we would argue that discursive consciousness also contributes to habitus" (1997, p. 34).

In rural sociology Corbett has also drawn heavily on both Bourdieu and Giddens, recognising that under conditions of late modernity rural places may not be isolated from global processes, but that individuals in these contexts are not freed from the confines of space, displaying lower mobility than may be anticipated (Corbett, 2007) and remaining to some extent 'bounded by the heaviness of place and space' (Corbett, 2013). Within his study of a community in Atlantic Canada Corbett draws heavily on Bourdieu to understand the way that the specific context of the fishery impacts on individuals' choices. However alongside this focus, he also draws on Giddens to identify how schooling acts as a disembedding mechanism, meaning that rural areas involve a meeting of local and global which results in the availability of different narratives, and "conflict, negotiation and an ambivalent intersection of purposes and values" (Corbett, 2007, p. 246). Young people within rural environments therefore may be both influenced by the 'habitus' of such places, at the same time as these places are

undermined by disembedding mechanisms that destabilise and offer different narratives and possibilities to individuals.

Considering this theoretical background, then, this paper will now present a current research project which elucidates the experience of island students from two particular island communities – Orkney and Shetland – in terms of their higher education and career pathways.

Methods

The aim of the research project presented in this paper is to identify how living in a remote island community (the Orkney or Shetland Islands) prior to entering higher education impacts on students' narratives of their higher education choices and subsequent career journeys.

For the project twenty three final year undergraduate students from Orkney and Shetland were interviewed by telephone in Spring 2015 in the final weeks of their degree programmes. These students were recruited via an online survey that was widely promoted within local media and via the careers services of universities within Scotland. Eighty six participants took part in the online survey and of these thirty nine left contact details. All of these thirty nine were invited to take part in interviews, and of these twenty three took part. Participants comprised of fourteen participants from Orkney and nine from Shetland. Participants were studying a range of subjects. Further details are given in appendix one. Notably the vast majority of students had lived in the islands all their lives, and the majority were also women (nineteen compared to four men).

Interviews were semi-structured in nature and focused on collecting participants' stories about their journeys. Interviews included both a retrospective narrative ('how I got here') and a future narrative ('where I'm intending to go'). In line with narrative and biographical approaches the first question for students was an open invitation to describe the story of their journey to this point in their life (Rosenthal, 2004; Scheibelhofer, 2008), with subsequent questions focusing firstly on 'internal' questions (covering topics already raised by the student) and then 'external' questions (covering topics not already raised). Because this project is also concerned with the development of narrative over time, the second part of the interview was designed to elicit student's narratives about their futures; subsequent data collection points will again ask participants to describe how they got to this point in their life and also ask about what has happened since the last data collection point, a method used in other longitudinal qualitative interviewing approaches (Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe & Thomson, 2007).

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using a grounded theory approach. Students will be interviewed again in summer 2016 in order to discover how their career paths and decisions have developed in the year after graduation. In order to protect the confidentiality of participants pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper.

Alongside the survey of students from Orkney and Shetland (from which the interview participants were recruited) and the interviews themselves, this research project also involves consideration of wider contextual factors. In particular, context is provided by the destinations statistics for previous graduates from Orkney and Shetland, taken from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey operated on an annual basis by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The DLHE survey collects information about graduates' course of study, and their destination (in terms of work, education or other destination) six months after graduation. By accessing the statistics from the cohort of leavers over the five

year period from 2008/9 to 2012/13, the researcher analysed five years' worth of data to identify key patterns and trends in the higher education destinations and the destinations after graduation of previous higher education students from Orkney and Shetland. A total of 745 graduate records were analysed, giving a reasonable indication of the general context of graduate pathways from the islands.

The remainder of this paper will present some preliminary findings of this project, focusing particularly on the geographical moves that students made (in moving to university) and the moves they intended to make after university. These findings outline some ways in which social and cultural factors as well as economic factors may be relevant to the career and migration decisions of island students. For ease, the preliminary findings will be grouped into two themes: higher education destinations and destinations after graduation.

