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Scottish Graduate Migration: Barriers to Belonging?

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When I first looked at the description of this conference one of the themes that caught my eye was ‘demographic nationalism’, a concept I hadn’t really encountered before (and have been unable to find much reference to in bibliographic searches, but this may reflect my background and knowledge rather than the currency of the concept). At first sight the phrase suggests some kind of pro-natalist policy – encouraging fertility or perhaps a certain kind of fertility. If one were to apply it to migration, one would more likely expect demographic nationalism to be concerned with limiting immigration in some respects. I want to look at an example of what I think does exemplify demographic nationalism, but is therefore perhaps somewhat unusual in that the focus is on the *encouragement* of immigration.

The demographic realm with which I am concerned is the specific demographic context which exists within Scotland, and I want to start by establishing three important features of this context:

- 1) Unlike the UK as a whole, long-term projections indicate a decline (and indeed ageing) of the Scottish population. Somewhat ironically for a nation which has for much of its history been characterized by net out-migration which has been more than compensated for by natural growth, the balance of migration in Scotland has in recent years been ‘in the black’ as it were, but steep declines in fertility mean that if current trends do not change then the population will decline.
- 2) This brings me to the second important contextual point: the public policy response to these conditions. While politicians in Scotland – most notably the devolved government (Executive) – are certainly concerned with how patterns of fertility might be altered, today I’m more concerned with their approach to migration. Immigration is of course what is known as a ‘reserved matter’ under devolution, meaning that it is the responsibility of the Westminster government rather than the Scottish Executive. It is interesting, then, that the government in Scotland has made some rhetorical and policy-centred steps designed to influence immigration to Scotland. The second interesting feature here is that there exists a broad political consensus in which higher levels of immigration to Scotland are generally *welcomed and encouraged*, offering a marked contrast to much political rhetoric in England. The most high profile of these initiatives is the ‘Fresh Talent’ scheme. While modest in its actual policy content (more global promotion of Scotland as a place to live; more information and advice for those who may be interested in coming to Scotland; two year extension of visas for overseas graduates of Scottish higher education institutions), what is more interesting is the degree to which the scheme has come to represent a wider political ambition to encourage immigration, albeit primarily immigration of highly-qualified individuals.
- 3) The third and final contextual feature I want to establish concerns *popular* as opposed to more ‘elite’ attitudes to immigration and immigrants in Scotland. Of course defining ‘immigrants’ is not always straightforward, and this category often overlaps, both conceptually and in the popular imagination, with minority ethnic groups. As a comparatively ethnically homogenous

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nation, research into minorities in Scotland has not been particularly extensive. But in recent years this has been growing, and what evidence we have suggests that public attitudes are unlikely to be as welcoming as those espoused by politicians. While some recent research – including my own – has looked at attitudes to Muslims and other ‘non-white’ minorities in Scotland, I want to focus largely on a particular minority group of ‘immigrants’ – people born in England. There has been a growing interest in such people in Scotland in recent years, not least for two reasons. First, they are of course fellow citizens of the UK and thus are not ‘immigrants’ in the sense of facing any formal restrictions on movement, employment and other rights. Second, whatever criterion one chooses to adopt, they are almost certainly Scotland’s largest ‘minority’. Using place of birth in the 2001 Census as an indicator, more than 8% of Scotland’s population were born in England, compared to less than 5% born in all other countries outside Scotland, and 2% in ethnic groups other than ‘White’. In discussions of immigration and ‘fresh talent’, then, it is easy to overlook the fact that Scotland’s biggest pool for in-migrants in fact lies on its doorstep within the same *state*. But we also have survey evidence to suggest that this may not be an entirely welcome migration, thus substantiating my point about popular attitudes to incomers in Scotland not always matching up to those of the political classes.

For example:

- In the 2003 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey most respondents did not feel that someone born in England but now living permanently in Scotland could claim to be Scottish. Only 44% said that they would definitely or probably consider such a person to be Scottish if they claimed to be. An even smaller minority (30%) felt that most other people would accept this claim.
- In the same survey, while around 80% of respondents said they had a friend or family member who was English, and most also took a comparatively positive view of the social and economic contribution of in-migrants from England, a majority also agreed with the statement that English people living in Scotland were more loyal to England than to Scotland and around a third agreed that Scotland would begin to lose its identity if more English people came to live there.

