



Book Review: Alexander, R. (2024). Higher Education, Place, and Career Development. Routledge.

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Introduction

Rosie Alexander's book provides rural education researchers with a valuable resource, with helpful theoretical perspectives and evidence to inform arguments about the nature of rural access to higher education and career transitions beyond. While the study is clearly bounded in an island context of Scotland, the generalisability of the findings to other contexts are fairly clear to me. As I read through the book, I found myself reflecting on my own experiences living and working in island and rural communities. Much of the content resonates with me, even though I am unfamiliar with the research context. This is an academic book and I think is best suited to an academic audience. While the anecdotes presented provide insights into the experiences of young people, the theory surrounding these insights would be somewhat difficult for an education professional or policy maker to digest. I found the structure a little repetitive at times, where concepts were reused from chapter to chapter. That said, there is considerable value in this book as it challenges assumptions and presents alternative ways of thinking about higher education access and career pathways.

Chapter Summaries and Reflections

In the first chapter, Alexander introduces us to the context of her PhD study: exploring place as a central theme as it connects to island communities and students engaged in higher education. In setting the scene she makes it clear why the research is important. *"This book concerns the role of place and mobility in the transitions of students into, through, and beyond university."* (p. 2). She argues that this kind of research gives voice to people who are often 'overlooked'. They are seen as peripheral, but Alexander wants to centre their experiences. Of note too is Alexander's positionality as an insider to the context. She takes a clear stand against deficit ascriptions of rurality, arguing that 'remoteness' is a term she uses carefully, acknowledging that the term is most often used by people in metropolitan spaces to stereotype those who live far away--and by extension are disadvantaged because they are far away, on the edge, at the periphery (see also Taylor et al., 2016). But she notes that those who live on the islands, who she goes on to describe, are most concerned about what is near to them--their islands and their communities. And so the scene is set for an exploration of what her research participants actually think.

In Chapter 2, Alexander provides a theoretical basis for the research, unpacking concepts of neoliberalism, metrocentricity, inequality, and mobility discourses. Drawing from Bourdieu's theories of social and capital (Bourdieu, 1986), she discusses 'mobility capital' to explain the propensities of islanders to move for participation in higher education. The chapter also introduces readers to three constructed case studies, based on a synthesis of her research participants' experiences. Helga, Marie and Inga tell their stories of entering university to *"demonstrate the quite different ways that young people can come to leave the islands for higher*

education.” (p. 38). Alexander notes that *“stay and leave decisions are complex and renegotiated over time”* (p. 44).

Chapter 3 is titled *Spatial belongings*. Alexander discusses the concept of 'heterolocal belongings' to explain the enduring connections to the islands that people retain over a life course, despite their movement away to engage in study and career choices.

Chapter 4 is about 'becoming and belonging'. Alexander challenges us to think about the spatial dimensions of becoming through learning. The theoretical unpacking of career as a temporal, social and spatial process will resonate with many who come from rural communities. Indeed, I reflected on my own (and my children's) experiences of growing up on an island (Tasmania) and can see how the experiences of Helga, Inga and Marie align with my own. The discussion about 'becoming' also aligns neatly with my own PhD findings about vocational learning in savanna communities of northern Australia (Guenther, 2006), which similarly commented on the significance of identity formation and mobility.

Chapter 5 is notionally about 'career frameworks for mobility'. While I do see this in the chapter, the themes that stand out to me are more about spatial orientations in careers. Maybe they are the same thing. Leading into the now familiar anecdotes of Helga, Inga and Marie, Alexander emphasises 'spatial horizons', 'spatialised aspirations', 'spatial intentions' and 'spatial frameworks' in the formation of career pathways. These spatialised orientations are set against the apparently 'decontextualised ways' that career decisions are encouraged. The reality that Alexander describes is not an either / or possibility. Rather what seems to emerge is a hybrid decision making hierarchy where career aspirations and spatial horizons come together, and where island horizons are at least temporarily replaced by alternative spatial accommodations. This dynamic is perhaps unsurprising for those of us who have managed multiple urban/rural transitions in pursuit of career or study options.

