

Should I stay or should I go? Reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study or work



PIVOTAL

PUBLIC POLICY
FORUM NI

Overview

Educational migration is a long-standing feature of Northern Ireland's economy. In this new research we present data from current students about reasons for leaving Northern Ireland for study elsewhere. Our research also explored what might motivate people to return home after graduation or later in life.

In 2019 there were over 17,000 young people from Northern Ireland who were studying in Great Britain, with up to two-thirds deciding not to return after graduation. The Executive should consider the positive impact policies to retain and regain some of these graduates could have on the economy in Northern Ireland.

Pivotal's previous report *Retaining and regaining talent in Northern Ireland* found that Northern Ireland has a concerning combination of very high numbers of students leaving to study elsewhere and a low number of incoming students.

A striking finding in our previous research was that the Northern Ireland Executive has no policy in place to retain and regain these talented young people, despite Northern Ireland's low levels of skills, productivity and innovation.

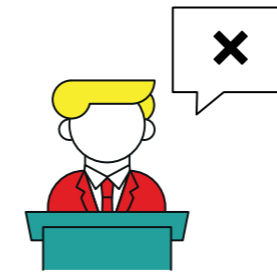
Our previous report explored existing research about why young people choose to leave Northern Ireland and not return. Given the lack of up-to-date evidence about motivations for leaving, in this new research we gathered views from more than 300 students through a survey and in-depth interviews, together with 48 interviews with people at a later stage of life who have chosen to live and work outside Northern Ireland.

We are extremely grateful to the participants who provided their time to participate in this project and to the various organisations we consulted with. Pivotal also wishes to thank the significant number of research interns who contributed to this project.

Our research may be summarised into four main findings which influence decision-making about leaving and returning to Northern Ireland:



Students clearly said that poor community relations in Northern Ireland were a reason to leave and not return. People who had chosen to live and work outside Northern Ireland after graduation agreed that this was a strong motivation to remain away.



Both groups reported that political instability and ineffective government in Northern Ireland were motivations to leave and not return.

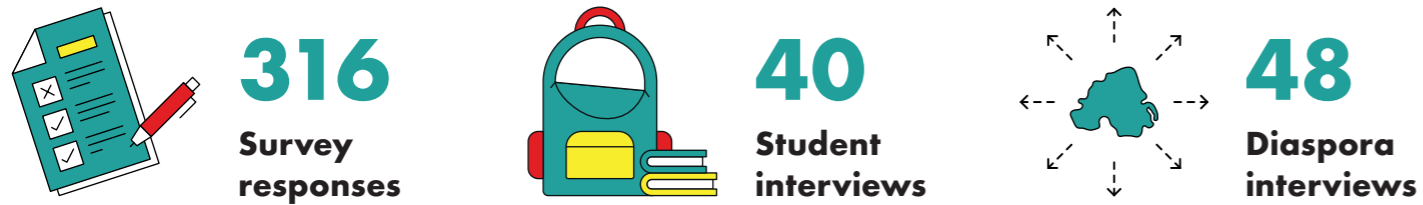


Students said that a broader range of higher education courses, greater availability of places and a higher quality student experience elsewhere encouraged them to leave Northern Ireland.

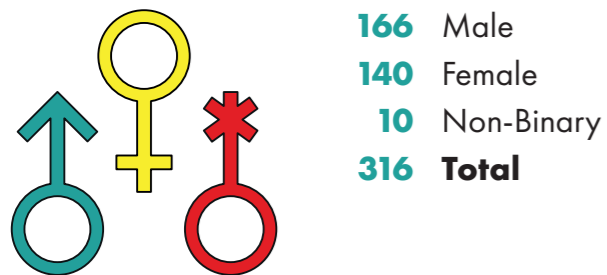


Students were strongly motivated by the close connections between university courses outside Northern Ireland and high quality undergraduate placements, along with the greater range of graduate jobs, higher salaries and opportunities for progression available elsewhere.

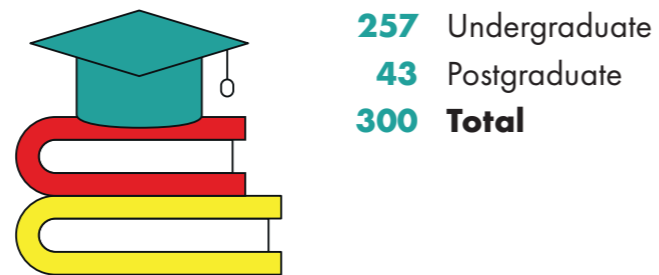
Who took part in this research?



