



# The selective migration of young graduates: Which of them return to their rural home region and which do not?



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## ABSTRACT

### Keywords:

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This paper addresses the migration behaviours of young university graduates from a rural region in Switzerland. Based on a questionnaire survey, it compares graduates' current place of residence (i.e. whether or not they returned to their home region) with characteristics related to their socio-familial, migration and professional trajectories. The propensity to return varies not only according to labour market variables (employment opportunities), but also to other factors, some of which have even more influence than job opportunities. The graduates' life course position (kind of household), their partners' characteristics (level of education and home region) and their family background (socio-economic status and history of migration) all play a central role. On the whole, results show that migration appears as a selective and complex process embedded in the life course of graduates.

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## 1. Introduction

In many countries, the proportion of young adults accessing higher education is growing (Smith et al., 2014). This “human capital” is seen as essential for regional growth and development in the context of the knowledge economy (Corcoran et al., 2010). Thus attracting or keeping highly qualified youth is a salient issue, particularly for rural regions, many of which experience the net out-migration of this population group (Thissen et al., 2010), described as “brain drain”.

Research into this matter has tended to focus on the migration of young adults moving away from rural regions in order to go to university, but less is known about what happens after graduation (Smith and Sage 2014). This paper addresses the migration of young graduates, starting with two general observations that can be traced back as far as Ravenstein's seminal work on migration (1876): firstly, each current of migration produces a movement in the opposite direction, although usually not of the same volume. Secondly, migration is a selective process. In other words, migration does not concern each population group with the same intensity (Ravenstein identified differences in terms of age and gender, and between urban or rural regions, for example).

On the basis of these observations, this paper addresses two under-researched dimensions of the migration of young graduates.

It first takes into account not only dominant flows but also counter flows, i.e. the graduates who do and do not return to their home region after having received their degree. It then assumes that the propensity to come back to a rural home region after graduation in an urban centre is a selective process. By analysing the influence of personal characteristics on migration behaviour, the paper identifies the graduates who are more/less likely than average to return to the region where they grew up.

This paper addresses these issues in the case of a rural region in Switzerland (Jura), drawing data from a questionnaire survey designed for that purpose. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on the selectiveness of internal migration, with an emphasis on young adults with a university degree; Section 3 presents the spatial context and discusses the research design and methods; and Section 4 presents empirical results on the effects of various variables on the propensity to return to the home region. The summary and conclusion of the findings are then set forth in Section 5.

## 2. Theoretical discussion

### 2.1. A life course approach to graduate migration

Adopting the perspective of migration as a decision embedded in the graduates' life course implies an assumption or recognition – that internal migration is a complex phenomenon that goes “beyond the economics” (Fielding, 1992a) and beyond “the

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parochial focus on labour-motivated graduate migration” (Sage et al., 2013). This therefore implies that research needs to show greater appreciation of the “non-economic” issues of migration (Halfacree, 2004). According to this perspective, migration is not only explained by factors related to the structure of the labour market (differentials in wages or job opportunities), as put forward by neoclassic and structuralist approaches (Lundholm et al., 2004). Nor is it only explained by a comparison of the financial costs and benefits in the short and long term, as postulated by human capital theory. Thus the underlying hypothesis tested in this paper is that to return or not to the home region is more than a strict question of (mis)match between supply and demand in the labour market, but depends also on criteria related to social ties (friends, family, partner), a sense of belonging, living environment, etc. (Haartsen and Thissen, 2013; Rérat, 2013b).

Our argument is that the decision to move is a choice made under certain constraints (Rérat, 2012a, 2013a). In other words, it depends on the migrant’s needs and preferences, within a choice set determined by various constraints or structures. In Bourdieu’s terms (see Rye, 2011), structures can be both objective (e.g. the jobs in a specific field that are located within a given distance or reachable within a reasonable time) and subjective. In the latter case, habitus (social laws, norms and values) may mediate between individual drivers and social structures. In other words, people have different dispositions (according to their socialisation), and they act strategically on the basis of these. Rye (Rye, 2011) speaks of structured freedom to qualify the migration aspirations and decisions of rural youth. Even though we are not denying the growing role of physical, economic and social mobility, we argue that individuals, even within a small and seemingly homogeneous group, do not all display the same migration behaviours.

