TRANSITIONS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION TO REGIONS WITH LOW POPULATION DENSITY

Graduates' motivations for returning and the impact on their home communities

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OBJECTIVES

To understand **motivations of young adults to return** to rural/low population density areas after graduation.

To study **returnees' perceptions on their contributions and impact** to the development of their communities.

METHODOLOGY

This mixed-methods study was conducted in LPD regions of Portugal, using snowball sampling.

Quantitative data was evaluated using descriptive statistics; **Qualitative data** was analysed and categorised using thematic content analysis, and the following categories are used: Graduates' motivations for returning; Returnees' impact on the local community.

INTRODUCTION

The **internal migration** of young people living in low population density (LPD) areas with the aim of continuing their studies, especially in higher education, is part of the phenomenon known as the **"mobility imperative"** (Farrugia, 2016). In Portugal, these movements tend to take place towards coastal urban areas and contribute to depopulation, especially among younger people, in regions that are already demographically weakened and have fewer opportunities. This has a cumulative effect on the underdevelopment of these regions, a problem that poses major challenges for European policies to promote territorial balance and inclusion. This demographic exodus often leads to a "brain drain" effect, leaving rural communities with fewer opportunities for socio-economic regeneration and innovation. However, in several contexts, such as Portugal, some young adults are **returning to rural areas after completing higher education** (Silva et al., 2021; Corbett & Forsey, 2017; Rérat, 2014).

Questionnaire (Silva & Faria, 2023)
91 young adults and adults
Age: [19-45] (M = 32, SD = 6.36)
Sex: Female (n = 64, 70.3%)
Decision to return: 44% immediately after HE
(Table 1).

Biographic interviews
20 graduates
Age: [22-35]
Sex: Female (N=14)
Male (N=6)

Table 1. The moment of decision to return.

	During HE	Before HE	Immediately after completing HE	In the first 5 years after completing HE	At another time
%, n	14.3%, 13	1.1%, 1	44%, 40	20.9%, 19	19.8%, 18

RESULTS

A. MOTIVATIONS TO RETURN

Figure 1. Descriptive statistics for the continuity of regional social ties during higher education.
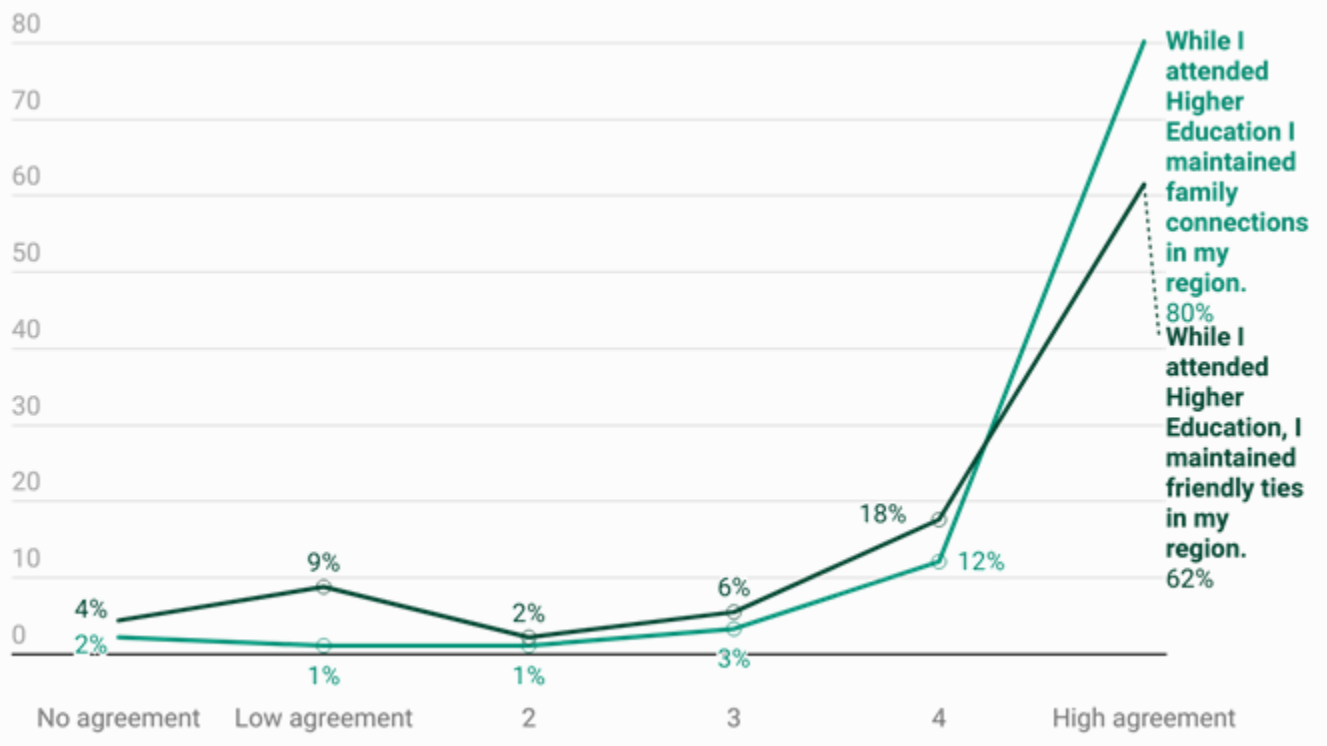