Gender



Level of study

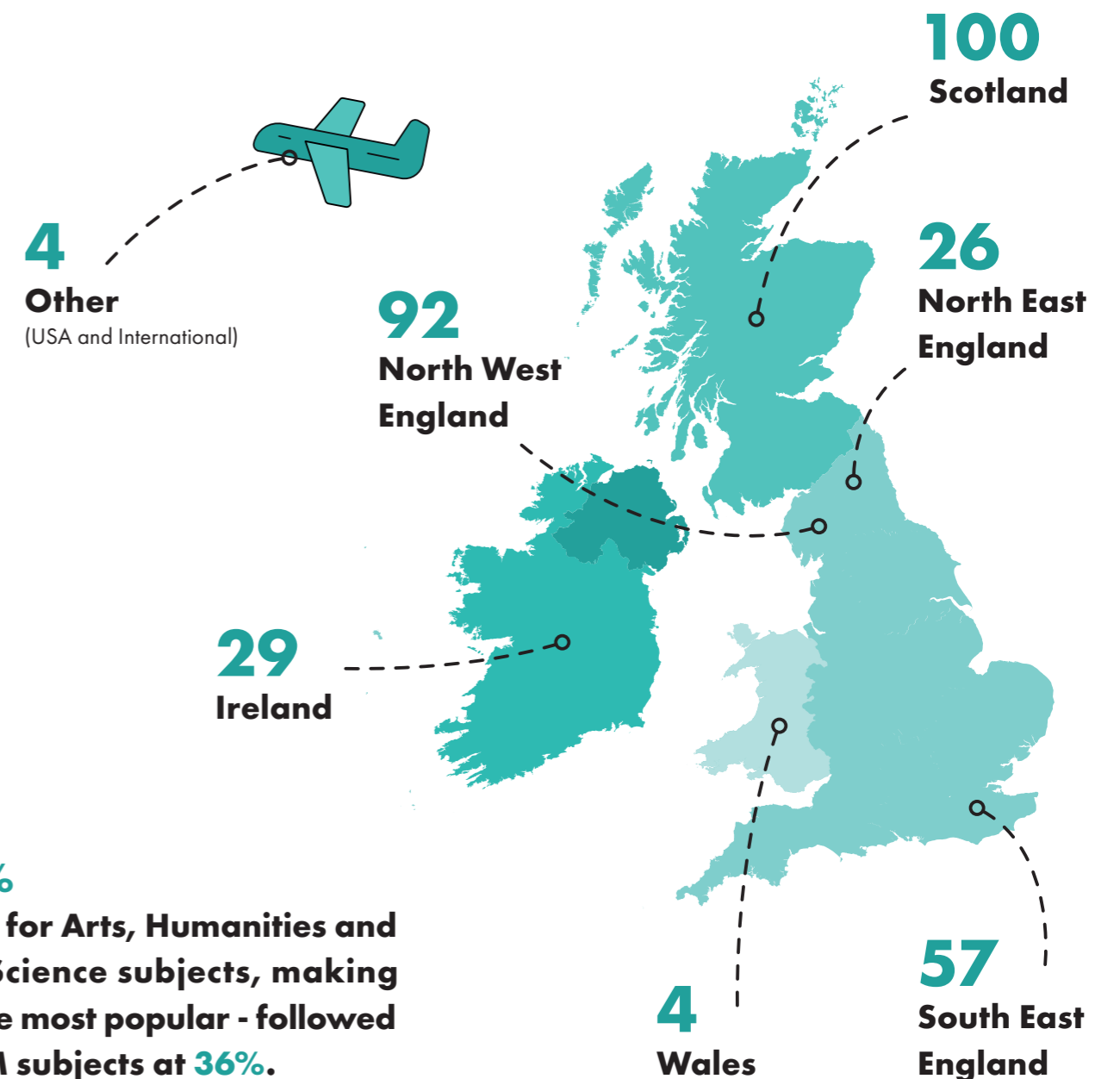


Religion



73% of the sample applied for a university programme outside of Northern Ireland as their firm UCAS choice

Where did our sample study?



38% applied for Arts, Humanities and Social Science subjects, making them the most popular - followed by STEM subjects at **36%**.

Factors influencing decisions to leave and not return to Northern Ireland

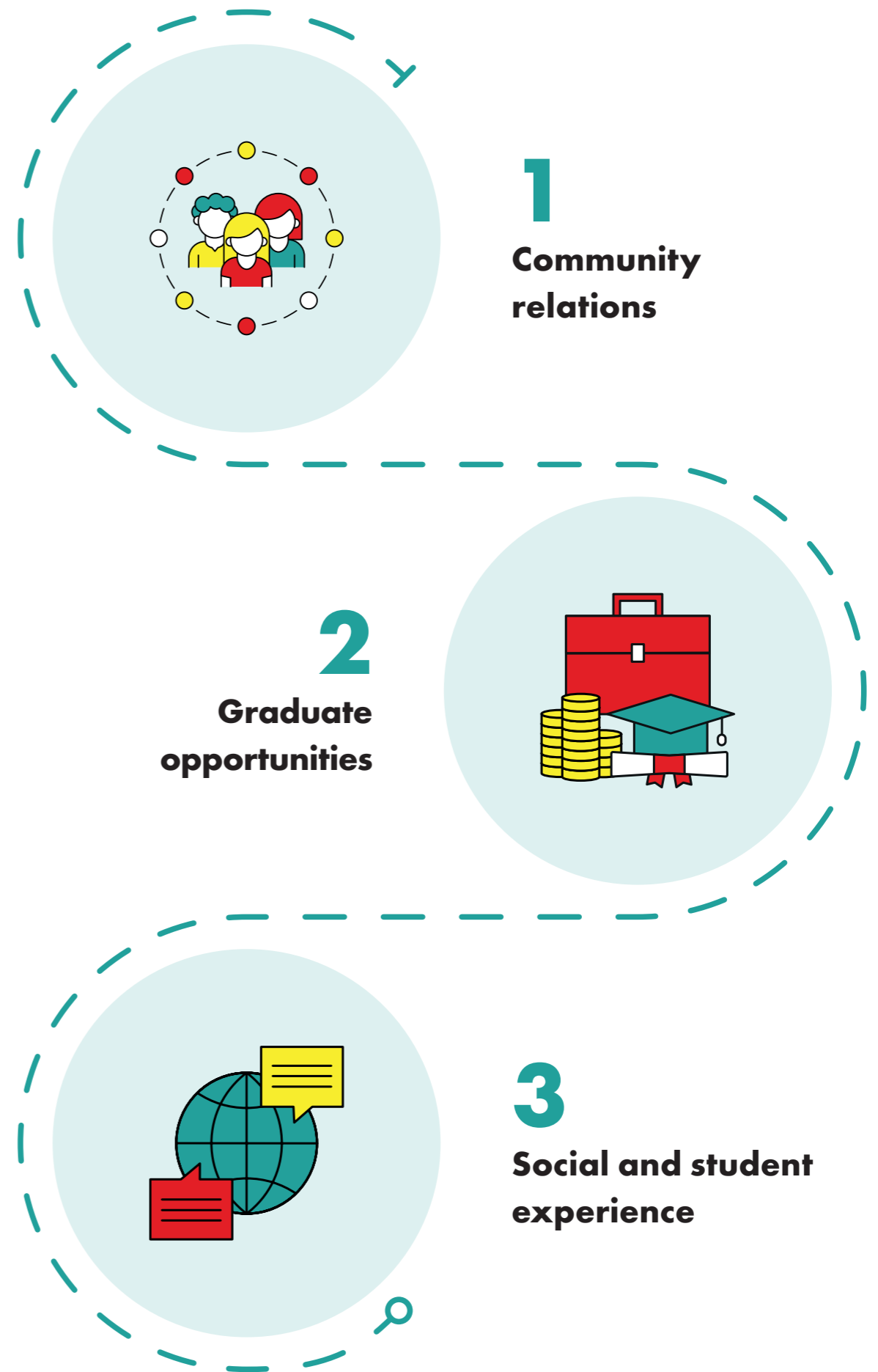
This section provides a summary of data obtained from students studying outside of Northern Ireland. We asked students about their motivations for leaving Northern Ireland to study elsewhere and what factors would influence their decision-making after graduation about returning home. We also interviewed adults who had been living and working outside of Northern Ireland for at least 12 months. This group is commonly referred to as 'diaspora'.