Higher education destinations

Consideration of the HESA DLHE data for the period 2008/9 to2012-13 shows that the most popular higher education destinations of students from the islands over this period are (in order): Robert Gordon University (located in Aberdeen), Edinburgh University, and Aberdeen University (Alexander, 2015b). This shows that Aberdeen as a city has a particularly strong appeal to island students with about a quarter of those graduating from one of the institutions in the city. The University of the Highlands and Islands (with campuses in Orkney and Shetland) is relatively popular with approximately 6% graduating from the institution, a level comparable with institutions such as the University of Glasgow and Strathclyde – institutions over twice the size (Alexander, 2015b).

These results are consistent with previous research which has shown that location is important in university choice, with some students choosing institutions that allow them to stay at home, and with others being motivated by wishing to study *away* from home (Purcell, Elias, Ellison, Atfield, Adam & Livanos, 2008). In addition, this same research identified how for some students a compromise position was adopted "choosing their institution because it allowed them to move away from home but still live within visiting distance of their families" (Purcell et al., 2008, p. 51): something which may explain the popularity of Aberdeen particularly to island students.

Turning to the qualitative data from the interviews we find that location is indeed a key consideration. Studying on the islands offers significant benefits for some students,

> If I stayed in Orkney to do the course I'd be saving a bit of money … [and] I was able to keep my part time post of twenty hours a week which has been really helpful being able to build up a bit of employment experience – Annie.

For other students university provided the opportunity to leave the islands, something which held significant appeal,

> Most people, they know they want to go away to university because they want to ... experience the university lifestyle ... it's not even all just about like the actual course it's about getting away from the island and going out and experiencing living in a city and meeting new people and everything – Joanna.

Consistent with the findings of Purcell et al (2008) it is also clear that Aberdeen offers significant appeal for *some* students because it allows students to stay close to home,

> Aberdeen, it's a city but it's so close to Orkney that it might as well be attached – Leona.

Although proximity is an important consideration in the choice of university, the data shows that this is *not* calculated objectively in terms of mileage but is constructed in terms of relative accessibility. So for example, Dundee is constructed as a city that is 'further away' than Edinburgh or Glasgow because of the lack of direct transport links, even though geographically it is closer,

> It would have been nice to have been in a city that there is an airport that you can fly home rather than obviously with Dundee you need to travel to Aberdeen or Edinburgh – Katie.

Relative to the cities that are connected via air-travel, Aberdeen as the main port for the islands is constructed as 'closer' because of the reduced cost of travelling by boat. One student explained that she didn't want to study in Aberdeen because,

> I wanted to be far enough that … wasn't … just a quick boat – well, it's not a quick boat ride but … the boat's quite cheap if you don't get a cabin obviously – Joanna.

However, the relative proximity of cities is also linked with social and cultural 'proximity' – particularly how familiar students feel with the city. This familiarity is constructed historically and biographically for many students, and the appeal of Aberdeen comes partly from the experience of travelling through the port as children,

> We always caught the ferry because we had the car, so that's probably why I spent more time here than anywhere else – Kay.

In addition, the historical links with Aberdeen mean that many students have social connections with the city – through friends or family living in the city now or in the past. Having friends in the city is often noted to be of particular importance, helping students to retain a link to the islands,

> A Shetland girl who was coming down to study as well … she moved in with me, which I think ... I wasn't homesick at all, so I think it was maybe having that person from home there – Tanya.

Because the 'proximity' of a location is considered both in terms of transport links and in terms of familiarity and social connections, this means that for some students other cities apart from Aberdeen may feel 'close'. So, for example one student had spent some of her childhood in Edinburgh before relocating back to Orkney and explained the appeal of studying in Edinburgh,

> I had obviously lived in Edinburgh and just really loved it as a place, and I have cousins here and family and my brother was here and he was loving being at uni – Amy.

Where students had connections elsewhere and felt confident enough to move, the physical proximity of Aberdeen was occasionally actually a detractor, with these students commonly describing the additional personal challenge offered by going elsewhere,

> I just knew I didn't want to live in Aberdeen, it's a lovely city but it felt too close to home, and I thought I'd just be jumping on the boat … I'd end up probably being home more than I would want to be … – Louise.

Therefore in terms of location, the proximity of the institution is important both in terms of geography but also social and cultural familiarity. For many students leaving home has significant appeal, but going somewhere completely unfamiliar and relatively very distant is considered too great a challenge. Rather, students are weighing up what feels 'familiar' or 'close' enough but not too 'close' to lack any element of challenge.

