**Blog post**

My name is Hannah Budge, 3rd year PhD researcher at the Centre of Rural Economy, Newcastle University. My thesis examines the experiences of women in the agriculture industry in the Scottish and Maritime Canadian islands. When I initially applied for the RPLC R&E grant in 2019, I looked forward to expanding my international research experiences and abilities. I pictured meeting new people in both Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, during the summer months of 2020. When I would also attend conferences and meet other researchers from across the globe with similar interests as myself, allowing for the all-important knowledge exchange and networking. However, as with many plans this past two years, Coronavirus placed a halt to all activities. With travel bans and lockdowns put in place, it meant an initial delay for travel aspect of the research. This was then re-arranged to April-July 2021, with hope that COVID-19 may have been under control by that point.

This meant a re-arrangement of my initial research plans, and instead I focussed on my Scottish interviews. As there were travel restrictions in place in Scotland during this time, it meant that I did the interviews either online, using zoom, or via the phone. This presented some issues such as doing the research from a remote rural location, as I returned to my family home in the Shetland Islands.

Following months of speculation, it was decided in March 2021 that with the surging cases of COVID-19 in both Canada and the UK, that it would not be suitable for me to travel and carry out the field work in person. This meant that I had to resort to Plan B: carrying out my Canadian interviews via zoom and over the phone, rather as in person. This presented similar challenges to that I experienced with the Scottish Islands research. Namely poor or unstable internet connection on both sides of the rural Atlantic. This meant that some of the interviews were carried out over the phone, and some over zoom. Although the phone interviews went well, there were issues of poor signal disrupting some of the calls. This though, did not take away from the quality of the interview or the data collected, did mean some going back and forth to ensure the participant could hear the questions and similarly the interviewee could hear all the answers. Furthermore, the time difference between the UK and Canada resulted in myself as the researcher being conscious of what times were appropriate for the interviews to take place. Thankfully as there was only a 3 and a half and a four-hour difference, this was not as tricky as some parts of Canada would have been, for instance a 12-hour difference. However, it was still a factor in that I as the researcher had to conduct interviews at 7 or 8pm at night, and ensure I was flexible with my evenings in order to accommodate the interview participants. This highlights that although online and phone interviews are less costly in the sense that the researcher does not have to travel to an area, it can affect the experience for the participants. For instance, the stress of hoping the internet access will hold out throughout the call, ensuring other household members are not using up large parts of internet data and trying not to move too much in case their signal drops and accidently ends the call. All of these are issues which do not occur during in-person interviews.

Lesson learned from this experience included being aware of both the advantages and practical disadvantages of doing online interviews. How although they present a new way forward for cheaper, more accessible research for some, it does not come without the disadvantages. Lessons which I have learnt for the future include:

* Having a back-up internet source, at times I switched to using a hotspot with my phone as the data source, especially if I had been having internet issues throughout the day.
* Always make sure you have a Plan B, or even C. In this case, since I had already put together a Plan B in case of not being able to travel, this made it much easier for the transition to online research.
* Ensure permission slips are easy for people to fill in or use verbal permission. Many individuals do not have access to a printer or scanner, with libraries being shut down during COVID this made it even more tricky for people to sign forms. In comparison to in-person interviews where these documents can be physically handed over.

In terms of the results of the project, a clear theme has emerged; that although there has been much progression in terms of women in the agriculture industry, both in these Scottish and two Canadian islands, there is still work to be done. During the interviews several barriers were raised. Therefore, the following include some initial recommendations:

* A need to increase the number of women on agriculture boards and for them to be in leadership positions. However, ensure they feel they are wanted and welcome and not simply there to tick a box.
* Unconscious bias training should be encouraged for agriculture sales reps. Several participants told stories of how they’d been ignored by the reps, or the salesperson had repeated addressed the man they were with, despite it being evident that they as a woman were the one with the check book and decision-making power.
* Women mentors should be encouraged, to act both as mentor for new farmers and as an example to women and girls that they too can be successful in an agricultural career.
* Women-only groups were broadly seen as a positive, but not flawless, stepping-stone to encourage women to take part in meetings and training opportunities.
* Further investment in internet access and phone signal across rural areas is required. This is especially required with the further shift to home working following COVID-19.

To conclude, this was a valuable learning experience on how to conduct online research in an international setting. It has highlighted many advantages and some disadvantages of doing research in this manner. Although there are some evident barriers to online-based research in rural areas, such as internet connectivity, there are signs of potential in this area. Throughout the next and final year of my PhD research I will seek to further these initial findings to provide a comprehensive comparison between the two Canadian islands and Scottish islands.