Why do students leave to study outside of Northern Ireland?

Students were invited to choose from a range of options that may influence their decision making that had previously been identified in studies of educational migration. These included reputation of the university, influence of peers and community relations. The results to the right demonstrate the top three endorsed items on a list of seven available options.

Students rated community relations, graduate opportunities and social and student experience as the top three reasons for leaving to study outside of Northern Ireland.

These factors were expanded upon in individual interviews with 40 students to better understand the issues raised and generate any new ideas.





Community relations

Students consistently reported that the religious/political divides in Northern Ireland are a 'push' factor for studying elsewhere. Students described being "sick" of ongoing community tension and disengaged from the historical context of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Notably, many students felt that the heavily segregated nature of education created limited contact with young people from different religious/political backgrounds and contributed to a desire to study elsewhere to gain a more varied experience of society.



I didn't apply at home because I wanted to live somewhere less focused on religion and politics, most people my age aren't bothered about religion but there's no escaping it at home.



I wanted an experience that wasn't related to what party you vote for or what you think about the past. I love Ireland but I am sick of all the

politics here and meanwhile no one is focusing on things that matter to our generation, civil rights, jobs, climate.



Graduate opportunities

Students described a perceived lack of placements during their university course and job opportunities after graduation, as a significant influence on their decision to study elsewhere. Participants were conscious of the financial and personal investment involved in higher education and were keen to obtain the best programme of study for their needs. Many students felt that Northern Ireland lacked varied and innovative placement and job options across subject areas such as STEM, arts and humanities and medical training.



I wanted to get a good placement as part of my [STEM] degree and not end up scraping around for the limited choices there are at home. Also felt

that building good contacts during degree would lead to better job when I finish.



I am studying [Allied Health Professional programme] and wouldn't want to work in the NHS at home. Starting positions are often hard to get and I don't think I could cope with the pressure of the waiting lists and funding issues at home.



Social and student experience

Those who had left Northern Ireland for study reported that seeking a more varied and stimulating social and student experience elsewhere was a motivation to leave. This theme was closely tied to community relations and a perceived lack of diversity in Northern Ireland. Students described a desire to be connected to global networks

with associated social experiences and had a negative perception of student life in Northern Ireland.

Several participants expressed a dislike of the lack of integration between students from different backgrounds in universities in Northern Ireland. Some participants felt that there were no proactive approaches to enable university students from Northern Ireland's different communities to mix and to develop international/EU student relationships.

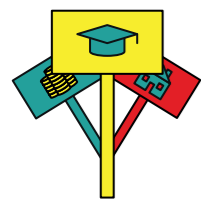


Firstly, Belfast is still full of sectarianism and I wanted to get away from that. I wanted to push myself and make new friends and not feel like it was expected for me to come home every weekend. Also, the nightlife and culture is a lot more interesting and varied in [England] compared to any Northern Irish city.



[City in England] seemed to me like a great place to live, people who are different, not everyone the same and of course, no one cares about religion and politics.

Three further themes emerged in the interview stage of the project: government functioning, lack of diversity in university programme choice and entrance grades in Northern Ireland.



Government functioning

Students consistently described concern and dissatisfaction with government functioning in Northern Ireland. A perceived lack of progress by the Northern Ireland Executive, a focus on identity politics and neglect of wider social and economic issues were cited as 'push' factors for the majority of the participants.

There was a clear perception of incompetence amongst politicians and a failure to represent issues of priority to young people.



I'm completely mentally exhausted with the corruption of our government in NI, the fact our leaders continue to live in the past and centre policy around religion and sectarianism and continue to withhold human rights. My generation has grown tired of this and need to be in a more forward-thinking, inclusive environment.



I don't hear anything about the big issues, you know jobs, affordable housing, human rights stuff. It's literally flags, language and point scoring. I got fed up with it and knew I'd have to leave to get away from all that crap.



Brexit has really started a lot of trouble where I live in [City in Northern Ireland] and I didn't want to be part of it. Sick of protests, flags and all the trouble, I wanted to get out.



Lack of diversity in university programme choice

Students described a lack of diversity in programme choice in Northern Ireland. Some students reported that the Scottish education approach of diversifying before specialising was a preferable approach to study.



I wanted to become a Vet and can't believe you couldn't do it in Northern Ireland, I'd no choice but to leave.



The Scottish system let me explore different options and I went into a different field that I'd never been able to do at home.



Entrance grades in Northern Ireland

Some students had a perception that entrance grades for some programmes, particularly medicine, were higher in Northern Ireland than universities elsewhere. Notably this perception appears linked to the MaSN cap, rather than entry grades per se.



I had a much greater chance of being accepted in [Wales] than at Queen's. I didn't even apply for Queen's as the chance of getting a spot in medicine was near impossible with such large numbers applying and so little places available.

