

Rural youth outmigration: brain drain or brain circulation?

Background

Rural and island brain drain

The 'brain drain' of young people from rural and island communities is a longstanding concern.



Retaining or attracting young people to these regions has therefore been a significant focus of policy initiatives.

Is it that simple?

Research shows that out-migration of young people in rural areas is strongly connected to higher education entry. Evidence also shows that young people increasingly return to their home communities after graduation (Sage, *et al*, 2013). Rural youth research also suggests that young leavers often maintain strong attachments (Evans, 2016). So, we can ask whether rural youth out-migration is always a 'brain drain' or if alternative metaphors of 'brain circulation' or 'brain rotation' may be more appropriate (Baldacchino, 2006).

The research

This research aimed to explore the trajectories of graduates from two specific rural island communities (Orkney and Shetland). 22 students from the islands who graduated in 2015 were interviewed at the point of graduation and one year later. In addition statistical data from the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) survey for all graduates from Orkney and Shetland over a five year period was analysed.

Desire to return



The findings show that the majority of participants either planned for, desired, or could imagine circumstances under which they would return to the islands. Returns were typically imagined as happening in the future at a point of 'settling down' with a partner, a job and a family. The islands were felt to be especially good places for children to grow up.

Destinations post-graduation

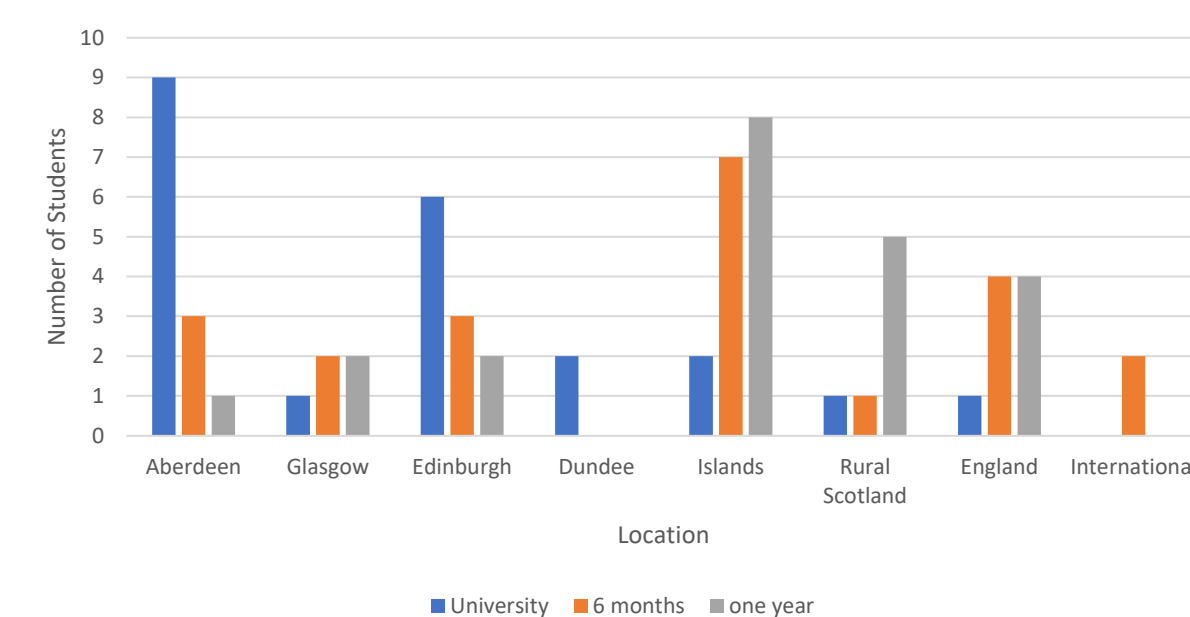


Fig. 1: locations of participants, for university, six months after graduation and one year after graduation.

Over one third of participants in the research were based in, or had returned to the islands one year after graduation. This is in line with the DLHE statistics for 2008/09-2012/13 which show that six months after graduation 39% of students from Orkney or Shetland (whose location is known) were living in Orkney or Shetland. For those interview participants who did not return to the islands there is evidence that some moved from urban to other rural areas (fig.1)

Experiences post-graduation

The interview findings show that where graduates are located a year after graduation depends on their relationship status and career pathway.

Some remain away, building up skills and experience waiting for the 'right time' to return home. Some have to remain away where they have trained in specific career routes if these options are not available in the islands at the time they graduate.

Others have entered relationships with people from the mainland, and are unsure if they will be able to return depending on their partner's feelings about the islands. Some of these graduates compromise by moving to rural areas that are 'like' the islands.

