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Further Reading: Cullinan J, Flannery D (2022) Distance Matters: Geographic Accessibility and Higher Education Participation Decisions. In *Critical Perspectives on Economics of Education*, Mendolia S, O'Brien M, Paloyo A, Yerokhin O (Eds.), London: Routledge.

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Distance Matters: Geographic Accessibility and Higher Education Participation Decisions

There is extensive evidence that substantial inequalities persist in relation to higher education participation and outcomes in many countries. One potential barrier to participation is geographic accessibility, often measured by travel distance, which can lead to a wide range of direct and indirect costs. These costs may impact not only the decision to participate in higher education, but also where and what to study. Importantly, they generally tend to be more salient for students from poorer backgrounds. As a result, distance deterrent effects may exacerbate inequalities in educational outcomes. They can also result in an inefficient allocation of resources, if those facing higher costs have higher potential gains from education. Within this context, this research examined the theoretical and empirical economics literature on the role and importance of geographic accessibility for decisions relating to higher education participation.

Key Findings

The research found extensive evidence that travel distance negatively impacts progression to higher education in many countries, including Ireland. It also found a general consensus that geographic accessibility influences the specific institution a student attends. This implies that in countries where there are large differences in geographic accessibility to higher education institutions (HEIs), some students may be disadvantaged as a consequence. In particular, if travel distance reduces the likelihood of participation in higher education, or results in students enrolling at lower-quality local institutions, such students may be penalized in terms of future labour market outcomes on the basis of where they live. In addition, there was considerable evidence that it tends to be students from poorer backgrounds who are most impacted by these distance effects.

Policy Implications

Overall the evidence suggests that geographic accessibility can have important implications for a range of higher education participation decisions. A number of studies have discussed a variety of existing and potential policy responses to address the various equity and efficiency considerations associated with distance effects. These include, but are not limited to, increased financial aid with staggered distance payments, scholarships to attend 'regional' universities (i.e., those outside large population centres), as well as policies that aim to reduce the costs of mobility. In relation to the latter, several studies have recommended that policymakers should consider measures to reduce the transaction costs of students who study, or would like to study, far away from home. Such measures could include free travel permits for students, reduced accommodation costs, and subsidized relocation costs. Other suggested policies relate more directly to HEIs. For example, there have been proposals for the establishment of new HEIs in poorly served regions, increasing the geographical dispersion of top-ranked institutions, as well as greater HEI specialization. In addition, more distance-learning and online programmes have also been proposed as a means of tackling distance effects, though obviously any particular policy response should be context-specific and take into account the unique local circumstances, including existing policies and supports.