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‘There’s no place like home’: an exploration of graduate attitudes toward place and mobility

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A report written with the support of the HECSU Research Fund

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Executive summary

This report presents a small-scale, mixed methods research project exploring patterns of regional graduate migration, building upon the typology proposed by Ball (2015). It seeks to better understand the reasons why new graduates might stay in the North West of England. The participants graduated from five North West universities. There is a greater representation of individuals from the Greater Manchester conurbation, and from those who stayed in the region to work.

The region is undergoing transformation through policy initiatives such as the Northern Powerhouse, Greater Manchester Spatial Framework and local industrial strategies. There is a need to attract and retain a highly skilled workforce. Although London is still the top graduate recruiting region the North West is fertile ground for recruiters and job-seekers of all sectors.

The results of the survey and themes from qualitative interviews suggested that, for many, staying in the region was a positive choice influenced heavily by family and friends as well as an affinity to the region itself because of culture and environment. In addition, many participants expressed hope and confidence in the opportunities available. Place emerges as not just a physical location but as representing deep connections to people, culture and identity. These conclusions challenge lazy assumptions that immobility might represent a default option or a lack of ambition. Employers, policymakers and careers services could usefully focus upon increasing the systematic and accessible profiling of regional work opportunities.

However, most participants would consider moving for the 'right job'. There was a perception amongst many participants that they 'should' consider working in London although some had bad experiences there, feeling isolated and anxious as well as out of pocket. Attractive international destinations also featured, often as a potential temporary relocation. Some people planned to work away in the short-term and ultimately 'settle down' back in the North West. For those who did want to leave the North West, frustrations with transport and infrastructure emerged as perceived barriers to developing a career.

Regional universities, individually and collectively, should explore the creation of accessible labour market information about career opportunities, in order to inform graduates about options existing in the region, and whether leaving will be necessary for the career they are interested in. Additional work could also explore innovative solutions to support opportunities for short-term outward mobility.

Two additional conceptual types are proposed which extend Ball's (2015) typology ('loyals, stayers, returners and incomers'), which we call 'explorer' and 'tourist'. Narratives around these two types highlight the need to consider mobility and migration as dynamic, fluid and highly personalised.

Careers and higher education professionals need to examine their own attitudes to mobility as they could unwittingly influence the brokering and discussion of opportunities. Student and graduate attitudes to mobility, the benefits and challenges and how to navigate the practical and emotional obstacles are aspects of employability which deserve more attention and need to take into account

personal circumstances in order to ensure that choices are informed and proactive rather than a default option.

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1. Introduction and background

This report is about graduate attitudes to geographic mobility. It focuses on research conducted in the North West of England yet has a Greater Manchester bias in the data it collected and reports upon. Both authors live in the region and work in local universities. Although the findings are specific to the region, conclusions may be of wider relevance to the role of place in career decision-making.

1.1 The authors



Eileen Cunningham – Social Policy lecturer and PhD researcher, University of Salford

‘I am a ‘loyal’ - I chose to study in Liverpool because I loved the Beatles and because it was both near-enough and far-away-enough from my parental home - nurturing the fine balance between dependence and independence. After graduating, I lived and worked there for ten years before moving back home to Greater Manchester. Although I have travelled round the world, I love the North West. There’s no better place.’



Fiona Christie – Senior Research Associate, Decent Work and Productivity Research Centre, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School.

‘I am an ‘incomer’ – I grew up in London and moved to Manchester after doing my first degree in Birmingham. I came to Manchester to work for a workers’ co-op bookshop. I’d been to Manchester once before I moved – that was to a memorable political demo! I had an affinity to the Music scene as I was a big fan of the Smiths in the 1980s. I have lived here ever since and now am proud parent of two Mancunian sons!’

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the participants who contributed to this study, who shared their perspectives and time so generously.

In addition, we would like to thank Charlie Ball, the HECSU Research Fund and Salford University Careers team.

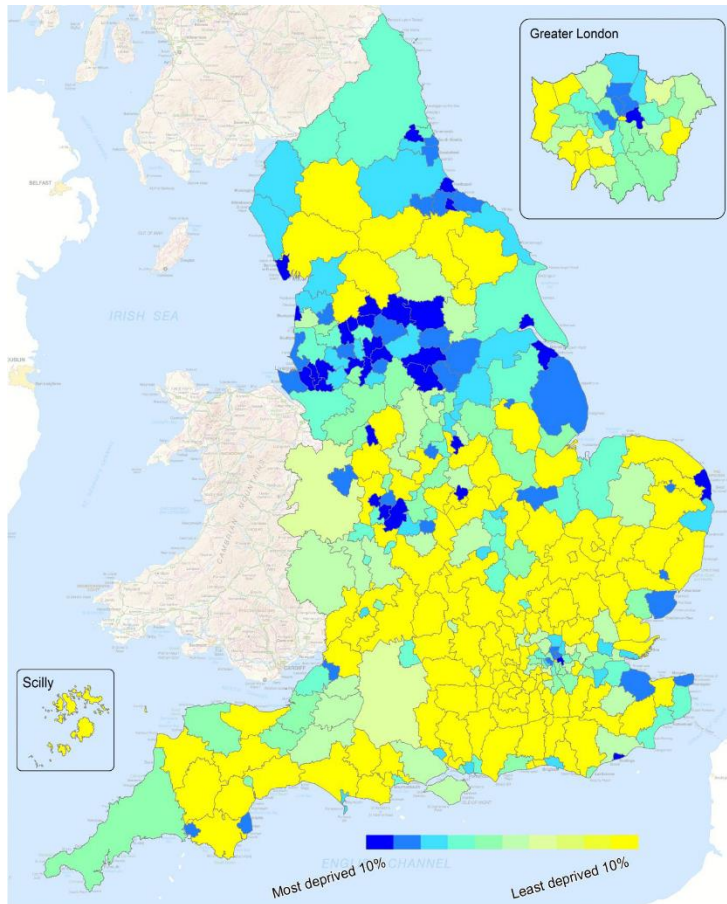
1.2 The region

Nestled between the hills of North Wales, the Lake District and the Pennines, North West residents are never far from green space and fresh air. A string of Victorian seaside resorts and vast sandy beaches offer a sense of openness and great fish and chips. The region draws many visitors from around the country and the globe, perhaps partly owing to its cultural reputation – from Merseybeat to Madchester - and the growth of its media hub in Salford which is home to the BBC, ITV and vibrant creative SMEs. The region is home to world-class football, rugby, cycling and other sports. It is easy to understand why it is a popular place to study, both with local students, those from across the UK and internationally.