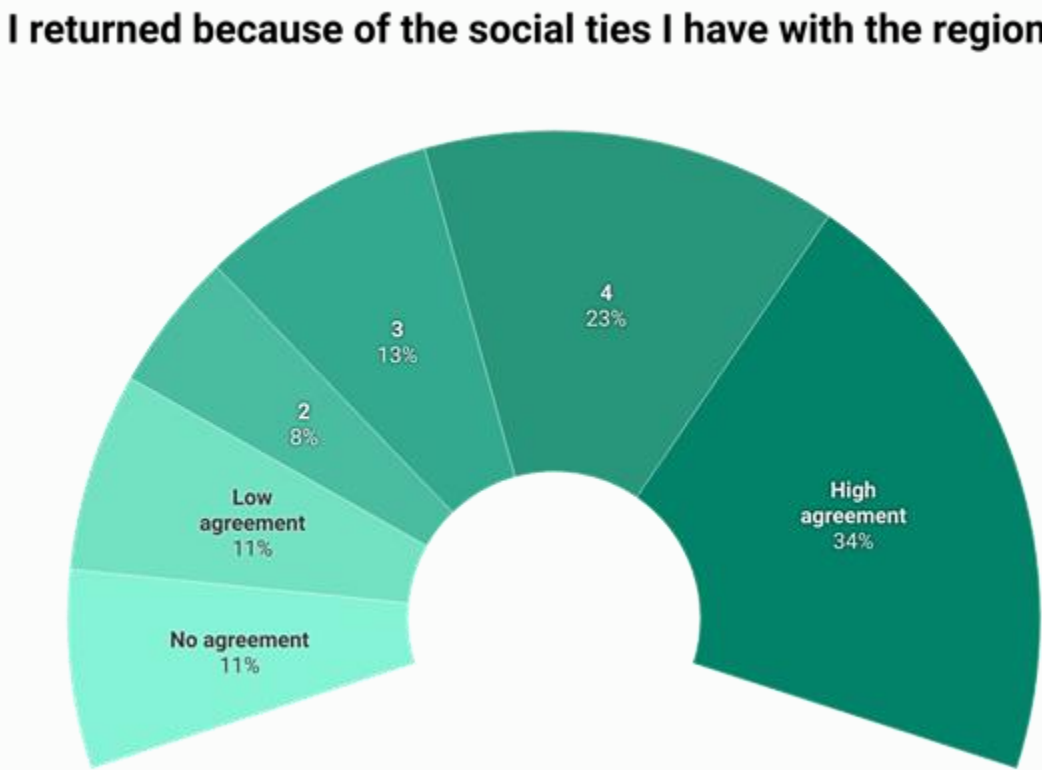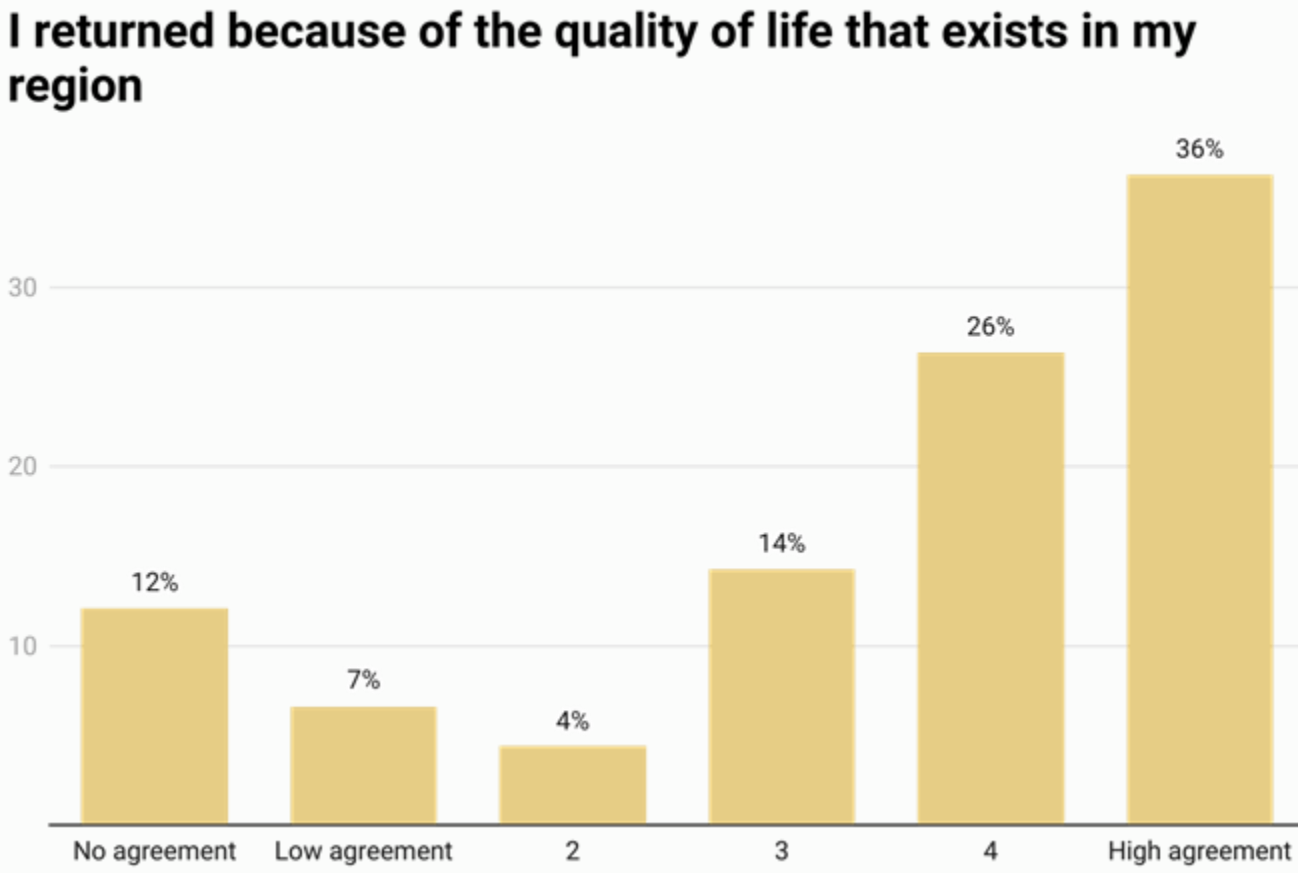Figure 2. Descriptive statistics for the social-tie–driven return migration.