Destinations after graduation

The second key area considered through this project is the destination of graduates after completing a full time first degree course. Considering the HESA DLHE data for the period 2008/09 to 2012/13 we find some significant patterns for students from the island communities of Orkney and Shetland. In particular considering the concerns about a 'missing generation' of young people it is notable that almost 40% of graduates (whose destination is known) are living in Orkney or Shetland six months after graduation (Alexander, 2015b). Aberdeen also remains a popular location (accounting for about 14% of graduate destinations) although generally graduates are more geographically dispersed than students (*ibid)*. Graduates living in the islands six months after graduation are slightly less likely to be in professional occupations compared to those island graduates living elsewhere (*ibid*).

Turning towards the qualitative data from the interviews we find that at the point of graduation students vary a great deal in terms of how they conceptualise their career options. This is consistent with findings from national studies that show that graduate outcomes vary significantly by institution, subject studied, class of degree, and even ethnicity, gender and age (Pennington, Mosley & Sinclair, 2013; Purcell, Elias, Atfield, Behle, Ellison, Luchinskaya, Snape, Conaghan, & Tzanakou, 2012). Indeed, researchers have suggested that,

> Very often 'higher education', 'an undergraduate degree' and 'the graduate labour market' are discussed as if they constitute unambiguously homogeneous phenomena – but those concerned with HE policy and practice recognise that they are highly complex and constantly evolving processes which encompass a diverse range of activities, meanings and values (Purcell, Elias, Ellison, Atfield, Adam & Livanos, 2008, p. 1).

Given this context, it is difficult to generalise about graduate outcomes for island students on the basis of a small number of interviews. However what can be considered is the process by

which career decisions are made, and in light of the topic of this paper, particularly about how decisions around location are made.

The first key finding is that where confidence and personal development were key in the *choice* of higher education institution (with students choosing institutions that would offer an element of personal challenge but not too much), by the time they graduate most students are reporting that they have indeed grown in confidence as a result of being at university,

> I've really enjoyed university and it's probably changed me as a person, I'm a lot more confident than I was – Kay.

As a result, students commonly report feeling that now they could live anywhere:

> I feel that I could go anywhere now, anywhere in the world … before you know I could hardly go to Aberdeen to stay but I went to America [on placement] and … I was never homesick and I had a great time – Tanya.

In this way, university is conceptualised almost as a 'stepping stone' to enable students to experience life away from home in a semi-familiar environment, in order to build up the confidence to be able to go elsewhere in the future.

However, confidence and personal development continue to be a theme when students are considering their future – particularly in terms of professional development, with students considering their first steps in the professional world. Although some students find professional work in the islands, many perceive staying away from the islands as beneficial because of a wider range of employment opportunities allowing graduates to build up confidence and experience. Importantly for some students staying away is also identified as important because it is 'safer' to develop a career in a place where they are not known,

> I don't want that when I'm still quite young and unestablished, I kind of want to feel a bit more happy with everything before I go back into this really intense environment of everybody knows me – Katie.

Even though most graduates intended to seek work away from the islands initially to build up experience and confidence most had some idea that they might return to the islands in the future. In particular students felt they may return to the islands in order to have children, and allow their children to have a similar upbringing to their own. This idea was often simply that – an idea – and students often said that they didn't know how that might happen, being aware that it would depend on finding a job to return to, a partner who wanted to live in the islands, and being in a position that they could have children,

> In some sort of way I'd say 'oh probably by the time I'm thirty or forty I'll be back home' but then ... if I'm still in a career with an engineering, you know a big engineering company doing nuclear or something like that I don't really see how I could be home ... I always sort of say 'oh I'll have kids I'll bring my kids up in Orkney' but then like I say if my career just can't ... doesn't allow me to do that then … I'm not sure – Amy.

The desire to return home to the islands is also associated with wishing to be close to participants' own friends and family,

> The real big difference really is that all of my family is in Orkney – Angela.

For students with less strong family ties the draw back home is also less strong,

> I think if I had a bigger family eh, I would come back, but I, I just have my parents and my sisters to move back for – Leona.