The North West has not, however, been without its challenges as classic literary works have chronicled (Engels, 1845; Gaskell, 1856; Orwell, 1937) and which still draw the attention of contemporary historians (Kirby, 2016) reminding us of the abhorrent working and living conditions of the slums of yesteryear. Still in the 21st century, modern day town centres are suffering decline and rough sleeping is prevalent. Manchester has the 3rd highest estimated number of people sleeping rough of all UK local authorities, up 31% in the year 2017 – 2018. Sadly, 80% of rough sleepers are thought to be under the age of 26. Across the NW region numbers of rough sleepers have more than quadrupled (from 110 in 2010 to 428 in 2018) (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2019) and there are pockets of severe deprivation (see shaded blue in Fig. 1). In a region that boasts the first train station in the UK, the first motorway and the first ever passenger bus, at the time of writing this report, there is widespread outcry about the unreliability of public transport (BBC, 2018) and some of the worst congested roads in the UK (BBC, 2019). Unemployment rates are only slightly below the national level at 3.9% (Office for National Statistics, 2019) with variations within the region. Despite challenges, North West folk have a reputation for resilience or ‘Northern grit’ and for fighting social injustice - from the Peterloo Massacre and Suffragette movement a century ago, to the Hillsborough Families for Justice now.

North West England is a region on the up. Despite historically entrenched perceptions (and indeed evidence) of a north-south divide, many students and graduates are recognising its potential as a great place to study, live and work. The development of HS2 (the high-speed north-south rail connection), expansion of Manchester airport and the deep-water port development in Liverpool (with upgrading of the Manchester ship canal and Port of Salford) promise to invite investments, enhance opportunities and advance accessibility. In 2014 the North West MP, George Osbourne (also the serving Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time) announced the ‘Northern Powerhouse’ initiative as a plan to strengthen the position of the UK in the global economy and redistribute the nation’s wealth and opportunity through linking up the northern cities and promising investment of billions of pounds. Devolution of power, for example, through new regional mayors and the budget for health and social care is enabling autonomy, responsiveness and accountability to local communities.

Fig. 1: The Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015 among local authority districts based on the proportion of their neighbourhoods in the most deprived decile nationally (*Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2015*)



Contains OS data © Crown copyright (2015)

Prospects for graduates in the North West are relatively favourable with Greater Manchester having the biggest graduate labour market outside London (Ball, 2018a). In theory, it is possible to find any category of employment in the region (and indeed Manchester alone) as all occupational sectors are represented (Ball, 2017). Early career professionals here may earn less than their counterparts in the south (McDonald, 2019), however, the cost of living is more affordable (Grove, 2018) with house prices meaning that young people may find it easier to become house-buyers or to afford private rental costs.

Using data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency's (HESA) Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE), Ball (2015) identified the following patterns in regional migration (Table 1). He found that more than half (58.9%) surveyed who studied in the North West, came from the region before going to university and then stayed here to work after graduation. 12.2% stayed in the region, having moved to the North West to study from elsewhere. A further fifth (20.3%) studied

elsewhere and returned to the region to work. ‘Loyals’ are an increasing number of the university graduate population and more likely to be from lower social backgrounds (Ball, 2018b).

Table 1. Typology of graduates’ mobility in the North West

Type	Description	% of graduates in each category in the NW six months after graduation
Regional Loyals	Graduates who are domiciled in a region, went to study in the region, and remained to work in that region	58.9
Regional Returners	Graduates domiciled in a region, who go elsewhere to study, and then return to their home region for employment	20.3
Regional Stayers	Graduates who travel away from their home region to study, and then stay in that region to work.	12.2
Regional incomers	Graduates who go to work in a region in which they neither studied nor were domiciled	8.6

1.3 Graduate employment and mobility

Ball’s report, *Loyals, Stayers, Returners and Incomers (2015)*, captured our interest as researchers and we were keen to ask the question ‘why do graduates want to come here and/or stay’? This research is the culmination of our curiosity. Academic research and literature have long shared this interest in migration and immigration. Economic immigration and freedom of movement are currently political hot topics, not least in the light of Brexit and recent refugee crises. However, understanding the complex and diverse factors which may influence students and graduates’ decisions whether to relocate is a relatively new and under-researched area, particularly when it comes down to localised regions. Traditionally, university students might have moved to distant universities and even later travelled and worked overseas as a ‘rite of passage’ (Waters, 2017). Graduate recruiters may ask candidates if they are willing to relocate and travel anywhere, indeed this can be a common ‘killer question’ in online applications and interviews to narrow down applicants (Glassdoor, 2019). Geographical immobility may be equated with a lack of ambition or imagination, perhaps insufficient commitment to a career or organisation.

In 2015, the first cohort of graduates hit the labour market with average debts of over £44,000. Meanwhile drives to recruit non-traditional students to degree programmes escalated. Arguably, with increasing debt and regional variations in the cost of living, the ability to be mobile was impeded for those without economic resources to smooth such a transition. Government policy has tended to favour conventional notions of graduate success, focusing attention and resources on graduate incomes and first destinations as measures, not only of individual graduate progression but also institutional effectiveness (via Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) & Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) surveys). However, early graduate employment and mobility transitions can be complex and unpredictable in nature which requires more nuanced analysis (Christie, 2017).

So how do graduates make decisions about where to seek employment and to settle down? It may often be assumed that such critical decisions are made through a rational and logical process. As Tomlinson (2007) states,

“there has been a tendency to view students in universalistic terms, as rational investors in education who approach the labour market in uniformed and stereotypical ways” Tomlinson (2007, pg. 286)

There now seems to be a growing recognition that students and graduates are not a homogenous group and that each individual will have their own complex backstory, values and beliefs which influence their choices. Emergent literature (Blustein, Olle, Connors-Kellgren, & Diamonti, 2016; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Finn, 2017) suggests that relationships may be a fundamental foundation underpinning choices. Notions of graduate success based purely on status are being challenged and reconstructed, for example, the new Graduate Outcomes survey asks questions about subjective career success, reflecting that quality of life is also of paramount importance.

However, in order to fully understand attitudes towards mobility it is important to consider the benefits of being mobile. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that national and international mobility can help to develop many valuable skills such as confidence, resilience, intercultural understanding and communication in addition to specific, job-related skills (Universities UK, 2018). Learning within the context of a new and different place has the potential to be truly transformative (Morgan, 2010)). Mobility can also enhance career decision making ability. Furthermore, evidence of mobility on a graduate’s CV can help them to stand out from the competition (Tomlinson, 2008) and can increase their earning potential (Kidd, O’Leary, & Sloane, 2017).

