

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 40 *Fostering Inclusive Learning
Communities Together*

Article 22

July 2023

Sustainable Cities Depend on Supporting First-Generation Students

Stuart Haw
Northumbria University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Haw, Stuart "Sustainable Cities Depend on Supporting First-Generation Students," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 40 (2023), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss40/22>

SUSTAINABLE CITIES DEPEND ON SUPPORTING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

Stuart Haw, Postgraduate (PhD) Researcher, Department of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation, Northumbria University.

Across England, many cities face the challenge of how to retain their young talent—particularly the talent offered by first-generation students. For these cities, having first-generation students remain in, or return to, the locations they come from relies on support from universities. Such institutions can support students by helping them to shape their lived experience and educating them on how they can create opportunities in their hometowns and cities—and therefore not contribute to ‘brain drains’ or human capital flights. The example of Peterborough is provided to show how such support can contribute to the growth of cities, in ways that work towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

For the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations member states in 2015, to be actualized, first-generation university students need appropriate support from universities, funders, and careers advice professionals. These are students who are the first in their family to enroll into a university. Goal 11 of the SDGs seeks to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.” For cities—inclusive of all sizes and locations—to be sustainable, providing support to first-generation students should be a priority.

Students have long been told that the world is their oyster. With the increasing interconnectivity of the world, young people, students, and graduates have a greater capacity for exploration than ever before, especially for how they utilize their human capital in the workplace. Human capital is an economic theory which has, over the past two decades, been introduced into the social sciences, primarily to explain employment practices and education (Becker, 1964; Putnam, 1993). The theory suggests that when students move to a new city, join a new company, or volunteer at an organization, they are making a personal investment in the human capital of those collectives.

It follows that for universities who attempt to enhance the human capital of their students, there needs to be some concern for the ‘oyster’ that they create. For instance, most cities which have a university see an overall increase in their numbers of new graduates, through a mix of those who move to the city to study and remain after graduation, those who move to the city after graduating elsewhere, and those originally from the city who study and remain after graduating (Swinney & Williams, 2016). Conversely, cities without a university experience a shift in population by young people, with some cities suffering what is known as a ‘brain drain’ or human capital flight. The impacts of this cannot be understated. Peterborough—for several years one of the UK’s largest cities without a university—has been in the lowest quartile of educational attainment for young people for over a decade, and the employment opportunities are limited (Swinney & Williams, 2016). The Centre for Cities shows that the city has a 0.4% retention rate for graduates (Swinney & Williams, 2016), and that those who can make a

difference to this issue, need to. So, for first-generation students, the pressure to emigrate from their home can be greater as they seek employment opportunities, particularly if they grew up in a city without a university or a presence of graduate employment. For those at Northumbria, who may have traveled to engage in research, there is a risk of reinforcing brain drains or human capital flights. We need to think about the mechanisms related to the support offered for how we can reverse this.

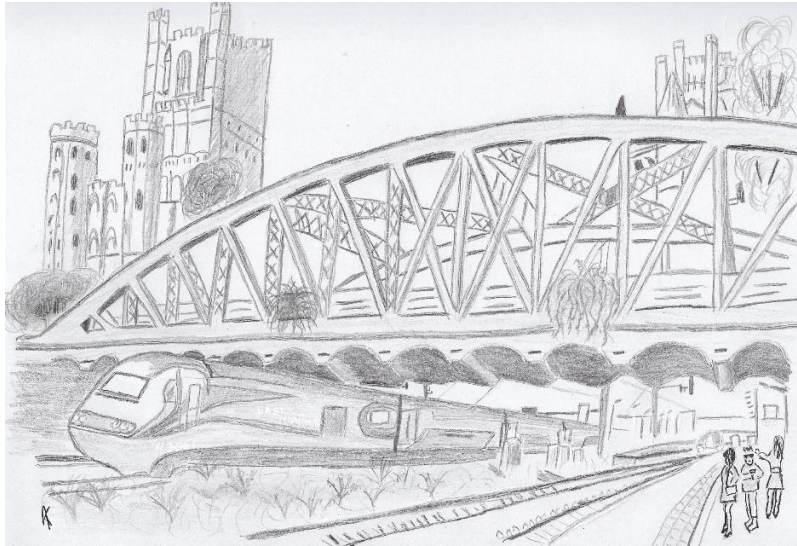


Figure. 1 *Students Leaving Peterborough.* (Karampela, 2021)