For students who intend to stay away from the islands, friends and family are also frequently identified as reasons why they would move to certain other places. For some students friendship connections are important for practical reasons (such as being able to move in with friends or stay with a partner), however in other cases they are simply noted almost as 'pins in a map' – a reason to go to that place rather than all the other places they could go,

> Australia would be ... I'd like to go there as well, I have a couple of friends who stay out there – Tanya.

Although many students intend to work away from the islands initially, some students plan to return home immediately: either as a permanent move, or as a temporary move. For those students returning temporarily, going home is discussed both as a way to 'get a break' from studying, and also a practical way to save money, before a student moves into or starts to look for a permanent graduate job,

> I've already got a job … over summer … so that'll just give me a bit of time to chill out in Orkney and save a little bit of money before I go to Bristol – Lee.

Overall, the islands are often described in terms of familiarity, homeliness and comfort, and where for many students these are characteristics they feel they would seek later in life or for a short period 'for a break', for some students there is an immediate and enduring appeal and they plan to move home immediately after graduation. Although for these students the move 'home' is conceptualised as a more permanent move, they also rarely rule out moving away again at some point in the future,

> I would never say that that is me home forever now, because I have loved being away as well so ... – Angela.

This means that although statistically the rate of return of graduates six months after graduation to the islands appears to be relatively high, what the statistics may hide is that a year or several years down the line some of the returners plan to move away again. This is in keeping with previous research in the UK which has suggested that approximately half of graduates return to their parental home at some point after graduation but that the period after graduation is marked by very high mobility with many students moving up to eight times in the five years after graduation (Sage, Evandrou & Falkingham, 2012).

Discussion

Considering the results of this first stage of the research project, it is clear that migration and employment decisions for these island students are complex and interrelated. Looking at the data it would be too simplistic to say that the decisions students and graduates make around higher education and graduate destinations are based on rational economic models – deciding which option provides the best potential for higher income. Although the economic component of decision making is important, this often involves wider economic circumstances, including the ability to keep a part time job (for students studying on the islands), or how expensive travel home from university will be (for students studying elsewhere), and, if living with friends or family will be more cost effective after university. Critically in terms of island students calculations based on proximity are not absolute but are based on the ease, frequency and cost of travel links. The importance of transport links in constructing the accessibility of islands has been noted in previous research (Karampela, Kizos and Spilanis, 2014; Spilanis, Kizos, and Petsioti, 2012), however this research shows the real impact such constructions of accessibility have on the lives of islanders.

      Alongside geographic proximity, this research also demonstrates the importance of social and cultural proximity, with the locations of family and friends in particular exerting an influence both on choice of higher education and on location after graduation. With leaving their island communities being perceived by most students as a big step, maintaining some connection to home, remaining proximate, is important. This demonstrates that migration pathways from islands are somewhat more complex than some economic models would predict; it is not the case that mainland communities are all equally accessible and that students are attracted to locations with the 'best' courses or jobs. Instead social and cultural proximity and particularly the island diaspora are important in terms of influencing migration choices.

      Although this research shows that proximity is important in the destinations of island students (with Aberdeen being a particularly popular destination) such a pattern of behaviour should not be treated as a *de facto* result of living in the island communities of Orkney and Shetland. This is because the appeal of Aberdeen is socially, culturally and historically embedded being grounded not only in the existing transport links, but also through the historical transport links which have resulted in greater familiarity with the city (through experiences of travel as children) and created a strong islander presence in the city. The influence of history in terms of supporting current trends can be understood in reference to Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Bourdieu states the importance of,

> The individual and collective *history* of agents through which the structures of preference that inhabit them are constituted in a complex temporal dialectic with the objective structures that produced them and which they tend to reproduce (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 123).

So, in the case of the popularity of Aberdeen, the historic significance of Aberdeen as a port town, has created conditions through which islanders have developed a familiarity with the town. This then supports the ongoing popularity of travel to the city, and supports the continuing travel links and the objective conditions that make travel to Aberdeen (relatively) cheap and easy for islanders. As a result, the city becomes the "obvious" choice for many

islanders. Although the popularity of Aberdeen is specific to the island experience of Orkney and Shetland, similar historically embedded patterns of the popularity of specific mainland destinations are likely to be found in other island communities. Given the greater length of time that boat travel has been possible, and the relatively lower cost of sea travel compared to air travel it is likely that in the case of many islands the main port towns retain the strongest appeal to islanders, especially for young islanders where jobs or education opportunities are available in these towns.