If the north of England is to fulfil its potential as a ‘powerhouse’ then it needs workers with high level skills and talent (GMCA, 2018). Understanding the thoughts, feelings and motivations behind the statistics can help policy-makers and employers to attract and retain graduates long-term. Our research aims to contribute to this conversation.

1.4 Methods

This is a small-scale, mixed methods research project which seeks to understand the experiences of the individual participants who were involved. We have striven with integrity and empathy to recreate a picture which is ‘experience-near’ and can catalyse further enquiry. We anticipate that some of the experiences of North West graduates will resonate with a wider group and hope our observations may advance the efficacy of place-sensitive career planning conversations.

Forty-eight research interviews, with students who graduated between 2013 and 2018 conducted as part of two doctoral studies, provided the initial stimulus to explore attitudes to place further. The interview participants were from a number of North West Universities, with a balanced sample across characteristics of gender and ethnicity, many from ‘widening participation’ backgrounds. Full demographic details are available elsewhere (Christie, 2018; Cunningham, Forthcoming). Brief details of interviews and survey participants are in table 2.

The interviews were analysed to identify patterns and themes relating to mobility. These themes informed the design of a simple survey for this project (see appendix 1 for survey questions) and were built upon in subsequent analysis conducted jointly by the researchers. We do not draw upon the data from interviews extensively in this report, although will extract some stand-out themes that emerged which relate to issues of place and complement the survey. This report will draw more heavily on the data that was collected for this project as part of a survey. Quotations used from both interviews and the survey are presented anonymously throughout the findings.

Table 2 – University attended - survey and interviews

Pseudonym	University descriptor	Doctoral study 1 - Interviews	Doctoral study 2 - Interviews	Survey responses
University A	Large, metropolitan, Alliance Group	20	7	60
University B	Super-large, metropolitan, Russell Group			5
University C	Medium-sized, urban, Alliance Group		9	9
University D -	Small, urban, Cathedrals group			1
University E	Large, county, campus-based, non-aligned		8	5

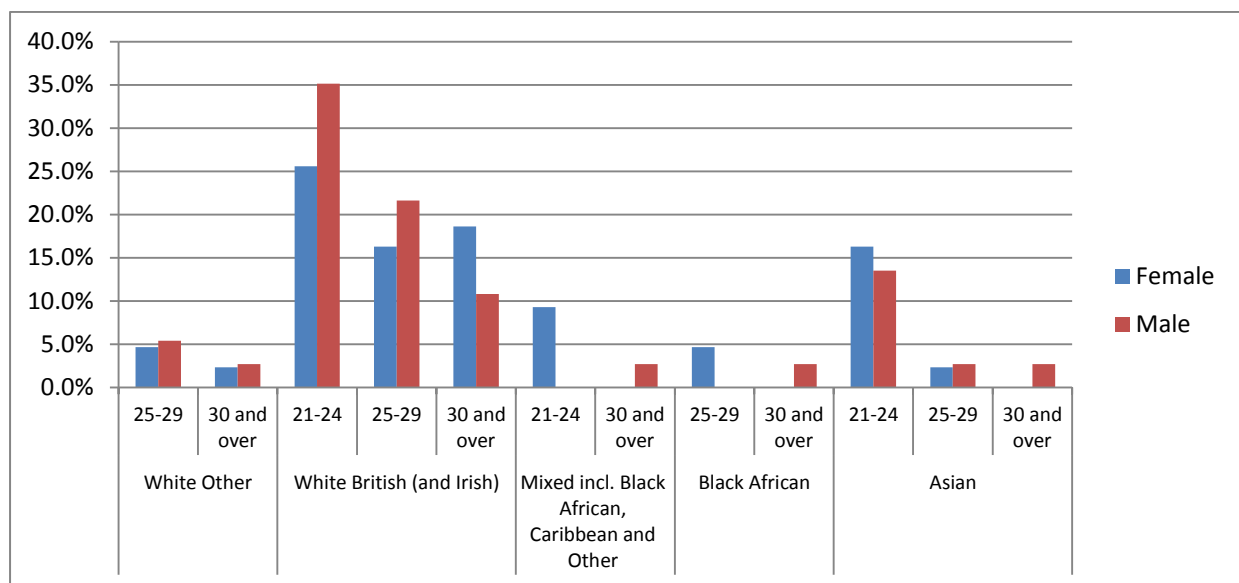
The survey was distributed opportunistically to graduates via email and social media. There were 80 responses in total (collected between March-June 2018). 43 responses were from one invitation that went out to 2016/2017 ‘University A’ graduates who had done an internship at the university after they had graduated, and 37 responses were from an invitation that went out more widely to graduates (2014 onwards) from different North West universities. The survey included both closed

and open questions. Open questions led to some very detailed answers, we suspect, due in part to participants' knowledge of the researchers and a resultant willingness to offer thoughtful and considered responses. As such the 80 survey responses capture useful insights into how individuals consider geographical mobility. The distribution of the survey participants mean that this research is biased towards Greater Manchester.

It is noteworthy that, at the time of the research, we were 'immersed' in the field as practitioner-researchers, as a Careers Consultant and Lecturer so the data interpretation was contextualised and 'tested' for example, in workshops and appointments with graduates and students.

Figure 2 gives information about the characteristics of those who responded to the survey including information about gender, age, and ethnicity.

Figure 2: Survey population characteristics



Base responses: Men 37; Women 43

Marginally more women (n43) responded to the survey than men (n37). White British (and Irish) graduates (n51) were the biggest participants in relation to ethnicity in contrast to Asian (n15), Black African (n3), Mixed; including White, Black African, Black Caribbean, and Other (n5) and White Other (n6). Younger graduates aged 21-24 gave a greater response rate (n40) compared to 25-29 (n23) and 30 and over (n17). Survey participants included graduates from 2014 (n11), 2015 (n4), 2016 (n23), 2017 (n34) and other years (n3).

Survey participants were predominantly 'loyals' (Ball, 2015) i.e., those who had lived in the region before their studies, stayed in the region to study and remained after. 80% were from the North West before coming to university, the remaining 20% originating from six other UK regions and just 7.5% from Europe and the rest of the world. At the time of the survey, 83.75% were based in the North West, the rest dispersed across four other UK regions and 5% overseas.

