



# The complex migration pathways of UK graduates

## Abstract

It is often assumed that the pathway from home to university and onwards to the labour market is a linear upward trajectory, ultimately resulting in improved opportunities and social betterment. This briefing paper summarises research tracing the lives of graduates across the five year period after leaving university, revealing that their migration pathways are often complex, non-linear and precarious. During this prolonged period of instability the parental home (and parental support more generally) provides a crucial safety net, potentially placing additional burden on mid-life parents who may also have care responsibilities to the older parent generation. The implications of these findings for adult social care, young adult welfare and regional economic development policy are considered.

## Key Points

- Graduate migration trajectories across the five year period after leaving university are complex, reflecting the precarious nature of the transition from student to independent adult.
- The parental support system often absorbs the risks and costs associated with making this transition, which may have implications for others who are also reliant on mid-life adults (such as the ageing older parent generation).
- The long-term settlement patterns of graduates suggest a lasting attachment to the place of study, and the conventional graduate pathway to London is elongated.

## Introduction

Young adults who are negotiating the transition from university to financial and residential independence often embark on a sequence of frequent 'temporary' moves which are difficult to capture in surveys collecting annual 'snapshots' of respondents. This

means that the patterns and processes of graduate migration in the UK are not well understood, despite widespread interest in where and why upwardly socially mobile graduate populations move and settle after leaving university. Pre-existing research has tended to focus on the first destinations of graduates

(6 months after leaving university) because of the limited data available for tracing graduates beyond this point.

This study addresses the gap in knowledge through an online survey capturing retrospective information about the lives of a cohort of University of Southampton students (who graduated 2001-2007), across the five year period after they left university. The findings shed light on the way graduate pathways unfold post-university, including where graduates move to, and the reasons why they migrate. This has the potential to inform regional and local economic development policies aiming to retain graduates from local universities and encourage in-migration from other regions. Our insights on the support required by graduates in order to achieve independent living have implications for young adult welfare and adult social care policies.

### The study

University of Southampton alumni who graduated between 2001-2007 were invited to take part in an online survey in Spring 2012. An innovative calendar tool was used to capture information about respondents' changes of residential address, employment status, partnership and child bearing over the five year period after leaving university. The survey also captured information about respondents' employment at the time of survey; 5-10 years after graduating. The findings presented draw upon data from a sample of 963 respondents, and focus on patterns of migration within UK borders (rather than international migration). The sex, age and ethnic group characteristics of the sample are broadly representative of the wider student population at the University of Southampton in 2004/5. It is important, however, to note that the findings from this sample do not necessarily reflect the experiences of the University of Southampton alumni, or the graduate population as a whole.

### Main findings

#### Complex migration trajectories

Approximately one quarter of respondents were highly mobile during the five year period after leaving university (they moved between 5-8 times). These respondents experienced complex migration trajectories including long and short-distance moves with varied living arrangements, housing types and tenure. Students who were younger when they enrolled at university (aged between 18-21)

reported more complex migration trajectories than 'mature students' (those aged over 21 at enrolment).

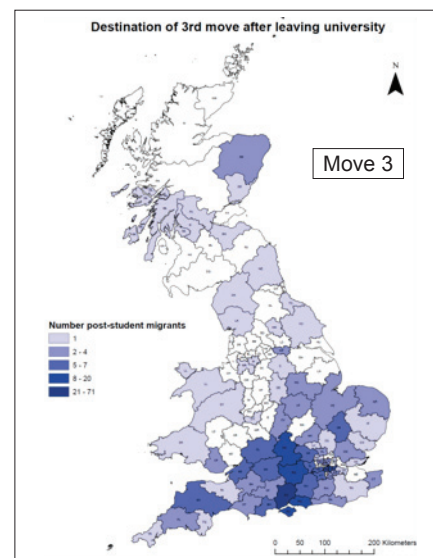
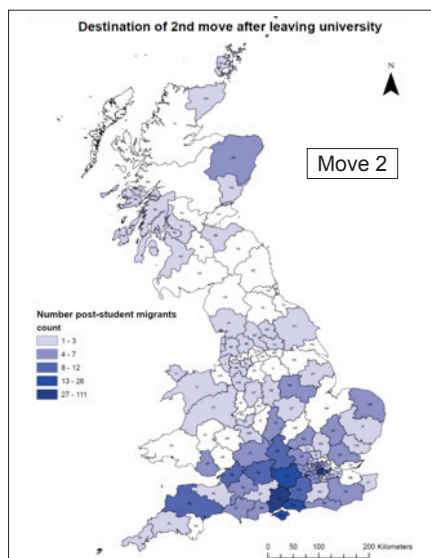
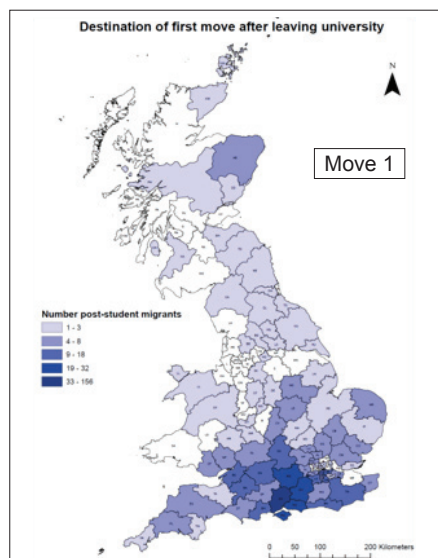
#### Migration destinations and reasons for moving