The sixth chapter adds relationships into the mix of push and pull factors that influence career choices and mobilities. The idea the space as 'socially constructed' is not new (Low, 1996; Roberts & Guenther, 2021), and there is plenty of evidence to show how important relationships are for career choices in rural spaces. While Alexander seems to focus mostly on personal and familial relationships (at least in the three vignettes from Marie, Inga and Helga), the construction of attractive rural spaces includes the broader community (see also Lowe et al., 2019; Versland et al., 2022). Based on Alexander's findings, the reverse may be true for islanders who choose to move away for careers. That is, the loss of island relationships and the gaining of new non-island relationships may make the spatial pull of the islands less appealing. Again from my own personal experience, when I moved from my island home to pursue postgraduate studies and later an academic career, the loss of parents and the out-migration of my children reduced the pull of the island. Meanwhile the establishment of new personal, social and professional relationships drew me to a new space in northern Australia, where more than 20 years on, I enjoy living.

In Chapter 7, Alexander provides a useful theoretical model to help readers visualise the interconnection of concepts introduced earlier. The diagram provides a succinct and clear map of career pathways, integrating the concepts of place, career and relationships with pathways of becoming and belonging across time. Alexander makes what I think is an important observation: *“something like ‘education’ has both a general realisation and a specific, localised, realisation, this is such that feeling a sense of ‘belonging’ in a school context in the islands can create a ‘familiarity’ with education that makes going away to university feel possible”* (p. 147). In my mind, this suggests that a decontextualised representation of education acts something like a bridge from one sector to another, creating familiarity that connects one context to another. On the next page Alexander drops another small but significant observation: *“we can understand that we hold multiple different spatialised positions. So young people in the islands attend school, but they also*

take part in activities like drama and sports that also have spatialised realisations". This resonates with some of the Australian literature that talks about Indigenous people navigating 'two worlds' (for example Parsons, 2022). The reality is not that people live in two worlds but rather that they themselves hold multiple spatialised positions, which enable them to successfully navigate the one world they live in at any given time. Alexander's insights here are helpful not only in understanding career pathways for people straddling islands and mainlands, but of those who straddle cultural and class spaces (which are touched on in this chapter)

In Chapter 8 Alexander introduces or reinforces some useful and important provocations. She proposes and questions policy responses in relation to the concept of 'deprivation' which Scotland uses to inform discussions about equitable and widening participation (see Lasselle, 2021; McKendrick et al., 2024). The argument for support is tempered by a recognition that being an islander is not necessarily a problem in itself: "*focusing on rurality as a 'barrier' which requires support to 'overcome' represents only one way of understanding rural space and young people's transitions.*" (p. 173). The aspiration of becoming 'settled', frequently mentioned in this book, is an interesting alternative which recognises that value in higher education is not just about career opportunities. However, Alexander seems to be having a bet both ways here, as she earlier describes the "*double disadvantage*" (p. 170) faced by islanders. This points to the tension that is often discussed in the literature about the need to label rural as 'disadvantaged' to argue for equitable access, while at the same time celebrating the strengths of rural or isolated communities (see also Guenther et al., 2014; Guenther et al., 2015).

The final chapter summarises the six key arguments that arise from the study:

1. The value of a career lens in research into youth transitions
2. The importance of the significance of space in graduate transitions.
3. Breaking down binaries of mobility and place.
4. Breaking down of the notion of spatial belonging as an impediment to mobility, and career as a motivator of mobility
5. The importance not just of career but also of relationships in the ways that graduate pathways develop.
6. The pervasive and problematic neoliberal discourses which frame the ways that policymakers, researchers and students themselves think about their trajectories.

These key arguments will no doubt resonate with many rural education researchers. They provide a useful framework through which access to and value from higher education can be considered.

Concluding comments

Alexander's book provides valuable evidence about the nature of transitions in the island communities of Scotland where she conducted the research. The theoretical contribution to career progressions in rural communities is also very important. But perhaps more important are the voices of those who shared their stories of engagement in higher education and their trajectories into careers.

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