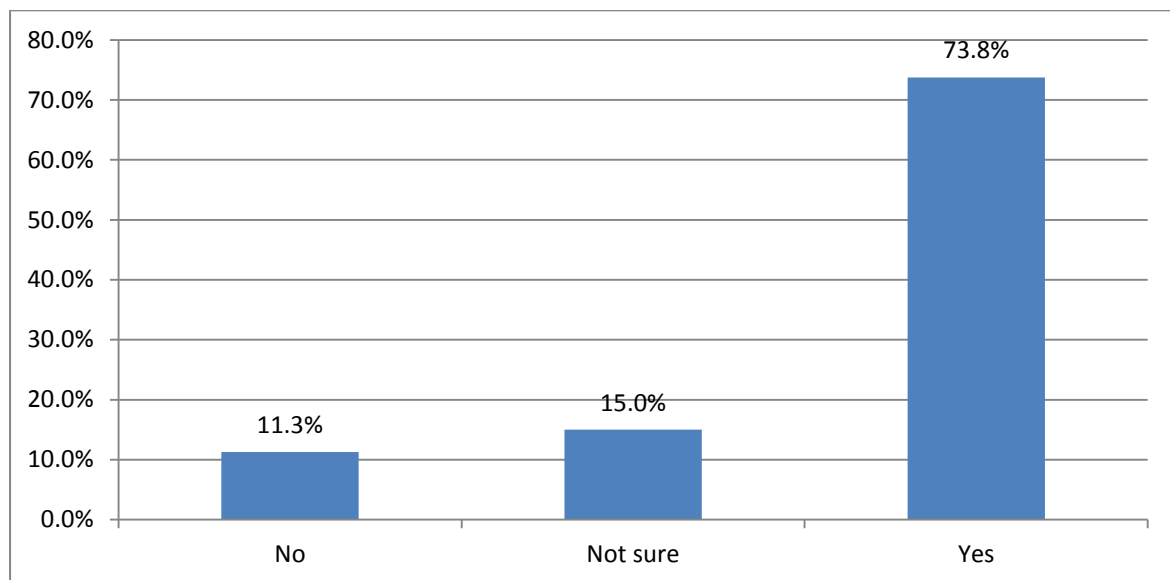
2. Survey findings and discussion

The following section 2.1, reports on responses to closed questions in the survey about whether individuals wanted to live and work in the North West, and whether they might be prepared to move for the right job.

2.1 Attitudes to mobility

The following (Fig 3) illustrates data from a question that asked participants if they wanted to live and work in the North West. 73.8% of all participants wanted to do so, illustrating a strong desire to stay in the region, just slightly fewer than those who came from the region originally.

Figure 3: Desire to live and work in the North West (all responses)



A higher proportion of Asian graduates, than any other ethnic group wanted to stay in the North West. 93.3% of Asian graduates reported this in contrast to White British (and Irish) at 70.6%. The other ethnic groups in the sample reported a lower percentage desire to live and work in the North West, than either Asian or White British (and Irish) participants.

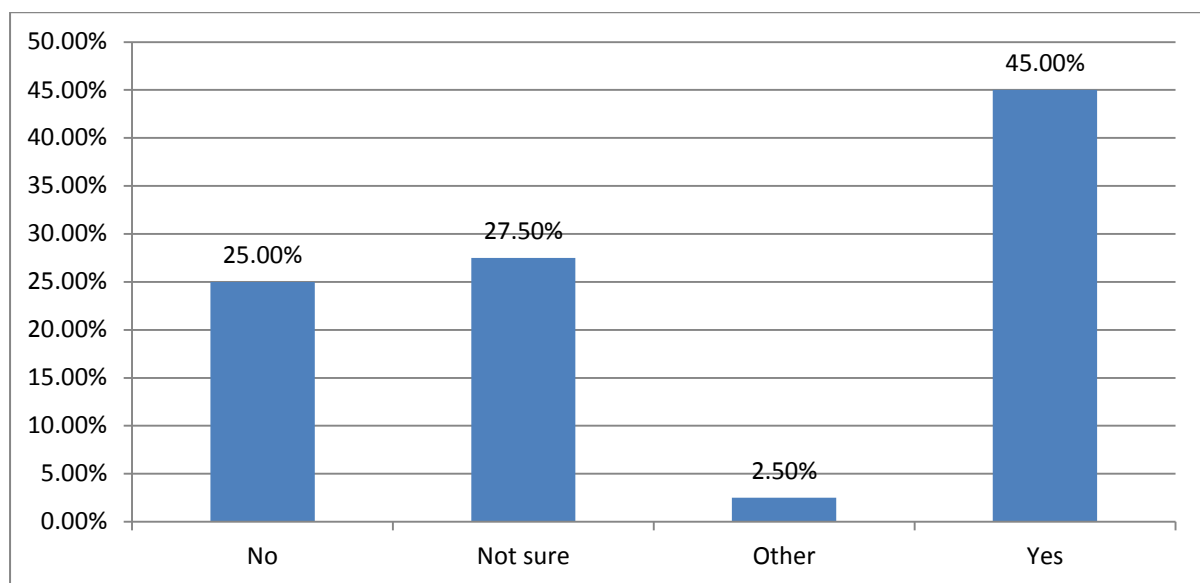
Regarding gender, the numbers who reported wanting to stay or leave the region were broadly similar for men and women, i.e., 72.1% of women reported wanting to stay compared to 75.7% of men, 11.6% of women reported not wanting to stay compared to 10.8% of men. This runs counter to any ideas that women may have more family ties and be less mobile than men.

Younger participants (aged 21-24) reported the highest percentage number who wanted to stay in the region at 77.5%. This finding runs counter to the notion that young graduates may be more mobile in their attitudes than older graduates. Albeit with a small sample, in our survey, the older graduates (30 and over) expressed a greater desire to move away with just 64.7% reporting that

they wanted to stay in the North West. The recent report by the Centre for Cities (McDonald, 2019) suggests that young students and graduates may be attracted to the towns and cities whereas older graduates may prefer to move out of cities and live in surrounding locations which are still within commutable distance.

Figure 4 reports on responses to a question which asked participants to consider if they would move for the right job. Despite 73.8% reporting that they wanted to stay in the region, 45% indicated that they would move anywhere in the UK for the right job. Four participants used the phrase 'dream job' as a potential magnet. This raises questions about what would constitute this dream job, how likely it may be and how they might pursue. Research by Houston & Cunningham (2018) explores the suggestion that waiting for a 'dream job' to manifest could impede active career management.