Although island habitus is important in individual decision making, it is also critical to note that it does not *determine* individual choices. Rather, it provides a structure within which choices are made by the individual. In this way, although Aberdeen may be the 'obvious' choice for islanders, it is not the only choice. Similarly although graduates typically intend to develop professional expertise on the mainland before returning to the islands to raise a family, it is also very possible for graduates to choose other options. Consideration of the way that choices are constructed by students in this research shows that there are certain common concepts drawn upon in constructing choices both pre- and post-university: familiarity and confidence. However, although these are common concepts they can be operationalized in different ways by individuals in order to explain their choices; with the islands being 'too familiar' for some and for others appealingly 'familiar'. This shows how students can narrate their own experiences using common values and concepts to present quite different choices.

When deploying the concepts of familiarity and confidence, students often refer to their personal histories and experiences. So, for example, some students within this research had a much greater familiarity with the 'mainland' as children. This raises a question as to the role of personal history. For Bourdieu, the important role of individual history is noted. However, he states,

> Since the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his group or class, each individual system of dispositions may be seen as a structural variant of all the other group or class habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 86).

In the case of island students then, further research may be necessary to consider whether there may be a number of variants of island habitus. In particular issues of class may be important – so for example students who had parents who went to university may be more likely to identify university as something they were 'always going to do' and may identify the cities that their parents went to university in as 'familiar'.

A further question is raised about how far island habitus may interact with other kinds of habitus. For example, students may exhibit differences in orientation towards graduate options according to the occupational or university habitus each student is located within. An example might be students studying vocational subjects such as dentistry, veterinary subjects, education and nursing tend to identify a period of growing competence followed by a stable career (which could take them back to the islands): something which contrasts with students from non-vocational courses who are less likely to be able to imagine a defined career path.

Conclusion

The results of the first stage of this research project reveal a complexity of decision making of island students in terms of higher education and subsequent career choices. Rather than simple economically 'rational' decisions about higher education or employment options, decisions take into account a range of economic, cultural and social factors. This complexity means that although the provision of education and employment options on the islands is a vital part of addressing youth depopulation, it can only be part of the solution. Further consideration of social and cultural issues and research into how these impact on islander decision making is vital if effective interventions are to be made to ensure population sustainability.

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Appendix 1: Interview Participants

Subject of study	University	Location prior to university	Time in location	Age	Gender
Health and Social Policy	University of Glasgow, Dumfries campus	Orkney	All my life	22	F
English	University College London	Orkney	more than 10 years	20	M
Civil and Environmental Engineering	University of Edinburgh	Orkney	more than 10 years	22	F
Mechanical & Energy Engineering	Heriot-Watt University	Orkney	less than 5 years	23	M
Accountancy & Business Law	Heriot-Watt University	Orkney	All my life	21	F

Accountancy & Business Law	Heriot-Watt University	Orkney	All my life	21	F
Business	University of the Highlands and Islands (Orkney College)	Orkney	All my life	21	F
Biological Sciences (Human Health)	Heriot-Watt University	Shetland	All my life	21	F
French & Spanish	University of Strathclyde	Shetland	All my life	22	F
Law	University of Aberdeen	Shetland	All my life	21	F
Applied Social Sciences	Robert Gordon University	Shetland	All my life	23	F
International Business Management	Robert Gordon University	Shetland	All my life	22	F
Creative Sound Production	Abertay University	Orkney	All my life	24	M
Business & Management	University of the Highlands and Islands (Orkney College)	Orkney	All my life	22	M
Dental Surgery	University of Dundee	Shetland	All my life	22	F
Occupational Therapy	Robert Gordon University	Shetland	All my life	36	F
Forensic & Analytical Science	Robert Gordon University	Orkney	All my life	21	F
Management with HRM	Robert Gordon University	Shetland	All my life	21	F
Management	Robert Gordon University	Shetland	All my life	22	F
Management with Marketing	Robert Gordon University	Orkney	All my life	21	F
Veterinary Nursing	Edinburgh Napier University	Orkney	All my life	21	F
Nursing (mental health)	Robert Gordon University	Orkney	All my life	20	F
Nursing (adult)	Robert Gordon University	Orkney	All my life	21	F