Figure 1 shows destinations and motivations for the first three moves after leaving university. The map for move 1 shows the broadest geographic distribution of migrants across the UK, which is strongly associated with graduates moving back to their pre-university address; 'returning to the parental home' was the primary reason for the first move after university, accounting for 32.7% of the sample. The map for move 2 shows respondents moving out of the parental home, back to Southampton and the South East. 'Moving to London' emerges as a motivation for move 2, this pattern continues with a greater proportion of respondents migrating to London with each subsequent move. This suggests the graduate pathway to London is relatively elongated, often involving a series of migration events before reaching this destination. The broader geographic distribution at move 3 (compared to move 2) shows some evidence of a 'double boomerang'<sup>1</sup> effect, where some respondents have returned to the parental home (move 1), moved out to pursue independent living (move 2), then returned to live with their parents for a second time at move 3, with reasons such as 'cost', 'cheaper rent' and 'unemployment' emerging as significant. Respondents were also asked for their employers address at the time of taking the survey (5-10 years after graduation); 867 respondents provided this information. Approximately one third of these respondents were employed in Southampton and surrounding areas, suggesting that, long-term, the city retains a significant proportion of its graduates.

#### Precarious transitions: the parental home as a safety net

The complexity of graduate migration pathways appears to reflect the precarious nature of the transition from studenthood to independence. During this period of instability half of respondents reported returning to the parental home, with 50% of returners staying for 1 or more years, and 12.2% for 5 or more years. The reasons respondents gave for returning suggest that the parental home provides a crucial safety net for young adults. These reasons include: unemployment / job seeking (20.8%); following a period of study (15.5%); to save for a deposit to buy a property (10.4%); during the transition between one rented property and another (9.7%); and unstable

<sup>1</sup>The 'boomerang generation' is a phrase used to describe young adults who return to live in the parental home after living away for a period of time.



Reason for first move	Count	%
Return to parents	217	32.7
Employment	182	27.5
End of tenancy	54	8.1
Moved in with partner	41	6.2
Purchased property	38	5.7
Higher education	34	5.1
Better quality accommodation	26	3.9
Moved out of parental home	11	1.7
Employment - partner	8	1.2
Family home	8	1.2
Moved in with friends	6	0.9
Cheaper rent	5	0.8
Marriage	5	0.8
Travelling	5	0.8
Change of personal circumstance	3	0.5
Relationship ended	3	0.5
Urban to rural	3	0.5
Better location	2	0.5

Reason for second move	Count	%
Employment	175	32.3
Purchased property	59	10.9
Higher education	45	8.3
Moved in with partner	35	6.5
End of tenancy	29	5.4
Own space/independence	26	4.8
Moved out of parental home	25	4.6
Better quality accommodation	21	3.9
Travelling	17	3.1
Moved in with friends	14	2.6
Employment - partner	11	2.0
London	10	1.8
Marriage	10	1.8
Return to parents	9	1.7
Better location	7	1.3
Cheaper rent	7	1.3
Emigrated	6	1.1
Family home	4	0.7

Reason for third move	Count	%
Employment	92	24.9
Purchased property	37	10.0
End of tenancy	28	7.6
Moved in with partner	28	7.6
Better quality accommodation	27	7.3
Return to parents	20	5.4
Higher education	15	4.1
End of house share	13	3.5
Unhappy sharing	11	3.0
Cost	10	2.7
Landlord sold property	8	2.2
Better location	7	1.9
London	7	1.9
Moved in with friends	7	1.9
Own space/independence	7	1.9
Cheaper rent	6	1.6
Marriage	6	1.6
Unemployment	6	1.6

employment (6.3%). Of those respondents who returned home 56.0% lived rent free, 54.9% did not contribute to household bills, 54.7% received meals at no cost, and 37.1% received emotional support from their parents. Overall 99% of those who returned home received some form of support from their parents, which indicates that the reintegration of graduates into the family home has some impact on the resources of mid-life parents.

### Policy implications

#### Economic development policy

Numerous graduate retention policies at the regional and local level across the UK aim to tackle the uneven distribution of human capital via the channelling of graduates away from peripheral regions to London and

the South East. Our research findings suggest that graduates form a lasting attachment to their place of study meaning the opportunities for retaining graduates are not restricted to the very early stages of the graduate pathway; instead there is scope to attract alumni back to the place of study at a later stage. Retention initiatives might therefore consider targeting graduates beyond their first destinations.

#### Adult social care and young adult welfare policy

Our research suggests that in the UK, responsibility for the welfare of graduates during periods of instability often falls to mid-life parents. In addition, Prime Minister David Cameron announced plans in July 2012 to withdraw housing benefit for 380,000 under 25's, identifying the

return of low-income young adults to co-reside with parents as a strategy for delivering a new wave of austerity reform.

Our data indicates that returning to the parental home has implications for parental resources (financial, time, and emotional). We highlight the potential for this to set in motion a 'ripple effect' whereby the wellbeing of the older parent generation is affected in cases where they are reliant on mid-life parents for informal care. It is possible that the unexpected demands on mid-life parents from their own adult children might reduce their availability and resources to provide informal care for their ageing parents.

Young adults returning home in greater numbers and requiring support for longer periods challenges the assumption often made in adult social care policy (see The Dilnot Report, 2011) that mid-life adults will be available and sufficiently resourced to provide care for their ageing parents. Our findings therefore suggest that, within the context of an ageing society, policy makers should be mindful of the multiple demands on the resources of mid-life adults and how this might affect the availability and distribution of informal care within families.

#### Authors

Joanna Sage  
Maria Evandrou  
Jane Falkingham

Edited by Teresa McGowan

ESRC Centre for Population Change  
Building 58, Room 2043  
Faculty of Social and Human Sciences  
University of Southampton  
SO17 1BJ

Office: +44(0)2380592579

**[www.cpc.ac.uk](http://www.cpc.ac.uk)**