

A recipe for brain gain

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Across the globe, people are moving from towns and rural areas to big cities, taking their knowledge and expertise. The resulting brain drain can be devastating for the communities left behind. Researchers in one Norwegian town think they have a recipe to reverse the process.

Studies of customer satisfaction have been used to evaluate everything from ketchup brands to office furniture. But now Norwegian researchers are using customer satisfaction surveys to study the Norwegian seaport town of Ålesund and its university college to see what people like about them.

The idea is to understand what makes young adults stick around for studies and careers. This is an important topic for a community that is desperate for human resources, and an intriguing one for anyone who has an interest in how statistics can answer complex questions about brain drain.

Brain drain

While only about 45 000 people live in Ålesund, the area attracts interest from big, international companies for its fishing industry, omega-3 production, and ship building. Due to its proximity to Geiranger fjord, a World Heritage Site, the town is also a popular tourist destination.

Despite its allure, many Ålesund natives leave in their young adulthood.

“Our brightest youth leave for studies elsewhere, and they do not come back,” says Øyvind Helgesen, who led a study on brain drain from the region with colleagues from Ålesund University College.

Helgesen explained that only a quarter of those who leave Ålesund to study come back to work, and while the town's population is actually growing due to a substantial influx of people, the newcomers lack the skills that Ålesund needs.

“The whole district is hunting for highly qualified workers,” he says.

A continuous brain drain will likely reduce Ålesund's appeal to foreign and domestic investors, and the long-term consequence could cause the community to wither. This is a problem faced by many towns and rural districts all over the world, as more and more people are drawn to big cities.

Loyalty makes people stay

Helgesen and his colleagues argue that students' loyalty to the region, the student town, and the university college they attend is “utterly important” for regional progress. The assumption is that loyal students are more likely to finish their studies in town and stay and contribute to the local economy.

The researchers tried to find the key drivers of this kind of loyalty. They surveyed 186 undergraduate

students at Ålesund University College, about eight percent of the total student population there.

After adjusting for the cost that students would incur by switching universities, they found that “social activities” were decisive in increasing students' loyalty. That term includes social activities both in town and at the university college, as well as access to information about such activities.

The conclusion was based on student responses to questions about how satisfied they were with the town and school's nightlife, social offerings, cultural offerings and variety of offerings.

While the finding in itself is hardly surprising, it is important as it sends a clear, statistics-backed message to education officials and local authorities, who share a strong interest in improving student retention and keeping their brightest young adults in town for employment. The message underscores the fact that officials at both places need to work together to offer activities both in town and at the university college to avoid brain drain and instead facilitate brain gain.

"Creating an environment where the student is happy cannot be done by an individual working for the university college," says Helgesen. "It's a fairly complicated task and people need to work together on it."

According to Helgesen's study, the recipe for brain gain includes “work placements, career service functions, cultural activities and leisure facilities, physical and digital infrastructure, as well as relevant study programmes both at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

"All good forces must come together," Helgesen says.

 [Students' loyalty to a region, the student town, and the university college they attend is important for regional progress. \(Photo: Colourbox\) \[9\]](#)
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