

# Urban 'escalator' means disadvantaged rural students miss out on top universities

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Bright but disadvantaged students from urban areas are more likely to enter elite UK universities than similar peers from rural communities

due to an urban 'escalator effect', according to a new study.

Researchers from the University of Bath analyzed data from 800,000 English students commencing university in the years 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016.

They found that while in general rural areas had higher overall progression to university than city centers and surrounding areas, when controlling for factors including socio-economic status, age, ethnicity and sex, disadvantaged pupils from rural areas were less likely to progress to one of 27 'top' UK universities.

The authors suggest the difference is due to a 'vortex of influences' including 'social mix effects' in more diverse urban settings, successive urban-centered policy interventions and the targeting of university and third-sector outreach activities to [urban areas](#).

Although the results reaffirmed that social class remains the biggest predictor of progression to a top university, the researchers say the results highlight drawbacks of existing geographic measures used to identify disadvantage, as they do not account for the diverse nature of deprived areas, and therefore universities risk missing disadvantaged students. Instead the use of more sophisticated measures could help universities target under-represented and disadvantaged students more effectively, and the authors call for a co-ordinated strategic approach to ensure that no areas are missed by universities' widening participation programs.

The paper is published in the *British Educational Research Journal*.

Jo Davies, who led the research as part of her Ph.D. studies in the Department of Education, said: "There has been a lot of interest and concern about geographic inequalities in education. Our paper shows

that whilst social background is still the most important predictor for progressing to an elite university, there may also be further geographic factors compounding access. We believe that the use of Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping methods, as used within our own research, could enable elite universities to target under-represented students more effectively, especially disadvantaged students living in [rural areas](#) with otherwise good progression rates."

The research team, from the Department of Education, used data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) of 800,000 English students beginning university in the academic years 2008/09, 2010/11, 2012/ 13, 2014/15 and 2016/17.

They were interested in progression to 27 'top' UK universities, comprising the Russell Group plus the Universities of St Andrews, Bath and Strathclyde, comparing rates from each Middle Super Output Area (MSOA) in England. Each MSOA, of which there are 6,791 across England, has a population between 5,000 and 15,000, with a minimum of 2,000 and a maximum of 6,000 households.

By analyzing progression to these elite institutions after controlling for a factors including education (state/private school education, tariff point score, number of facilitating subjects studied), socio-[economic status](#), age, ethnicity, sex, distance traveled and academic year, the urban escalator effect emerged.

The research was funded by a University of Bath Research Studentship Award. The University currently funds seven Ph.D. students as part of its program of research aiming to uncover ways in which participation in higher education can be widened and to ensure that no [student](#) who has the ability and desire to go to onto higher education is prevented from doing so because of their background.

Dr. Matt Dickson, who leads the overall program for the University's Institute for Policy Research, said: "This research is a great example of the importance of analysis that goes beyond a descriptive picture to understand the key factors that perpetuate inequalities in higher education access. Rather than a simple rural-urban divide, the reality is much more complex and this has important implications for higher [education](#) policy."

These lessons are already being implemented at the University of Bath. For example, alongside its existing program of Widening Participation initiatives the University recently entered into a partnership with Villiers Park Educational Trust to support students from neglected rural and coastal communities to access top universities, such as Bath, through activities including coaching and mentoring for students.

**More information:** Joanne Davies et al, Geographies of elite higher education participation: An urban 'escalator' effect, *British Educational Research Journal* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/berj.3711](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3711)

Provided by University of Bath

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