Figure 3. Descriptive statistics for quality-of-life–motivated return migration.

B. IMPACT OF RETURNING

1. Contribution to economic development through academic expertise and the initiatives
"We're proud of the fact that this year we were able to organise the inland job fair in May. We also gave a workshop on entrepreneurship, where young people took part, if they wanted to start their own business. It's an event that we want to promote, especially in this area of employment and entrepreneurship, focused on the inlands" (Clara, Female)

2. Contribution to general development of the regions through professional activity
"We have various projects because it also depends on what comes out, but we have everything from upgrading pipework, which is also very important for the water supply. From renovating walls and castles, in other words, heritage sites. I end up working for a company that works to improve the community" (Orquídea, Female).

3. Contribution through participation in the community
"I have a set of skills and experiences that can be useful to people who are here. Since I came back, I've been volunteering with the volleyball tournament, and I've been working with some people in the village to install a playground in the school" (Tomás, Male, North)

4. Contribution as consumers and through raising family
"The decision to live in my region and start a family here has allowed me to be part of a small group of young people with children who keep the kindergarten and primary school open" (António, Male, North)

DISCUSSION

Motivations to return are **linked to a sense of belonging to a place and family and emotional ties**, which may play a key role in young people's return after higher education (Fig.1, 2). Returning is also associated with **new values and new social models** linked to new transition opportunities and the reconfiguration of biographical pathways. The quality of life in rural areas, linked to the availability of public services, but also to more time available and nature, are also reasons for returning (Fig.3). This is in line with the findings of Stockdale (2006), indicating that the search for a balanced lifestyle is often a reason for returning to rural áreas. These new values are related to the interests of young people who return to contribute to the development of their regions and empowering their communities. The results point to **four typologies of contributions of returnees**, indicating the importance of recognising new indicators and meanings related to regional value, growth and cohesion (Silva et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Emotional geographies (Hörschelmann, 2013) and sense of belonging impact on educational trajectories and transitions and explain return migration of young adults after higher education. This indicate that **non-economic factors** are motivating young adults to return. Better living conditions and a **sense of responsibility to contribute** to the home community through their educational capital are also explanatory factors. **Place-based education** (e.g. Gruenewald, 2003) emphasises the importance of anchoring educational experiences in the region in order to foster ties and later attract tertiary educated young adults. Such approaches are in line with EU strategies such as cohesion policy and the Rural Vision for Europe 2040, which emphasise the strengthening of rural areas as spaces of innovation and resilience, where **investment in diverse educational** opportunities is key.

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