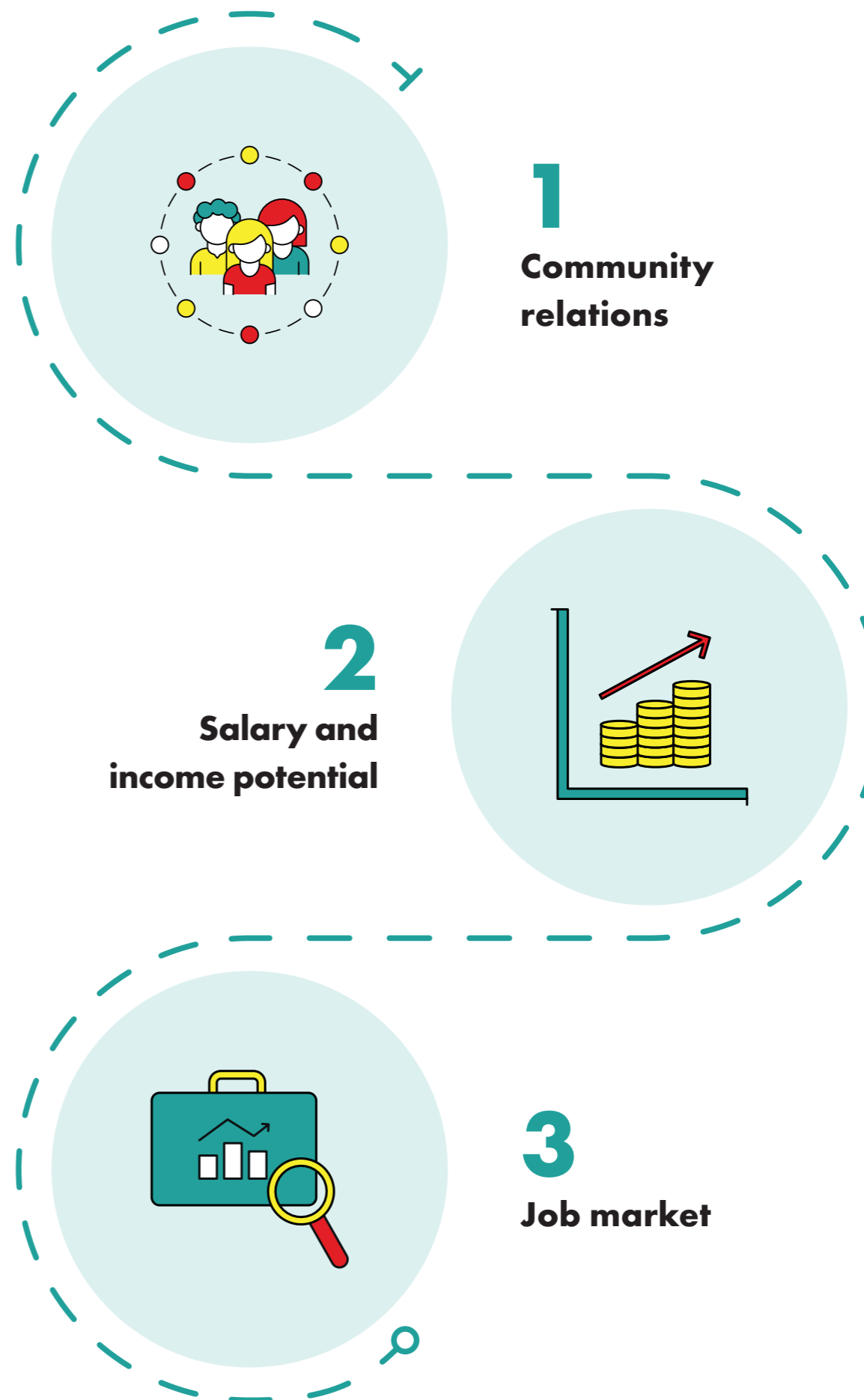
Student intentions to return to Northern Ireland on completion of their studies

88%

of participants had no plans to return to Northern Ireland after graduation

12% of participants had plans to return to Northern Ireland following graduation.

Students were invited to choose from a range of options that may influence their decision-making which had previously been identified in studies of educational migration. These included, for example, the influence of peers and income potential. To the right, these results demonstrate the top three factors that influenced their decision to remain outside of Northern Ireland after graduation from a list of seven available options.





Community relations

Community relations was a recurrent key factor in decision-making for participants. The analysis indicated that participants' limited confidence about positive change in Northern Ireland acts as a deterrent to returning home. Students indicated that living away from home had enabled them to reappraise their experiences of life in Northern Ireland.

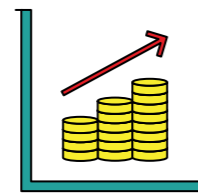
This process of reappraisal was a meaningful experience for many participants which created a sense of comparison of living outside of a post-conflict society.



I didn't really think about how much all that green/orange, what school did you go to stuff had an effect on me till I left. I like living in [North West of England] cos people don't care about that and you focus on normal stuff.



I've been studying in [Scotland] for 3 years and every time I come home I see no change. Same parties causing same problems in my local area. It's like groundhog day.



Salary and income potential

Students frequently raised concerns that jobs in Northern Ireland had a lower starting salary compared to Great Britain and Ireland. This issue was reported across employment sectors with many students expressing concerns that their earning potential would be limited in Northern Ireland. It was interesting to note that whilst some participants felt that the quality of life compensated for lower salaries in Northern Ireland, this was not a shared view.



There are no real grad opportunities in [Marketing role] and even if I got one, there is a ceiling for progression that just doesn't exist in England.



Like houses and cost of living is cheaper but it's not enough. Jobs are paid less, there's less room to grow and it's been like that for years.



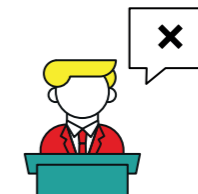
Range of job opportunities

The study highlighted that students perceived the economy in Northern Ireland to be regionally-based with limited access to global opportunities. Participants raised concerns about the high levels of low-paid jobs in the economy in Northern Ireland. Those studying law, business and marketing highlighted the need to be connected to a global market, whilst those in STEM indicated that a lack of investment in Northern Ireland meant there were limited opportunities in these roles.



I love Northern Ireland but it's a bit backwards I suppose, companies don't want to invest here and even though it's linked to the troubles, people don't see it. We see lots of flag protests and stuff but no protests to get investment at home.

These factors were expanded in student interviews with the following two themes emerging: political instability in Northern Ireland and networks outside of Northern Ireland.



Political instability in Northern Ireland

Concerns about political instability were raised by every participant in the project. Thematically these concerns could be grouped into issues related to government functioning, Brexit and the peace process in Northern Ireland.

No-one in the sample described confidence in government decision-making and students consistently reported that elected representatives did not represent youth-focused issues. Many students described politicians being “stuck in the past” referring to the conflict in Northern Ireland and traditional social views.

The whole political situation, it’s really childish, I ask myself well why would I want to stay in a country that... it almost promotes being divisive and I just hate that... It’s like you did this so we will do that. It’s almost like that Simpsons’ meme where Homer is going at Marge ‘well I might have wrecked the car, but you forgot to pick up the kids’. I mean, you don’t want politicians to be Homer Simpson.

Many participants felt that Brexit could offer opportunities to Northern Ireland but issues related to political identity had overtaken social and economic decision making.



The whole Brexit thing could’ve given better opportunities to young people and businesses here. We could’ve had the best of both worlds but it’s quickly spiralled into another ‘us and them’ issue, green and orange. Not about people or jobs.

The student sample consistently raised concerns that Northern Ireland was deteriorating rather than progressing, and that the peace process was being damaged:



Things are moving backwards now, I was born post Belfast Agreement but look at the state of this country. It’s like all our politicians know is the Troubles and everything, buses, flags, education comes back to it. Things are getting worse, not better.



Networks outside of Northern Ireland

The study found that students quickly formed new personal and professional networks in the local area of their university. These relationships were a significant factor in influencing a decision to return home.



I love home but I’ve been here 2 years, made friends, joined the rugby team and made good contacts on placement and uni. I’d lose all of that and more if I went home.