Supporting Students

With the UN's sustainable cities and human settlements goal in mind, for cities to become inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, they need to be desirable places for young people, students and graduates. Cities are hubs for ideas, culture, science, and productivity, as well as social, human, and economic development, so educated and skilled individuals are essential to cities, regardless of a city's size, location, or whether it has a university. In sum, cities require developed human capital to be sustainable. So, for smaller cities to become sustainable, we need to prevent brain drain and encourage graduates to stay in their home cities. This is particularly true for first-generation graduates, as their human capital flight would see not just one generation of human capital removed from their city, but future generations too.

There are many things that universities can do to encourage first-generation students to either remain in or return to their home city after graduation. Firstly, universities can ensure that the course materials and careers advice that students will interact with is not discriminatory to first-generation students. By this I mean that the students must be presented with information which does not teach them that the only way that they can succeed is to depart from their home cities and countries. For this, academic and administrative staff must come from varied backgrounds, and ideally some academic staff must be first-generation graduates themselves. Therefore, students will witness a blueprint for how they can be part of a 'brain gain' in their places of origin.

Further to this, if universities trained students to develop careers, be entrepreneurial, and start companies in the places they are from and know well, then it is more likely that students will feel confident they can succeed in their hometown. Currently, most graduate schemes, start-up incubators, and funding schemes are in London or other larger cities. If these were opened nationally with advice and guidance to match, then students would feel that they could succeed in their home city. This would encourage first-generation students from cities such as Peterborough to return to their home cities and invest in the locality. For these cities, such activity is essential for them to participate in achieving the SDGs, and universities too can participate by offering this support (Haw, 2020a).



Figure. 2. *Graduates taking in Peterborough.* (Karampela 2021)

More needs to be done to prevent cities from experiencing a brain drain and a human capital flight. Peterborough was provided as an example because it has one of the lowest graduate retention rates at 0.4% (Swinney & Williams, 2016) and, despite the city's wonders, was voted the worst city in the UK for three years running (Haygarth, 2021). I provided this example as I am from Peterborough, and as a first-generation student, felt that if more support was provided to students like myself, then such a brain drain could be prevented. I provided examples of what this support could involve and the possible benefits of it being provided: not least, the likelihood that first-generation students would invest their human capital in their home city, and as a result SDG 11 could be actualized in a greater number and range of cities. I feel it's important that people tell their own stories, particularly marginalized students. So as a first-generation student from what has been voted the worst UK city—one which experiences a significant brain drain—who is nearing completion of a PhD exploring how human capital can be mobilized, I feel it's important that I told this story candidly. Furthermore, it's a poignant story, as I commit to reinvest in the local economy post-PhD.

Acknowledgements

Artwork by Anastasia Karampela.

References

Becker, G. S. (1964). *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. New York: Columbia University Press for The National Bureau of Economic Research.

Haygarth, D. (2021). Peterborough named ‘worst place to live in England’ for third year running. *CambridgeshireLive*. <https://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/news/local-news/peterborough-named-worst-place-live-19560796>

Haw, S. (2020a). Protecting the leisure sector is more important now than ever. *sportanddev.org*. <https://www.sportanddev.org/en/article/news/protecting-leisure-sector-more-important-now-ever>

Haw, S. (2020b). First-Gen Spotlight: Stuart Haw. <https://first-gen-guide.com/2020/10/05/first-gen-spotlight-stuart-haw/>

Putnam, R. D. (1993). What makes democracy work? *National Civic Review* 82(2): 101–107.

Swinney, P., & Williams, M. (2016). The Great British Brain Drain: Where graduates move and why. *Centre for Cities*. <https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/great-british-brain-drain-where-graduates-move-and-why/>

United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>

United Nations. (2019). *Sustainable Cities: Why They matter*. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/11_Why-It-Matters-2020.pdf