Those who return have different experiences of return depending on their relationship and employment experiences (Fig.2)

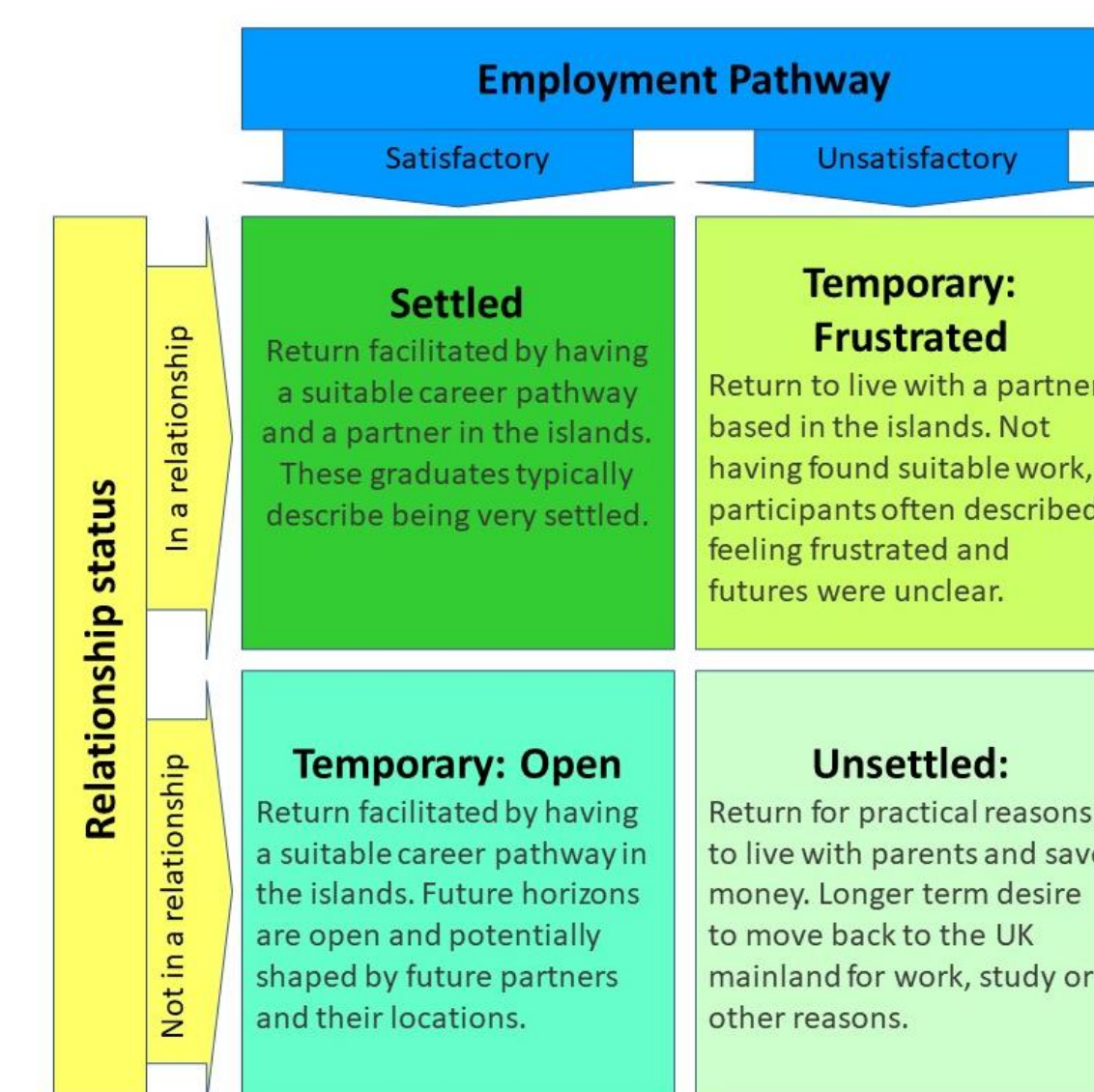


Fig.2 Typology of returner graduates (one year after graduation) (Alexander, forthcoming)

Summary

The communities of Orkney and Shetland experience high rates of graduate return. To different extents this is likely to be mirrored in other rural communities. However not all return experiences are positive.

Policy implications

- Understand return migration as part of population sustainability. Interventions to support potential returners could include:
 - Building opportunities for young out-migrants to retain connections with their communities. This could include discounted travel fares, or building connections between local employers and graduates through project working, mentoring or networking opportunities.
 - Reducing barriers for return e.g. housing
 - Longer term, investing in children's services to provide positive experiences of growing up is likely to encourage later return to raise children.
- Support young people and returners already in rural communities to secure meaningful work and build staying potential. Interventions could include:
 - Funding opportunities for young graduates to secure training
 - Work placement schemes with local employers
 - Bespoke career guidance provision

For further information



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