I feel really disconnected from home, I’d like to think about going back but wouldn’t know where to start with like jobs and that. I don’t know what’s growing and improving. All we hear on the news is about funerals [referring to Bobby Storey’s funeral] and protests.

People living and working outside Northern Ireland

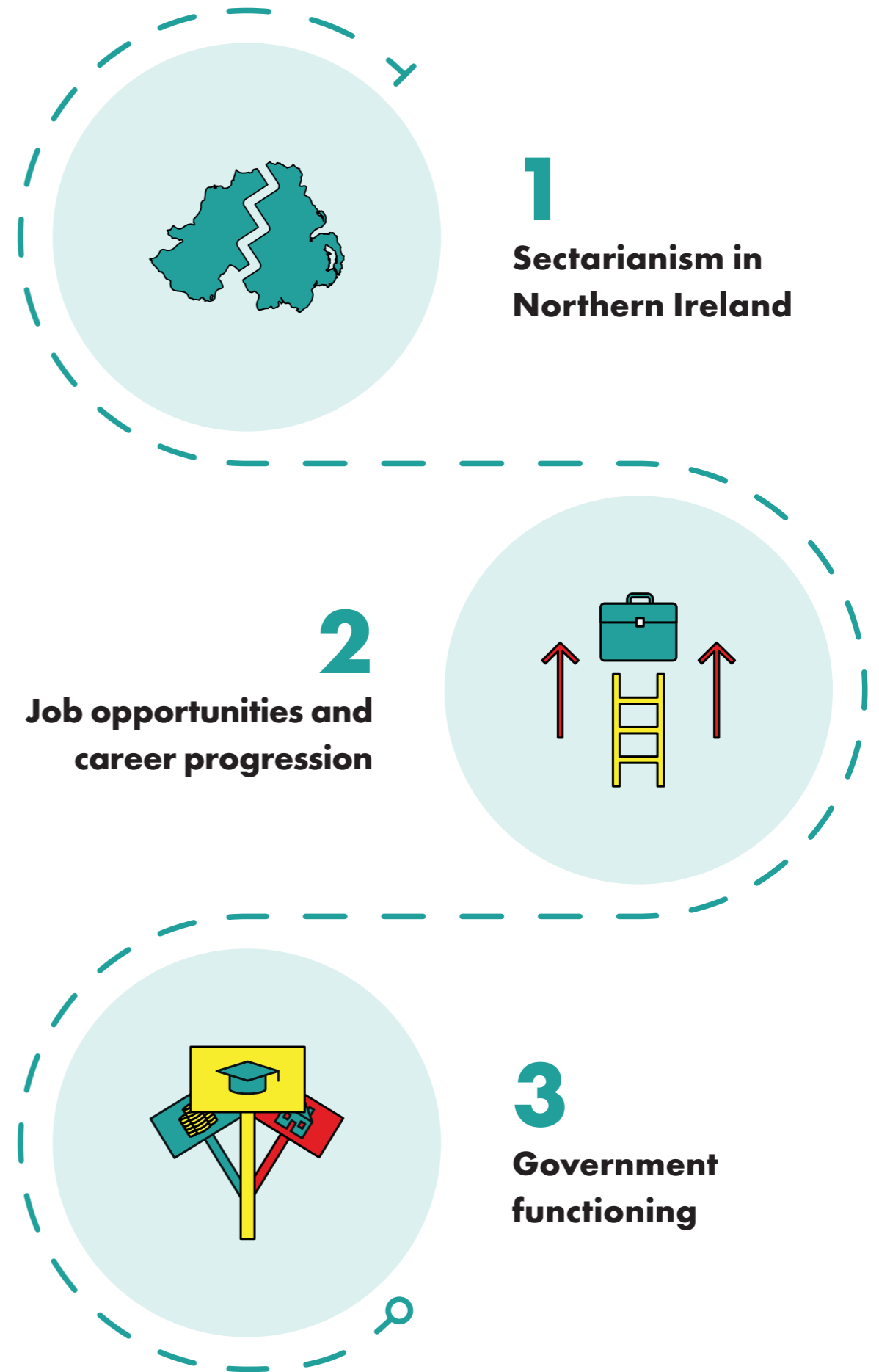
MOTIVATIONS FOR LEAVING AND RETURNING



The project also included interviews with 48 professionals who were living and working outside of Northern Ireland, commonly referred to as diaspora.

Despite significant differences between the samples in terms of age, location and employment situation, our research with diaspora highlighted similar findings to the student sample.

The graphic displayed to the right shows the three most common factors that influenced the decision to leave Northern Ireland.





Sectarianism in Northern Ireland

The analysis found that the legacy of decades of sectarian violence was a significant factor in participants' decisions to leave Northern Ireland. Many of the participants had been directly affected by the Troubles, for example, one participant recalled a bomb in their home and another described paramilitary "punishment beatings" in their local area. Collectively these experiences gave many participants a "desire to escape".

Participants provided reflections on the causes of "deep rooted sectarianism" which they attributed to segregated housing, education and a perception that some workplaces were also divided by religious or political beliefs.

Social perceptions of identity was a recurrent theme in discussions about sectarianism, with many participants feeling dismay about political assumptions based on names, schools and a place of origin in Northern Ireland.

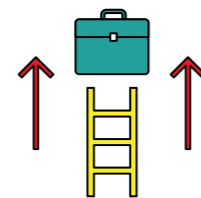


Like even in a professional work environment, people would quickly want to know which one are you... like 'what school did you go' just wore me out.

Cross-community relationships were another factor influencing decisions about leaving Northern Ireland. Some participants who had entered a relationship with a partner from a different religious belief felt as if



a decision had to be made, you're a Catholic or Protestant, it leaked into everything, what ceremony you have, where you live, even where your kids go to school. We couldn't cope with the pressure.



Job opportunities and career progression

Participants consistently described leaving Northern Ireland for better opportunities and career progression, describing the labour market as "stagnant".

The analysis highlighted that workplace culture was perceived to be "outdated" and "old fashioned"

by diaspora who were working outside of Northern Ireland. Many participants described examples of long working hours, sexism and a lack of flexible working.



I left home in the early 2000s to work in [North West of England] and it was a bit of a culture shock in a good way, my company invested in me, allowed me to work flexibly and just had a really forward thinking ethos.

Many participants left Northern Ireland for career progression that they felt unable to achieve in their roles at home. There was a perception that salaries were much lower in Northern Ireland than Great Britain. Those who migrated for employment in international companies in the USA, Australia or China expressed a desire to be connected to a global labour market.