Having established those important contextual facts, I now want to turn to a specific research project I recently completed with some colleagues. It was part of a research programme co-funded by the Scottish Executive and the ESRC, comprising six projects exploring the demographic challenges facing Scotland. Our project focused on the issue of graduate migration, emphasising its importance within the context I have described – one in which the in-migration of qualified people is particularly welcome. In fact, Scotland is an interesting case in this respect. Four features stand out:

- 1) Scotland is a very successful ‘importer’ of *students*. Around a quarter of all students at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland came there to study from other parts of the UK and from overseas.
- 2) It is relatively successful at retaining graduates overall, in the short-term at least. Based on the latest available figures (2003-04 cohort) around 80% of all graduates from Scottish HEIs who were in employment six months after

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- graduation were employed in Scotland, and this figure rises to 90% of those graduates who originated from Scotland. But...
- 3) Again in the short-term, it is relatively unsuccessful at retaining graduates who came to study in Scotland from other parts of the UK or from overseas. Of the 2003-04 cohort of graduates in employment, only around a third of those who had come to Scotland to study from other parts of the UK and less than a quarter from other EU countries were working in Scotland around six months after graduation.
 - 4) There is evidence that in the longer term it is a net 'exporter' of graduates. The 2001 Census shows a net out-migration of more than 4,000 degree-qualified people from Scotland to other parts of the UK in the 12 months before the census.

But these data are limited: they concern only those who had recently graduated, or, in the case of the census, those who had recently migrated. Our project aimed to assess graduates' status five years after graduation, reasoning that by then they would exhibit more settled patterns of residence and employment. We investigated a specific cohort – first-degree graduates of the University of Edinburgh in the year 2000 – and investigated them using a postal questionnaire and a series of 80 follow-up interviews. As well as the unusual features of contacting graduates five years after completion of their studies and introducing a qualitative element into the research, another novel and important feature of our project was our interest in the **motivations** behind graduate migration patterns. First though, some brief details from our survey concerning the patterns of migration of our respondents.

These show that there appears to be a stability over the five year period in that a clear majority of those originally from Scotland remain in Scotland while a clear majority of those not from Scotland leave. 70% of our respondents who had originated from Scotland were living there in 2005, while 79% of those who had not originated from Scotland were not living there in 2005. However, we should note that this apparent stability obscures two important processes which cannot be revealed by more short-term data: delayed migration and return migration. About 1 in 7 of our respondents had remained in Scotland for a significant period after graduation (at least 6 months), but were no longer living there five years after graduation. A very similar proportion had lived outside Scotland for a substantial period (at least 3 months) in the five years since graduation but had returned and were living in Scotland at the time of the survey. All these features then – the fact that most of those not originally from Scotland tend to leave; that a significant minority stay in the short-term but leave in the longer term; and that a similar minority can be attracted to return – all suggest significant scope for improving graduate retention in Scotland as an important means of addressing some of the demographic challenges I outlined earlier. What needs to be explored, then, is the reasons *why* graduates make the migration decisions they do.

This was a key objective of our interviews. These were also designed to capture the breadth of graduate origins and experience. As such we divided our respondents into four equal groups of 20 based on whether or not they were living in Scotland prior to going to university and whether or not they were living there at the time of our study. Time is short today, so I want to spend the rest of the talk giving a very brief summary of our general findings and then going on to look at a particular aspect of

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these findings which I think has particular resonance in terms of the kind of contextual factors I outlined at the beginning.

Broadly, we found that graduate migration behaviour is shaped by three groups of factors: the **opportunities** that are perceived to exist in various geographical places – most notably in relation to employment and careers; the **connections** people have to such places – through significant others, through activities and through general feelings of affinity; and the **expectations** they have for their future lives. I'm going to focus now on the connections aspect. While the most important type of connection concerned families and relationships, also important are those connections which relate to issues of affinity and belonging. Generally, we found that Scotland enjoyed a lot of positive features in this respect. Most interviewees who had come to Scotland to study from other parts of the UK or further afield but were still living there five years after graduation reported feeling at home or at times an even stronger allegiance (such as a degree of Scottish identity). Positive connections with Scotland were variously developed through spending most or all of one's adult life in the country, through having a Scottish partner or a Scottish family background, or through being employed in specifically Scottish institutions. In addition, the environmental attractions of the countryside in particular, but also urban environments and the friendliness of the people, were important. These factors also emerged as the most positive features of Scotland for those living outside the country. There is thus a strong potential for improving the rates of retention and return of those who came to study in Scotland from other parts of the UK or indeed further afield.