Figure 4: Reported willingness to move for the 'right job' (all responses)



The ethnic groups Black African and Mixed; including White, Black African, Black Caribbean, and Other reported a higher willingness to move than other groups at 66.7% and 60% respectively (albeit with low response for these groups in comparison to Asian and White British participants).

51.4% of men reported a willingness to move for the right job compared to 39.5% of women. 32.6% of women reported that they would not move for the right job compared to 16.2% of men.

Regardless of the more prevalent preference to stay in the region (noted earlier), younger participants (21-24) expressed a greater willingness to move for the right job at 47.5%, with only 15% reporting that they would not move. This contrasts with the over 30s, of which 35.3% said they would not move while 41.2% reported being willing to move.

2.3 What influences attitudes toward mobility?

Free text answers to questions gave indications as to why participants wanted to stay or leave the North West. Interestingly, many participants commented on both issues, so for example, even if they had reported wanting to stay in the North West and explained this, they would also offer comments about potential reasons to leave. The survey very explicitly asked about attitudes to place and the detailed answers provide insight into the dilemmas faced by individuals when considering a geographical move connected to their work and career.

Broadly, reasons to stay included a strong sense of belonging and attachment to 'home'. 'Home' relates to people, to family and friends, but to a wider familiar community too. 'Home' can also connect to the external environment, whether beautiful countryside or vibrant urban culture. Scope for good job opportunities and more affordable living are also mentioned. Notably, reasons to leave can often be the inverse or similar. For example, going 'back home' is mentioned for those not from the North West, or a choice to move to live with a partner. In addition, a desire to forge new relationships and meet new people can push people to leave. The external environment features with aspirations to get away from the congestion, poor transport or pollution of a North West city, or to go where culture may be richer or more varied. The perception of better job opportunities and higher salaries is a strong pull factor to go elsewhere. This can extend to the notion that it is necessary to move in order to get a 'dream job' or a 'once in a lifetime experience' and that standing still geographically can be a barrier to having a successful life.

Other observations that occurred across the free text answers were the strong featuring of London and the South East, often positioned as the opposite of the North. Some other UK places are mentioned but only by single participants - e.g. Midlands, Scotland, and Devon. Participants tended to refer to 'the North' as opposed to the North West – their words echoing the binary language of North and South which has long been characterised as a dominant aspect of English if not British life. Overseas locations occur in answers as imagined possible places to live for self-discovery, although they do not appear to be associated with concrete plans. The idea of 'Returning Home' is evident amongst those who talk about leaving but with a feeling that they would like to 'come home', 'back up north'.

When asked for more general comments about the role of geographical location, participants' answers captured the tensions about whether to move and the choices to be made around work, life, career, family and so on. Individuals are clearly grappling with these issues which are practical, economic, and emotional. Wellbeing at work is an increasing national concern and the government has included the role of employers and workplaces in their strategic approach to tackling loneliness (UK Government, 2019) so that issues of habitation are important and should not be glossed over in simplistic assumptions about graduate mobility. Decisions about place are not to be taken lightly.

be hugely beneficial. I would possibly consider short term work outside of the North West if it would help my progression but would only consider this on a job by job basis.

I want to live and work in the North West (i.e. Manchester) due to the geographical location of the city, the numerous job opportunities within the Finance and Accounting field, and for the fact that money can buy more here than in the South (e.g. living in London). I also prefer a quieter, less chaotic life, with a more achievable work-life balance (e.g. set off for work at 7.45-8am and arrive home by 6pm) compared to the South.

Firstly, I have family ties to the North West. My mum is a single parent, and so I would like to remain living close to her so that I can be there if she is ever ill. Secondly, I feel like the North West is 'the place to be'. There is a lot of growth for the region's economy (especially in Manchester) and so I would like to remain here to take advantage of that. Linking to this, I would like to buy a house in the North West soon, as it is still somewhat affordable to do this. Thirdly, in the future, I may consider postgraduate study. By staying in the North West, I will have access to a wide variety of quality higher education institutions at which to complete my studies.

There was a considerable amount of candour about priorities evident in answers which challenge dominant discourses about being mobile and career-focussed. In some cases, there seemed to be a rebellion against the idea of being ambitious in a career at all. For example, one participant honestly admits that their career is not their number one priority.

I'm not very career driven at all, my main motivator is happiness and so I would lose more than gain from moving away. It would honestly depend on that scale of things lost and things gained.

There were just ten 'stayers' in the sample – i.e., those who had moved to North West to study and then remained. All had made a positive choice to stay in the region and some already had established firm relationships which contributed to their desire to stay. Two of the stayers were from countries outside the UK and they wanted to stay due to having family in the North West. One indicated more negatively that it would be hard for them to return to their home in the South for financial reasons as costs of living had become more prohibitive for a return South.

Previously I was socially established in the South East, so I would prefer to return, however the salary I could currently achieve would not be sufficient to live in the South East.

2.3.2 I'll go where the opportunities are

A similar word frequency analysis was conducted across answers about why participants might want to live and work away from the region (Fig. 6). The most frequently recurring words were opportunities (n19), move (n16), work (n11) and better (n8). In contrast to the answers about staying in the region, the words family and friends were only mentioned once each. To put it simply, based on this linguistic analysis, participants who want to leave appear to make a choice to prioritise opportunities for work over family and relationships.

world for the right job. The North West is a thriving arts community, which is why I am currently here indefinitely.

Of specific interest to policy-makers, transport is mentioned as a significant disincentive by two participants for living and working in the North West. One respondent gives considerable detail on this and makes a thoughtful commentary on how poor transport runs counter to Northern Powerhouse aspirations:

It is becoming increasingly difficult to commute into the city centre, despite the fact I live in Greater Manchester and only a 20-minute train journey away. Improvement and investment in local transportation would do far more than making trains between Manchester-Liverpool-Leeds a few trains more frequent an hour. The only problem I have with the geography of where I live in terms of career prospects is lack of any real investment in local infrastructure, which will probably force me out or leave me in peril of getting left behind.

There were just seven participants originally from the North West who had stayed to study and had then left after graduating. All reported that it was a quest for better opportunities that spurred their move. Interestingly though, for those who move, a desire for belonging in a new location emerges, wherever that might be. A 2014 graduate from the North West who has moved to the South West describes finding a new sense of home in his current location.