Regional inequalities were consistently raised by participants who did not come from Belfast. One participant described Northern Ireland as a "two-speed economy, it's Belfast or bust". Many participants who came from coastal areas and the North West, felt that the lack of opportunity was a driving force in their migration.



I love the North West but it was factory work or nothing, living in America I actually come across lots of kids who leave Derry and I'm frustrated that the government have done nothing to shift things from Belfast and invest in wider economic growth.

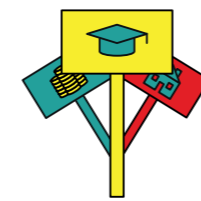
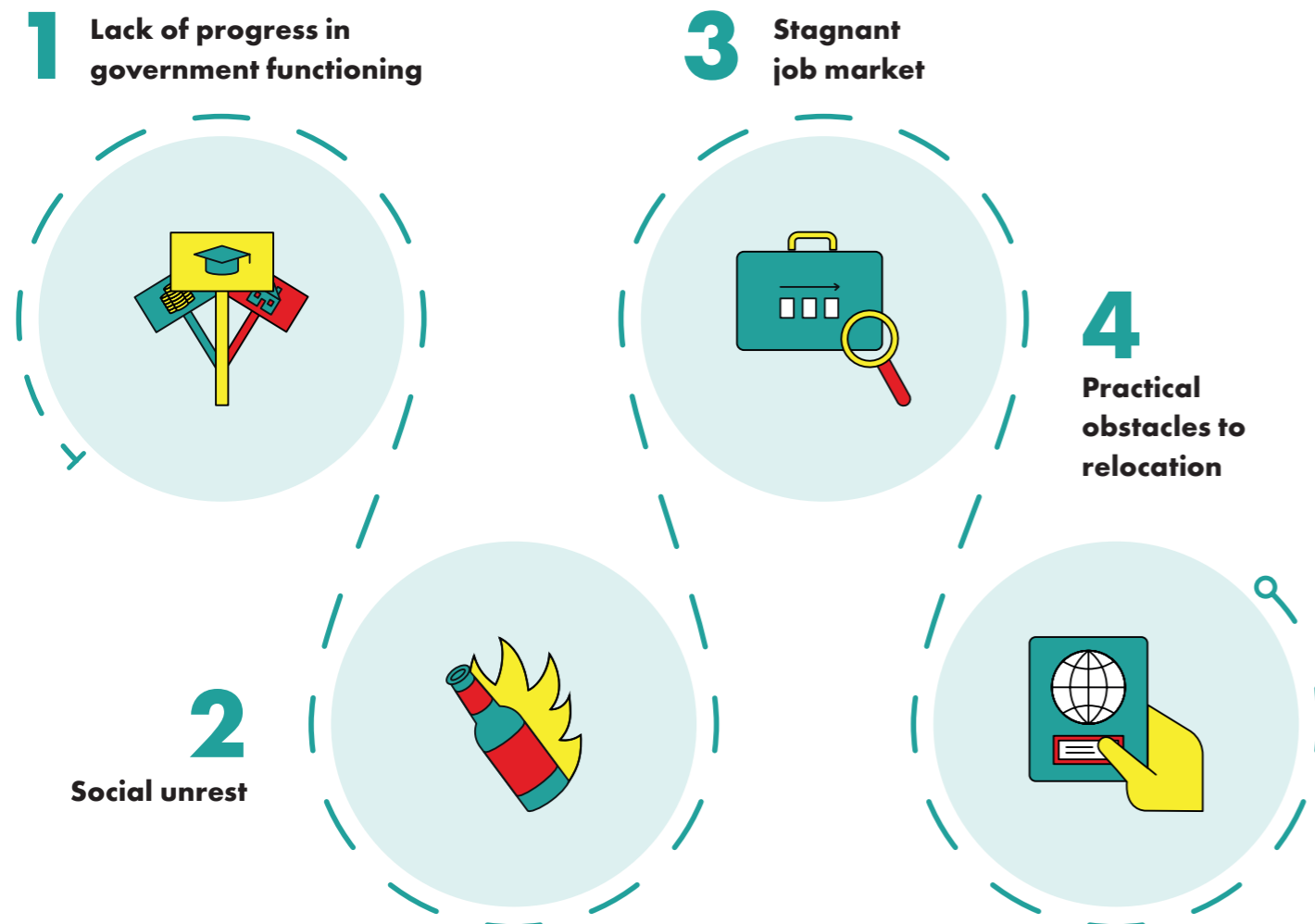


Lack of leadership and progress in government

Participants consistently raised concerns about politics and the government's capacity to grow, change and lead in a modern society in Northern Ireland. The analysis indicated that many participants felt disengaged from the 'identity politics' that dominated Northern Ireland and this contributed to their decision to leave. Those participants who experienced conflict in Northern Ireland felt angry that the government, in their opinion, had "done nothing to move things forward, they are stuck in the past and their inability to function as normal professionals is ruining the place".

Common factors influencing decisions to remain away from Northern Ireland

Four major themes emerged from the analysis to explain participants' reasons to remain away from Northern Ireland.



Lack of progress in government functioning

This was a consistently raised issue across all interviews with variations in strength of feeling. Many participants perceived government to be “completely ineffective and actually harmful” whilst others described government functioning as “getting better but nothing to be excited about”.

Participants were dissatisfied by the lack of progress in government functioning, citing recent examples of inter-party difficulties that occurred during Covid.



I mean if you can't get your act together during a global crisis, what hope does Northern Ireland have? Arguing about who broke what rules and following Irish or British Covid regs seems crazy. The politicians on both sides should be ashamed of themselves.

Other participants highlighted that poor government functioning has led to low foreign investment and economic growth:



I know there is a lot of identity stuff that remains raw but the lack of progress in attracting big ticket investors with high income roles is depressing. Look I know there's been bits here and there but nothing like the South [of Ireland]. I just don't understand how people on the streets aren't complaining more about it.



Social unrest

Participants consistently raised concerns that community divisions remain unresolved in Northern Ireland and become worse during periods of social unrest, for example, during the '12th of July'. Notably many participants felt that media reports of unrest damaged the reputation of Northern Ireland and had a negative influence on potential foreign investment opportunities.



The only time we hear about home is when things are going wrong. It's like 'here we go again' and we see image after image of young fellas destroying their lives, throwing petrol bombs at the police. I go into the office in [East Asia] and everyone's like 'see your lot killing each other again'. On a serious note though, there is no way my company would open a branch at home with all that going on.

