



University pathways of urban and rural migration in Iceland



Thoroddur Bjarnason ^{a,*}, Ingi Runar Edvardsson ^b

^a Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, University of Akureyri, Iceland

^b School of Business, University of Iceland, Iceland

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ABSTRACT

Low levels of education have serious social, economic and cultural ramifications in rural areas. In many countries, regional universities have explicitly been built to educate the local population, create professional jobs and stimulate innovation. More recently, distance education has been developed to provide university education in rural regions and diminish brain drain towards urban centres. In this study, the pathways of Icelandic university graduates are traced from place of origin to residence five years after graduation. An overwhelming majority of local students at the national University of Iceland (UI) remain in the Reykjavík Capital Area after graduation, while others mostly emigrate abroad. Only about one in three UI students from regions beyond commuting distance return after graduation, while about half remain in the capital area and others mostly emigrate. The regional University of Akureyri (UNAK) in Northern Iceland is relatively successful in retaining graduates from North Central region, but on-campus students from regions beyond commuting distance from UNAK are no more likely to return after graduation than their UI counterparts. In sharp contrast, about three in four UNAK distance students remain in their region of origin after graduation. While regional universities may primarily strengthen regional centres, distance education has the potential to enhance educational levels in more distant exurban, micropolitan and rural areas.

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1. Introduction

Inequalities in higher education contribute to regional and rural decline by drawing students from local communities and preventing the return of college graduates. In most countries, the level of university education is highest in the largest cities and decreases with less urbanization and more distance from cities and universities (OECD, 2016). Educational opportunities are generally concentrated in urban areas and successful professional careers are in most cases best pursued in metropolitan or even global job markets. This may of course vary by fields of study and professional specialisation, as school teachers and general practitioners may for instance have a broader choice of professional locations than corporate lawyers and nuclear scientists. Social mobility nevertheless frequently presupposes geographical mobility, and greater educational and occupational aspirations consistently predict stronger migration intentions among rural youth (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson, 2006; Rye, 2011; Seyfrit et al., 2010; Thissen et al., 2010).

Prospective university students from rural areas may have various plans for future residence that do not necessarily come to fruition. Many are drawn by an ‘urban ethos’ or ‘cosmopolitanism’ that equates city life with a free, modern lifestyle and may have firm plans of never returning (Bjarnason, 2014; Gabriel, 2002; Lowe, 2015; Skrbis et al., 2014). Others have a strong attachment to the local community and may choose to pursue studies that might enable them to return upon graduation or later in life (McLaughlin et al., 2014; Rérat, 2014; Thissen et al., 2010). Various changes over the life course may affect such early plans, including romantic relationships and joint decision making of spouses (Clerge, Sanchez-Soto, Song and Luke, 2000; Costa and Kahn, 2000). The aggregate level of adolescent migration intentions is nevertheless a fairly strong predictor of rural population development in the following decades (Bjarnason, 2014).

The concentration of university graduates in urban and metropolitan areas contributes to increased productivity, innovation and entrepreneurship, and helps create dynamic environments rich in amenities and occupational opportunities (Blackwell et al., 2002; Gunasekara, 2006; OECD, 2016; Pink-Harper, 2015). Such urban and metropolitan areas are in turn characterized by low out-migration and high in-migration of university graduates (Abel

* Corresponding author. Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, University of Akureyri, Solborg v/Nordurslød, 600 Akureyri, Iceland.

E-mail address: thorodd@unak.is (T. Bjarnason).

and Deitz, 2012; Edvardsson, 2014; Gottlieb and Joseph, 2006; Waldorf, 2009; Winters, 2011c). Conversely, the lack of a university educated workforce in rural areas is a self-reinforcing process with serious social, economic and cultural ramifications. The lack of university education in communities traditionally dependent on primary and secondary production inhibits successful local innovations and entrepreneurship, and may reduce the chances of outside investments that require an educated workforce. The lack of university graduates also adversely affects various amenities and services, including health services, education, cultural activities and recreational opportunities (Chatterton, 2000; Corcoran et al., 2010; Winters, 2011b). Ironically, in more rural areas it is therefore often difficult to fill the relatively few existing jobs for university graduates such as teachers, doctors, nurses, psychologists and social workers (Flum et al., 2016; Jervis-Tracey et al., 2016; Kelly and Fogarthy, 2015; Mbemba et al., 2016; Nithiapinyasakul et al., 2016; Reininger, 2012).