If you get settled - find a sense of belonging - you are more likely to become fixated on where you want to remain. When I was graduating - I would have moved anywhere. Now I feel part of a community and moving anyway wouldn't be ideal

This supports the argument that the feeling of belonging to a place is increasingly important over time.

2.3.3 The lure of London and the South East

Within the free text data, there was a notable number of references to London and the South East. This is an indicator of the considerable pull of the capital city. The fairy-tale cliché that its 'streets are paved with gold' would appear to endure and it seems that many graduates ask themselves the question 'will my career take off if I move to London?' There is an assumption that this would be the case for many. In word frequency analysis there were sixteen mentions of London across the data, more than any other place and the city is the place that participants most frequently consider a move to. Participants spoke of the push and pull of London, describing the opportunities it offered but others indicating reasons why they did not feel able or willing to move or live there.

The following quotes capture contrasting attitudes to London.

There are more opportunities outside of the North West, particularly in London. My understanding is time spent in London can fast track my career due to scale of the opportunities.

I did move to London for a job but gave up on that after about a year because I was so lonely!

There are more relevant jobs available in the South East, however the salary is not sufficient. I have remained in the North West because it is more affordable, but there will be fewer opportunities for me to progress.

I do believe that the bigger and “better” companies are based in London. I work in marketing and all of the big brands were working with agencies in London at the time I graduated, so I had to move down there if I wanted to work with big names and have a really great career.

What accuracy is there in statements from participants about London opportunities being bigger and better? Whatever the strength of regional cities such as Manchester, many indicators do show that the London job market is the strongest in the nation, so the comments from participants reflect this. However, similarly other respondent comments capture the challenges of living in London which is also well-known to anyone who has ever travelled on the London underground or looked for rental accommodation in the capital.

2.3.4 Returning - “back up north”

Five participants spoke of the reality and possibility of moving away and wanting to return to the North West later. Phrases that typify this are “back up north” and “coming home”. A strong loyalty to the region is evident.

I would move away for the purpose of a dream job or a once in a lifetime opportunity, however I do see myself always settling in the North West eventually.

Frankly, I was quite flexible with the location and this attribute was resonant among my circle at University as restricting ourselves to a particular region would limit career opportunities. However, if given the choice, I would consider moving back to North West if the right opportunity comes by!

I wanted to be back up north to be closer to my family and friends as I knew no one down south, but it was important for me to have a great job lined up in Manchester first before I “jumped ship” on my London job.

I would like to live abroad at some point during my career - work in USA and experience the American dream for a few years and then come home, back to Manchester.

These comments should be reassuring to policy-makers who are concerned about graduate retention for the region and specifically Greater Manchester. It does appear that this is a location of choice for many whether they were born and bred or came to the area to study. Capitalising on such sentiment for the labour force is the challenge in order to attract the highly skilled back to the region. It would also be interesting to conduct further research around such mobility patterns and how many do return.

3. Interview findings and discussion

The findings of the survey strongly suggest that family is a key factor influencing regional loyalty, however, the short answers do not adequately explain why. Do family members purely assist by providing food and a home for this ‘boomerang generation’ of struggling early career graduates or is there more to it? Our in-depth interviews helped to illuminate this phenomenon more clearly as participants often described the moral support and the sense of love and belonging they received from close friends and relatives. Moreover, many cited examples of where friends and family had been instrumental in introducing them to opportunities through their own networks. Quotes from the survey about being lonely in London and being ‘anxious the whole time’ allude to a strong link between psychological wellbeing and the close relationships of ‘home’.

The interview data also enabled us to explore alternative patterns of migration in relation to the region which are introduced below and could provide stimulus for further research.

3.1 The Explorers

The survey data revealed a desire amongst participants to go overseas in order to work and/or live, whether for a shorter- or longer-term experience. Data collected as part of the doctoral research project one, included five participants who had acted on their aspiration to travel and gone overseas within the first two years of graduation. Some were overseas at the time of their research interview. The evidence gained supports what has been written about the value of international experiences.

Table 3: The ‘explorers’

Doctoral study 1 – the explorers	
Daniel (Journalism graduate)	Planning to leave his job in PR for a short-term volunteering opportunity in Africa
Robert (Film studies graduate)	Travelling and working in Canada in a bar
Isabelle (Graphic Design graduate)	Travelling and working in New Zealand in a tax office
Sophia (Performing Arts graduate)	Studying in France
Ibrahim (English graduate)	Planning a short study trip to the US as part of postgraduate studies

The narrative of exploration emerged as a way to describe these graduates’ stories. Arguably, participants drew upon an archetypal ‘voyage and return’ story (Pryor & Bright, 2008). For these five graduates, there was evidence of the life-affirming experience of living and working outside the UK. For the five (pseudonyms - Daniel, Robert, Isabelle, Sophia, Ibrahim) in the participant group, who describe their respective trips/moves overseas, their stories are resonant of a long tradition of young people’s personal growth through travel and learning about other cultures. The three graduates who were overseas at the time of their interview evoked the greatest appearance of personal pride and excitement of all participants in the research (based on research interviewer perception).

Isabelle illustrates this well. At the time of the research interview, she is living in New Zealand, having recently arrived after a period of travel and is starting to look for a job. Travel is something she has wanted to do for some time, and the fact she doesn't know what she wants to do for a career and is open-minded about this has led her to save up money to take the opportunity to work and travel. Her emphasis is on personal growth, discovery and independence when she says how happy she is:

I'm probably the happiest that I've been in a long time being here...So I'd say that I'm really happy with my situation at the moment even though I don't actually have a job [LAUGHS].
(Isabelle)

Robert describes a team of supporters behind him – his family and friends. Having worked in various jobs to earn money, which included a few months in London, he moved to Canada to work as a cashier in a bar. His dad is disabled and cannot work, and his mum is his carer; he attributes his travel ambition to them, they want him to see more of the world than they have. Location and travel are important for him and his desire to escape his home town in the North West is strong. His move to Canada was alongside friends who were doing the same. He found out about the visa option to go to Canada via them, and he describes a supportive group seeking adventure together. Despite his warmth towards his parents, it is noteworthy that he considers a physical move away from them as so important, although they are presented as his unconditional cheerleaders:

So with my parents especially, any decision I make, or anything I say to them, they're totally on board with, they just always want me to be doing what I want to be doing. So it's been really nice to just go, even when things seem crazy and I go... 'oh I'm moving to Canada'. As much as they'll miss me, they're always saying, 'whatever is right for you just go and do it'.
(Robert)