However, we also need to consider the most significant factors likely to weaken connections to Scotland, erect barriers to belonging, and thus limit the potential for increasing the retention of graduates who did not originate from Scotland. I want to focus here on issues of identity and discrimination. I think this is both sociologically interesting and has important lessons for the Scottish Executive's programme of demographic nationalism. If we think back to the survey evidence I discussed earlier, which suggested that 'claims' to be Scottish made by those who were not Scottish by birth were likely to be challenged by the majority population who were born in Scotland, then our interviews produced some evidence of perceptions of this type of exclusion among those who had migrated to Scotland to study and eventually settled there. Here are some examples:

'INT: And do you feel Scottish now or would you say you feel at all Scottish?

RES: No. I don't think I would ever really feel Scottish. I think because I've got, well with my dad being Welsh and things, I feel British probably more than anything else. And it's kind of weird but I think part of the reason I would never really feel Scottish is because I don't really think other people would ever really see me as Scottish, you know, it just wouldn't really. So I still really think of myself as being from Yorkshire but British. But I think Scotland is home now I suppose'

'I always, maybe it's strange but I always get annoyed when, not in this context obviously, but like when people accentuate the fact that you're different you know, that you're Norwegian, you're not quite Scottish and it's like, well I live here – that's Scottish enough for me'.

'... I never really strongly thought of myself as English, because both my parents were Scottish so obviously I was Scottish as well. That seemed fairly self-evident to me when I was little. Since I've come here I have modified that slightly just because I think, because of other people's assumptions, because when you speak in an English accent then you're English'

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As well as barriers to belonging which may relate to how people conceive their identities, we also need to consider the extent to which more direct discrimination based on one's national identity may have a similar effect. Specifically, I want to focus on the experiences of discrimination of the largest group of educational 'in-migrants' to Scotland (and also as I made clear earlier Scotland's largest 'minority') – those from England. Experiencing discrimination will of course serve to loosen any connections established with Scotland, and may also affect student and graduate expectations of where they would prefer to spend their lives after university. It therefore follows that such discrimination will weaken Scotland's capacity to retain highly skilled graduates who originated from south of the border.

We need to be quite careful when discussing what is usually referred to in Scotland as anti-Englishness or even 'Anglophobia', because this is quite a complex phenomenon. Our study reflects previous findings in this area in that anti-Englishness was found to be a significant concern for many people, and yet the experience of it is very much differential, and underlain by a number of other important factors such as social class, regional origins, and our respondents' (former) status as students. For some of our respondents, anti-Englishness was not experienced as a substantial problem, or was not a problem at all. Those from the north of England and/or from less affluent social backgrounds were also less likely to suffer. As well as substantiating previous research which suggests that 'Anglophobia' in Scotland may be closely related to issues of social class this may well be a factor in the higher retention and return rates among graduates in these categories: we found that graduates from working-class backgrounds and those from the north of England were comparatively less likely to migrate from Scotland. In this regard we also need to consider evidence which showed a 'north British' affinity in which a number of respondents who originated from the north of England felt a stronger sense of connection to Scotland and the Scots than they did to the south. It is also true that even when people report a significant experience of anti-Englishness, this does not necessarily undermine their connection to Scotland to the extent that they take the decision to leave. Similarly, many non-Scottish respondents who did report at least some negative experiences of discrimination while living in Scotland and had since left often reported strong feelings of attachment to Scotland. So experiencing anti-Englishness need not be a substantial barrier to returning to Scotland either, although for others it did appear to be a significant factor in their decision to leave, or in their thoughts regarding a potential return to Scotland. The following quote from a graduate who had left Scotland exemplifies the complexity and potential significance of this issue:

'That's the one thing that when you were asking about where you feel more at home, that's the one thing that slightly holds me back from feeling completely at home in Edinburgh, and that I would seriously think about if I was going to move up there. Because I did feel like, not with everyone at all obviously, but quite often actually there was a slight antagonism towards English people. And it might be partly because I've got quite a posh English accent, I don't know. I think friends of mine who were from Northern England didn't have such difficult times'

In contrast, those graduates who originated from Scotland but were living in England generally reported that being Scottish in England was, if anything, an asset rather than a drawback. This finding substantiates the limited research in this area which suggests

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that Scots migrants living in England are generally well-received. This is therefore an area in which Scotland could be seen to be at a net disadvantage.

Overall, then, while it is undoubtedly the case that many features of Scotland make it an attractive destination for in-migration, working to ensure that graduates who did not originate from Scotland feel able to fully 'belong' in the country after graduation is one important element in trying to enable the Scottish Executive to meet its strategy of encouraging higher levels of skilled in-migration to Scotland and thus help the country to meet the important demographic, social and economic challenges it is likely to face in the future.