The population under study (young adults from a rural area who have graduated from university) shares some important characteristics: they come from the same region, belong to the same age group and have reached the same level of education.<sup>1</sup> However, beyond their common characteristics, graduates may be quite different in terms of socio-economic background, marital status, field of study, etc. All these characteristics related to the biography of individuals are likely to influence their migration behaviour (see, for example, King and Shuttleworth, 1995; Belfield and Morris, 1999; Corcoran et al., 2010; Faggian et al., 2006). This shows the importance of adopting a life course perspective in our research.

The life course approach is a way of structuring a complex set of events that include decisions about occupational, marital and housing careers (Mulder and Clark, 2002). It stresses the need to take into account three kinds of interdependence (Heinz et al., 2009, 16–17): (1) an interdependence of the past, the present and the future, and thus a path dependence of the life course; (2) an interdependence between the different spheres of action that constitute the multi-dimensionality of the life course (family, education work, leisure, etc.) and (3) a multi-level interdependence between individual action and political, economic, social and cultural contexts, “since life course patterns are embedded in macro-social structures and cultural beliefs and guided by market opportunities, institutions and social networks” (Heinz et al., 2009).

In this paper, the analysis of graduates’ migration behaviour has been placed in the light of a triple biography (Courgeau, 1985), which we have named the socio-familial trajectory, the migration

<sup>1</sup> University graduates represent a limited – although rising – proportion of young adults accounting to about 15% in Switzerland (SFSO, 2012). This small proportion is explained by the fact that the Swiss education system places importance on other forms of education (apprenticeships and professional training) to a greater extent than many other European countries.

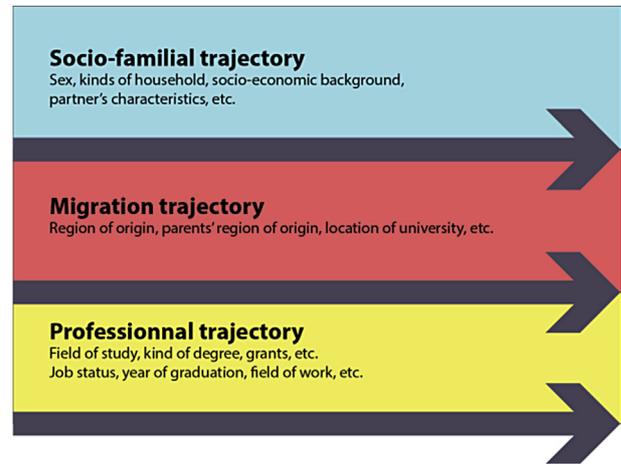


Fig. 1. Graduates’ triple trajectories.

trajectory and the professional trajectory (Fig. 1). These trajectories encompass various dimensions that may influence the decision to return or not to the home region. In other words, the hypothesis of the life course perspective is that the graduates’ behaviour (or intentions) in one life domain (e.g. marital status, career, etc.) has an impact on their behaviour in other domains (in this case, migration).

The objective of this paper is to determine which characteristics are discriminant in the graduates’ propensity to return to their home region once their university studies are completed.<sup>2</sup> It is important to highlight here that the relationships between the actors’ characteristics and their migratory practices are not deterministic, but probabilistic, and that the nature of causality in the social world is a matter of chance rather than of destiny (Rye, 2011). The links between the dependent variable (migration behaviour) and the independent variables (relevant characteristics related to their life course) may be of various natures. As stated in the literature review below, the link may be causal but also show an association effect, as migration is usually part of a wider life project.

The following sections review the various dimensions of the three trajectories according to the literature on the migration of young graduates and highly skilled people.

## 2.2. Socio-familial trajectory

A graduate’s socio-familial trajectory includes elements such as gender, life course position (whether he/she lives in couple and/or has children), his/her partner’s characteristics (region of origin and level of education) and his/her family background (parents’ socio-economic status).

### 2.2.1. Gender

Recognition of the influence of gender varies among studies on young graduates’ internal migration. For some scholars, gender does not play a significant role (Belfield and Morris, 1999), whereas others find a higher propensity to mobility among women (Venhorst et al., 2010; Faggian et al., 2006), as well as greater aspirations and ambitions (Bjarnason and Thorkindsson, 2006). The impact of gender may be indirect, and may affect other phenomena: access to tertiary education, local employment structure or construction and experience of rurality (Corbett, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> It therefore does not aim to address migration motivations (which may change over a graduate’s life course, as factors other than finding work may grow in importance) or the decision making process.

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