Sophia is living in France studying at a specialist acting school. Although not from a wealthy background, she has used the money from her recent inheritance when her father died, to move to France. She is aware that this is risky as it has meant she doesn't have future savings to use, however, she is having what she depicts as a transformational experience in France, where she perceives being an actor is much more highly regarded than in Britain. She talks of finding herself away from the UK:

I'm having this sort of emotional sort of existential change, I'm still really in the same place as I was financially possibly, you know a year and a half ago... another twenty something year old cliché, which is what we all are. I'm that, I'm doing that at the moment as well, finding myself. (Sophia)

Finally, Ibrahim and Daniel both have forthcoming plans to go overseas at the time of the research interview and talk very positively of their respective plans. Both had contact with the researcher subsequent to their trips confirming that their experience had been very good. In Daniel's case it gave him an understanding of international development that allowed him to thread together his journalism skills with his political interests and he got a job working for an international development charity. Ibrahim's experience doing research overseas gave him a considerable confidence boost going forward in pulling together ideas as a film-maker/researcher.

In the current policy context, which stresses so-called graduate level work as the definition of success, it seems almost rebellious in an old-fashioned way that graduates are deciding to step away from societal pressures to escape the UK, sometimes for self-discovery rather than career advancement.

3.2 The Tourists

Interviews also highlighted another group to expand Ball’s typology (2015) that we have named the ‘tourists’. Tourists arrive into the region from elsewhere to study and/or work then move on to another place (or return to their ‘home’ region) after graduating and/or working here. The following examples, taken from doctoral study 2 (Fig 9) represent this group who came to the North West to study or work then left after graduating (pseudonyms are used).

Table 4: The ‘tourists’

Doctoral study 2 – the tourists	
Imogen (Biomedical Science graduate)	Came from the USA to study at university E, spent a year travelling, now studying Medicine in London
Justyna (Journalism graduate)	Came from Eastern Europe to live in the North West at the age of 16, studied at university A, now working in Spain
Mary (Business and Marketing graduate)	Came from Surrey to study in the NW at university E, now living and working in Malaysia
Brad (IT graduate)	Came to work in the NW after graduating in Scotland, now returned to Scotland to live and work
Hassia (Nursing graduate)	Came from the Midlands to study at University C, now returned to the Midlands to work

It is interesting to consider what might have first attracted these graduates to the region and then subsequently pulled or pushed them away. Some of the participants were motivated and proactive in making the most of opportunities of mobility offered by university and work. The interviews also supported the argument that decision-making can entail a combination of logic and luck. The participants appeared to be attracted to the UK as a country or by the particular university first and foremost, rather than specifically being attracted to the North West region. However, once here, they reported being happy with their move (despite the rain).

Why I did come here? Because first, education in this country is really good and I wanted to explore the world to see different cultures. I’m happy that I came to England because it was actually a really good opportunity for me to improve my language skills because English language is really useful these days, you can basically go anywhere and speak to anyone and it really helps... and there is a funny story about my choice of universities and I just emailed a few universities and this was the first one who sent me the paperwork, I was happy so yeah that’s why I came here and I like it! (Justyna)

Imogen described herself as very well-travelled, but previously only with her parents on holidays. Moving to the UK to study was a big step in asserting her independence. Her choice of where to go was perhaps still quite overwhelming and consequently random:

I had no idea I was gonna do this degree, I was gonna do psychology and then realised I didn't want to and then got better grades than I was going to get so I ended up here kind of by accident, like I remember in my parents living room on the day of results and I'm like "I'm not going through them all I'm going to University E" and they didn't know what to think!... I'm very close to my parents I love them to pieces and they were always very supportive they kind of say you can do whatever you want, and I guess I realised I could do things by myself, I could live by myself and I went 'hey I can do this!' I accepted the offer and then went to see E (university town) and it was completely raining, and I couldn't even see what it looked like!

For many, the key factors were similar to those influencing individuals who stayed in the North West – for Imogen the opportunity to study at a reputable university both initially attracted her to University A then catalysed her move to London for postgraduate study. Similarly, graduates who are 'tourists' in relation to the North West may be 'regional returners' to their home region and return for family or friends:

I grew up in London, so I feel like it's my home and I think I'll always come back to London really, there's nowhere else quite like it so I think I'll probably end up staying in London but maybe a few years somewhere else. (Mary)

The interview data was also able to shed further light on some of the less positive reasons for regional loyalty. Many students and graduates may not have the social networks or financial resources to be able to explore career opportunities further afield even if they want to. This graduate expresses the dilemma of feeling that she 'should' be prepared to work in London, set against the practical issues she experienced when undertaking a placement there:

I wouldn't go back to London, it's so claustrophobic and I do love the rural side of life and to go out for a run or walk and not be overwhelmed by fumes and traffic but it's mainly the cost side, so I was paying £800 a month for a room and if I had a partner or friend or family then I'd be more willing to reconsider it but as a single person who is constantly looking to the future I've always got my finances and financial independence in mind then I want to focus on the picture, the ability to build a life and that just isn't realistic in London. (Ella)

A recent graduate in a small business interviewed in doctoral research 2 was a promising example of how graduate mobility could be encouraged and supported through internships:

myself and the marketing executive were both from the North and had to move to London so we'd kind of known how hard it was coming to London and sleeping on peoples sofas and staying with family or whatever we could do so we do pay well, we started initially paying about £x a week but I've kind of increased that just because I just thought, they are a real part of the team (Hayley)

As the graduate workforce continues to diversify, new kinds of social networks may hopefully develop that can acknowledge and help to mitigate the financial challenges of mobility.

4. Findings and discussion – a summary

Changing patterns of graduate mobility challenge the traditional narrative of ‘moving away to go to university’ as a rite of passage (Waters, 2017). Much of the data presented by this research illustrates a counter-narrative of loyalty to the home region and to the significant relationships that influence life-decisions. However, only a quarter stated that they would not be prepared to move for ‘the right’ job, signifying that im/mobility does not necessarily equate with a lack of ambition or imagination about location. Indeed, many of the respondents expressed very eloquently their reasons for staying in the North West which included the love of the culture and environment.

More work needs to be done to raise the profile of the wide range of opportunities which exist within the region as this was the most common rationale participants gave for moving away. The participants’ responses also suggested that there might be differences in short and long-term mobility patterns which could be further explored.

Career professionals perhaps have a role to play in breaking down binary assumptions (North/London, mobile/loyal) to help graduates exercise mobility in different stages of their careers and in different ways (should they so wish).