The analysis also found that periods of unrest had a negative influence on decision-making to return home, particularly for the partners of diaspora.



I'd like to go home, set-up a version of what I've got here [online business] but my wife is dead against it because her impressions of Belfast are just bombs, shooting and flags. I can't win!



Stagnant job market

Participants consistently cited low paid roles as a barrier to returning to Northern Ireland. There was a perception that the job market was "stagnant" with limited opportunities for senior management/high income roles.



I've looked a few times at moving home but I'd be taking a 20-30 grand pay cut with limited chance of ever getting back up to that again.

Many participants raised the attraction of lower costs of living and a potential "slower pace" of life in Northern Ireland as a strong pull factor to return home. However, the challenges of obtaining suitable employment and other issues outlined in this analysis (e.g. political functioning) acted as a barrier to returning home. One participant reflected:



I've a dream of living on the North Coast, sending the kids to the local school and enjoying everything Northern Ireland has to offer, but the reality would be me driving to Belfast for a job that pays less than now and a fear that the tide could turn and we're back to petrol bombs on the streets. It's just not worth the risk.



Practical obstacles to relocation

The analysis found that those participants who were considering a return home felt that there was a lack of information about the practicalities of relocation, in particular the challenges associated with spousal visas, pensions and tax.

One participant reflected "we'd seriously consider going back, but when I've looked into it, the visa situation is really complicated. At best my wife wouldn't be able to work and at worst she wouldn't even be able to enter the country".

Many participants who had lived outside of Northern Ireland for over 15 years were unsure of the implications of relocating on their pensions and tax. This group felt that there was limited public information available to inform their decision making.

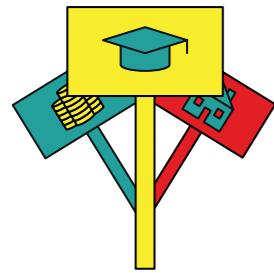


I've been paying into a pension for well over 15 years and I don't know how that would work if I moved home. I'm also unsure if I'd have to keep paying tax in the [United States] and here, just don't know really and there's nothing out there that makes sense.

Policy solutions

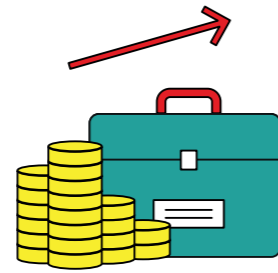
The research included an opportunity for participants to raise solutions to the issues they experienced. The following section provides an overview of the main solutions raised by both groups in this project.

Student proposals



Government functioning

- A progressive government that focuses on growth and young people
- Better leadership in government, working together for a shared future
- Youth involvement in policy development



The economy

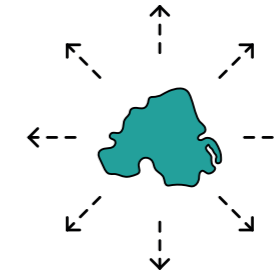
- Focus on job creation and less focus on the past
- More graduate roles for students in Northern Ireland
- A 'keeping in touch' service that links students studying elsewhere to employers in Northern Ireland



Higher education

- Free university fees for students from Northern Ireland
- Programmes of integration between different members of the community
- Better links with employers and placements

Diaspora proposals



Combined

- Better connectivity across the region to connect towns and cities to Belfast
- Advice on the practicalities of relocation (e.g. applying for spousal visas)
- Incentives to attract senior level managers back to Northern Ireland
- A hub to connect businesses outside of Northern Ireland with local companies for knowledge exchange

Summary of research findings

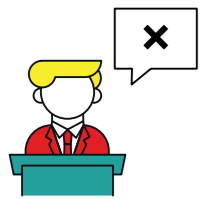
The research data in this study can be summarised into four headline findings:



Both students and diaspora said clearly that **poor community relations** in Northern Ireland were a reason to leave and not return. There was a clear message from students that they left Northern Ireland for a more 'normal' life elsewhere. People living and working outside Northern Ireland said that divisions within society here were a significant factor in their decision to leave and a strong deterrent to returning.



Students said that a **better range of higher education courses, greater availability of places and a higher quality student experience** elsewhere were motivating factors when deciding to study outside Northern Ireland.



Both groups also reported that **political instability and ineffective government** in Northern Ireland were motivations to leave and not return. In particular, young people who left did not feel that politicians or political discourse in Northern Ireland reflected their views or concerns. Those living and working elsewhere felt that Northern Ireland was moving backwards rather than forwards.



In deciding to study elsewhere, students were strongly motivated by the **close connections between university courses outside Northern Ireland and high quality undergraduate placements, along with the greater range of graduate jobs, higher salaries and opportunities for progression** elsewhere. Similarly, the diaspora reported that job opportunities, higher salaries and access to global markets elsewhere were reasons not to return to Northern Ireland.

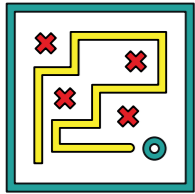
Previous discussion about students leaving Northern Ireland has often emphasised that many young people are 'pulled' away by the prospect of high quality university courses and economic opportunities elsewhere. Our research shows these remain important motivating factors. However, participants also said clearly that there are very significant 'push' factors causing young people to leave Northern Ireland and not return, particularly poor community relations and perceptions of ineffective government. The same factors were also reported by diaspora when considering a possible return to Northern Ireland at a later life-stage.

The responses also show that young people are not just being 'pulled' away by attractive university and job options elsewhere, but in fact are also being 'pushed' away from Northern Ireland by their perception that there is a lack of university places and courses, and fewer work placements and job opportunities of a comparable high quality at home.

The research shows a striking similarity between issues raised by young people who are currently studying outside Northern Ireland and those at a later stage of life who previously left Northern Ireland for life and work elsewhere. In particular, both groups identified poor community relations as a key factor in influencing their decision to stay away. Both groups also said that government here was not moving Northern Ireland forward, and that politicians and government did not represent their priorities or desire for change. This finding suggests that issues such as identity politics, a lack of focus on economic opportunities and poor community relations continue to have a negative impact on decisions about leaving across the generations.

Policy recommendations

In response to the findings from this research, we would suggest the following policy recommendations.



1. The Executive should develop a comprehensive and ambitious strategy to address the loss of talented young people from Northern Ireland

This strategy must include steps to both encourage more young people to stay here to study, and to give them reasons to return after graduation or at a later stage of life. While leaving to study or work elsewhere is a worthwhile and valued path for many young people, Northern Ireland stands out as having a far lower percentage who return after graduation.