Governments in many Western countries have attempted to break this vicious circle by placing regional institutions of higher education at the centre of regional policy (Anderssen, Quigley and Wilhelmsson, 2004; Arbo and Eskelinen, 2003; Edvardsson, 2001; Frenette, 2009; Lehmann et al., 2009; Tomaney and Wray, 2011). Regional universities are in particular expected to have a wide range of positive regional impacts, including the diversification of industries, provision of skilled jobs, consumption of goods and services, support of innovation and entrepreneurship, and collaboration with local actors for regional development (Brenzitz and Feldman, 2012; Drucker and Goldstein, 2007; Edvardsson, 2014; Scott, 2014; Smith and Bagchi-Sen, 2012). Most importantly, regional universities are expected to enhance regional levels of higher education by producing university graduates, recruiting educated faculty and staff and creating an intellectual and cultural context that draws other educated people to the area (Abel and Deitz, 2012; Blackwell et al., 2002; Bramwell and Wolfe, 2008; Gottlieb and Fogarty, 2003). It should however be noted that the regional impact of universities tends to be geographically limited (Anderssen et al., 2004; Anderssen, Quigley and Wilhelmsson, 2009). The economic impact is primarily felt in their immediate vicinity and they do not necessarily enhance educational levels in more peripheral areas. Regionally they may even contribute to economic and cultural centralization at the expense of the regional periphery (Edvardsson, 2014; Goldstein and Glaser, 2012; Nord and Weller, 2002). While the establishment of regional universities may be an important part of a broader strategy for strengthening major regional centres, they may therefore not necessarily increase the level of university education in smaller towns or more rural areas.

More recently, the development of online distance education has been widely hailed as an effective way of providing university education in rural regions and diminishing brain drain towards urban centres (e.g. Chawinga and Zozie, 2016; Muhirwa, 2012; OECD, 2015; Rennie et al., 2011; Tomaney and Wray, 2011; UNESCO, 2015). The advancement of information technology has revolutionised teaching and learning as new technology enables the exchange of ideas and teaching material, free of the constraints of time and space. Distance education clearly makes university education more accessible to prospective rural students and thus decreases inequalities in individual access to higher education. It is however unclear to what extent distance education increases the educational levels of rural populations. Many distance education graduates inevitably move to urban areas and distance education may to some extent simply delay out-migration by the duration of the studies. Somewhat surprisingly, there is a lack of research on the effects of distance education on the residential choices of university graduates and its impact on levels of higher education in rural areas.

In this paper, we explore the influence of on-campus and distance higher education on the future migration of Icelandic university students. The pathways of all graduates between metropolitan, exurban, micropolitan and rural areas are mapped over a ten year frame through the national University of Iceland in the capital of Reykjavík and on-campus and distance education at the regional University of Akureyri in the regional centre of Northern Iceland. A multinomial logistic regression model is then developed to estimate the association of gender, general area of study, university location and distance education with migration to different domestic and international destinations.

2. Pathways of higher education

The impact of university education on migration is the outcome of complex interactions between communities of origin, the location and relative strength of universities, individual educational choices and aspirations, social networks and interpersonal relations, and structural and individual occupational opportunities.

University enrollment and choice of university depend on a whole host of factors ranging from structural characteristics such as gender (Buchmann, 2009; Reynolds and Burge, 2008; Wells et al., 2013), race and ethnicity (Alvarado and Turley, 2012; Griffin et al., 2012; Kim and Nunez, 2013), and social class (Deil-Amen and Tevis, 2010; Goyette, 2008; Rye, 2011; Wu and Bai, 2015) to attachment, relations and advice from family and friends (Alvarado and Turley, 2012; Myers and Myers, 2012; Wells et al., 2013), and individual values, aspirations and ambitions (Goyette, 2008; Sojken, Bartkowiak and Skuza, 2012; Wu and Bai, 2015).

While the university preferences of students may be influenced by e.g. the course offerings, reputation and tuition levels of different institutions (Cooke and Boyle, 2011; Tindal, Packwood, Findlay, Leahy and McCollum, 2015; Walsh et al., 2015; Sojken et al., 2012), selective universities may also choose among applicants on the basis of social and economic background, test scores and educational achievement, and even interests and extracurricular activities (Deil-Amen and Tevis, 2010; Dwenger et al., 2012; Klasik, 2012).

Importantly for the purposes of the current study, geography is one of the factors influencing the choice of university. University enrollment decreases with increased distance from university (Alm and Winters, 2009; Frenette, 2009; Jepsen and Montgomery, 2009; Kjellström and Regnér, 1999; Parker et al., 2016; Spiess and Wrohlich, 2010). Proximity to university has in particular been found to affect the intention to enroll and the actual university enrollment among young people of lower socioeconomic background (Christie, 2007; Frenette, 2009; Parker et al., 2016). Interestingly, local universities do not only draw young people from their areas of origin but also appear to encourage young people to attend more distant universities (Frenette, 2009). The effects of distance on university attendance is however contingent upon e.g. the structure and availability of educational programs, the difficulty of terrain and access of prospective students to car or other means of transportation (Edvardsson and Oskarsson, 2010; Parker et al., 2016).

After completing a university degree, there are various possible pathways between region of origin, region of study and region of destination after graduation (Haapanen and Tervo, 2012; Hoare and Corver, 2010; Venhorst, 2013). Those who move beyond their home region to study have the options of returning home, staying in the region of the university or moving onward to other regions. From the perspective of each region, however, the population of university graduates living in the region can be divided into those who studied locally, local students who moved away for studies and returned to the region with a degree; in-migrant students who

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