4.1 Limitations and observations about the research

The participants were mainly based in the Greater Manchester conurbation, which needs to be taken into account when interpreting the findings. The experiences of graduates in rural or coastal North West towns may be quite different from those closer to the city, just as Liverpoolians may differ from Lancastrians in their outlook. Further research could perhaps illuminate such diversities; however, a caveat of the research warns against assumptions of homogeneity as a general principle in any qualitative research with graduates.

Similarly, any research that compares different groups of participants must acknowledge the arbitrary nature of such categories so that even when there seem to be trends and patterns there may also be many outliers which are equally valuable and enlightening. It is often assumed that working-class students and graduates may be less geographically mobile and have less access to valuable networks. Although our research predominantly focused upon the ‘loyals’ and most of the universities had a high proportion of ‘widening participation’ students our interview data showed that using social class as a defining factor can be over-simplistic (and UK-specific). Many of the students were successful in utilising their experience, education and contacts to become socially and geographically mobile. Similarly, attempts to define students by ethnicity or nationality can also be unhelpful as many participants stories uncovered a far richer tapestry of cultural influences.

A very positive methodological observation about our research was the extent to which the participants engaged with the open comments options in the survey. Traditionally with this format responses tend to be short or omitted entirely, yet the quotes included earlier illustrate a level of detail, openness and expression that surprised us. One possible reason for this was many of the

survey participants already knew us, the researchers, through our PhD research, personal recommendations by tutors or graduate employability workshops we delivered. This is an interesting observation in itself as it is easy to dismiss open response items in surveys (a kind of qualitative data sometimes referred to as 'small q') as being of lesser value than in-depth interviews, observations or focus groups. Compared with interviews, these kinds of questions may be more susceptible to socially desirable responses, however, they may also encourage more reflective, full and thoughtful answers.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Retaining graduate talent in the North West is crucial to the success of the region and the Northern Powerhouse strategy. A danger of the HS2 development (especially given the current issues with local trains) is it could be quicker and easier for graduates to commute to London than other locations in the North West. Reduced local fares and investment in regional transport networks are emerging as possibilities (Transport for the North, 2019). Connections between northern towns and cities are vital in facilitating a strong regional identity, rather than a Manchester-centric one. Manchester seems set to be the greatest beneficiary of the Northern Powerhouse strategy but must not become complacent or isolated. Free or heavily subsidised travel for under 25s could open up wider possibilities for geographical mobility within the region for young graduates.

Of course, students and graduates should equally have access to information and the opportunities to travel nationally and internationally in order to widen their horizons and fully participate in the world around them. Technology and faster, cheaper transport have the potential to widen participation in such opportunities to those who are unable to exercise extensive mobility due to family commitments, disabilities or lack of resources. Virtual solutions are also developing (e.g. virtual internships) for or those who wish to tap into the benefits of global exposure from home. Funded, short-term national and international learning opportunities such as ERASMUS also (currently) support such pursuits. A worthy aim of universities, employers and society is perhaps to develop truly 'glonacal' citizens (global + national + local), (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002) who are firmly rooted in the region and yet flexible and mobile, short-term or virtually.

The government emphasise the critical role of employers in careers and employability support (Department for Education, 2017) so perhaps there is an opportunity if not a responsibility for organisations to help new graduates wishing to relocate by offering practical support. This could entail a buddy system, relocation allowance, short-term subsidised accommodation or help finding somewhere to live. At the same time, offering flexible and virtual working times and places may attract more regional 'loyals' to work for national and international organisations, as surely loyalty is a valuable trait for long-term talent retention?

It was clear from our research that graduates need more support than they currently can access. Many reported that they felt insufficiently prepared for the transition to the labour market. Universities need to continue engaging with them after graduation, not just because of the longer timescale of the new Graduate Outcomes survey, but for the genuine reason that 'after-graduation' support should be an ethical/moral imperative with an investment as costly as higher education. This need has been recognised by the Office for Students (2018) which recently launched funding for universities and colleges to help students who want to find graduate-level employment close to home. Individual universities may have different policies and processes in place to offer continued help for graduates. Our previous HECSU research project enabled us to develop an online resource '21 days to Career Success' (<https://blogs.salford.ac.uk/careers-employability/21-days-career-success/>) which has proved highly popular.

Careers advisers and university tutors have a key role to play and need to be reflexive and non-judgemental in their own assumptions about mobility. In our experience, advisers may tend to be

less mobile in their own career in contrast to academics. Assumptions could play both ways and this can influence interactions with students. Further research could usefully focus upon how those who support students and graduates – professionally and informally – can help them to make informed choices which fit their circumstances at the time. Careers education and guidance (and perhaps HE in general) should take into account the wider personal context of the individual, family and finances. Careers advisers (and HE tutors and parents) could endeavour to widen horizons to ensure that people are at least aware of and get to try further afield opportunities so at least loyalty to the region is an informed choice rather than just a default.

The opposite of mobility is often positioned as ‘immobility’ which sounds like a limitation or disability. This research aims to stimulate discussion about regional graduate migration and mobility beyond these binary concepts and to build on recent research (Alexander, 2018; Christie, 2018; Finn, 2015) which offers a more nuanced and positive approach. An alternative opposite to mobility is ‘stability’ which is valuable to the individual, organisation and society. We have found that there is significant pride in the North West region and many make a positive choice to be here.

6. Appendix

Appendix 1 - Survey questions

3. What subject area did your degree belong to? *Drop-down list*

3.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

4. What year did you graduate?

2017; 2016; 2015; 2014; Other

4.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

5. What university in the north-west did you attend?

Bolton; Central Lancashire; Chester; Cumbria; Edge Hill; Lancaster; Liverpool; Liverpool Hope;
Liverpool John Moores; Manchester; Manchester Metropolitan; Salford; Other

5.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

6. Where did you live before coming to University? *Drop-down list*

6.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

7. Where are you currently located? *Drop-down list*

7.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

8. Do you want to live and work in the north-west?

Yes No Not sure

9. Would you move anywhere in the UK for the right job?

Yes No Not sure Other

9.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

10. If you want to live and work in the north-west, please explain why?

11. If you want to live and work away from the north-west, please explain why?

12. Please add any other comments you may have about how choice of geographical location may have affected your career options.

Personal Details

13. Age (select one answer only):

Please choose your age range

21-24 25-29 30-39 40 and over Prefer not to say

14. Gender (select one answer only):

Male Female Trans Prefer not to say

15. Ethnicity : *Drop-down list*

15.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

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