Over generations, the departure of large numbers of young people from Northern Ireland has become an established and widely accepted feature of life here. It is however surprising that the Executive has no plan in place to address this ongoing loss of talent, despite Northern Ireland's low levels of productivity, skills, innovation and skills shortages in key growth sectors. Our research indicated that many young people with expertise in skill shortage areas (e.g. STEM) are leaving

Northern Ireland for opportunities elsewhere. A focus on retaining talent within Northern Ireland must be considered within the context of the Skills Strategy to accompany the ambitious '10x Economy' strategy. It is notable that the Welsh Government has recently announced such a strategy to encourage more young people to stay in Wales or return after studying elsewhere.



2. Together as a society Northern Ireland needs to acknowledge the impact of poor community relations on young people's decisions to study and work elsewhere

This applies to political and civic leaders, schools, universities, community organisations, families and individuals. Young people themselves would point to the need for action throughout the education system to build relationships and understanding between people from different backgrounds. The segregated nature of

school education is standing in the way of greater integration. In addition, universities in Northern Ireland need to do more to foster understanding and integration between students from different backgrounds. Segregation in school education combined with limited open discussion of community relations within higher education may further reinforce segregation and contribute to continued divisions between individuals and communities.



3. The Executive needs to demonstrate that government is working to move Northern Ireland forward

Young people in our research told us that they do not feel represented by politicians or political debate in Northern Ireland. Those living and working elsewhere said that they see government in Northern Ireland as moving backwards rather than forwards. The continuing focus of political energies on debates about identity rather than policy issues is both driving young people away and preventing others returning later in life. Participants in our research said clearly that they want politicians to work together

on day-to-day issues that matter to them, like economic recovery, women's rights and job opportunities.



4. The Executive should complete a full review of the funding of Higher Education

This review should look at how to ensure sufficient numbers of places are delivered in the appropriate range of courses, and that a high quality student experience is provided. It needs to align with the ambitions set out for the skills of Northern Ireland's future workforce in the recent '10X economy' strategies.

Some young people in our research reported dissatisfaction with the range of courses, number of available places and student experience on offer in Northern Ireland, which then motivated them to move away to study. While Northern Ireland may not be able to match all university opportunities elsewhere, it is notable that grant funding for higher education here has fallen significantly over recent years. Inevitably this will impact on the quality and attractiveness of the higher education



5. The Executive should work with universities and employers to enhance the range and quality of opportunities for undergraduate placements and graduate jobs in Northern Ireland

Participants in our research consistently said that a lack of economic opportunities at home and the range of attractive options elsewhere were a reason to leave Northern Ireland and not return after graduation.

Students who have left for study elsewhere felt that Northern Ireland did not offer the same range and quality of undergraduate placements and graduate jobs. Their decision to move away was strongly influenced by the value of the work experience and networks they could access elsewhere during their degree studies. This may be partly an incorrect perception about what is available in Northern Ireland. An increased promotion of placement and graduate opportunities could help raise the profile of the diverse offerings at universities here. There is however an obvious action here for the Executive, employers and universities to work together to increase the quality and range of undergraduates placements available in Northern Ireland, particularly in the high

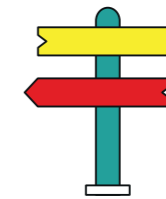
offer to students here. The Executive itself acknowledges that there is a long-standing funding deficit in higher education. In addition, the MaSN cap on student numbers has remained unchanged for a decade, despite young people from Northern Ireland having amongst the highest rates of participation in higher education in the UK.

This review of higher education should build on the work done as part of the 'Big Conversation' in 2015, where the then Department for Employment and Learning recognised the need for a forward-thinking consultation on the future of higher education. The consultation document indicated that significant changes were needed in higher education to address deficits in funding, some of which were related to the decision not to raise tuition fees in Northern Ireland in line with higher education institutions in Great Britain. The consultation noted that the current model of funding was unsustainable and suggested various ways to increase public and/or private investment. However, there are no published outcomes from this consultation and no steps appear to have been taken.

-skill sectors that are most attractive to graduates and that are central to Northern Ireland's plan for economic growth.

Northern Ireland has an ambitious Skills Strategy to address shortages in areas such as digital technologies, agri-tech and advanced manufacturing. The strategy is reliant on sufficient human capital to grow these industries and provides an opportunity for enhanced links between universities and industry. The Executive should consider the role of increased graduate opportunities in these growth areas, including fostering the relationship between employers and students during undergraduate study.

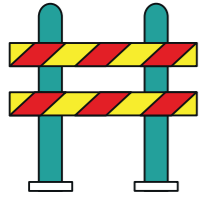
As well as attracting back young people who have studied elsewhere, the Executive should also consider ways to encourage returners at a later stage of life. Indeed there is a strong argument for looking to draw back people who have spent some time living and work elsewhere, since they can bring with them very valuable work and life experience. Our research showed that many people would consider returning to Northern Ireland, but that the lack of job opportunities, amongst other things, is a significant factor preventing them from doing so.



6. Alternative routes to higher education must be considered as part of a strategy to retain and upskill young people in Northern Ireland

Our previous study on education, skills and training for 14-19 year olds found that many young people had limited awareness of the labour market and limited knowledge about Further Education (FE) and vocational pathways.

Our current study highlighted that young people want more choice in higher education programmes, enhanced employment options and undergraduate placements. Some university students in the sample may have found a more suitable route via FE to enable them to gain technical skills in their area of interest and possibly 'earn and learn' through apprenticeship schemes. A better understanding of the available options in FE for young people may be one practical step towards reducing educational migration. The recent launch of the 'Routes into Higher Education' scheme is welcomed to promote the multiple ways into higher education with a particular focus on Further Education options. Further work in this area may encourage young people to choose sectors with skill shortages, whilst also meeting young people's desires for interesting placements and employment when they complete their studies.



7. The Executive should take action to address specific issues that create barriers to diaspora returning to Northern Ireland

Participants in our research who had lived and worked elsewhere reported a range of practical problems that might prevent a return to Northern Ireland. Those who had looked into the possibility of returning said visas for spouses, tax issues and pensions all created barriers. At present one of the roles of Northern Irish Connections is to provide advice about relocating back to Northern Ireland. To effectively encourage people to return to Northern Ireland at a later stage of their lives, the Executive may need to provide further support and take action to address these practical barriers.

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