

Gone away – educated – came back?

Rural regions as attractive residences for high qualified people

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Peripheral regions nowadays often experience a loss of intellectual potential due to the fact that young people leave their native region for receiving higher education in cities and don't return afterwards. While urban areas profit through this development the future of rural areas is endangered in a structural and intellectual respect.. The presented paper tries to analyze and comprehend student's expectations towards their future residence areas and examines to which extent their native regions can accomplish these prospects. Based on the findings of the research possibilities to improve their attractiveness for academics are developed.

The research is based on a master thesis by Jonas Meyer at the Department of Geography and Regional Science/University of Graz in 2012. It builds upon the 'capability approach' of Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2003) as an alternative approach to welfare economics where freedom and capabilities in a society are emphasized. The master thesis tried to combine this approach with the 'value-expectancy model' on migration by De Jong and Fawcett (1981). Different general goals and related indicators which are relevant for migration (e.g. wealth, autonomy or affiliation) are given and can be chosen by persons for migration motivations according to their most relevant value. Based on these theoretical approaches the attractiveness of a native region might be mostly influenced by 1) the stakeholders of that region who should provide capabilities to their residents, 2) affiliation and the identity of residents to their region and 3) the re-migrating people who will assess the future residential region by using relevant values.

To prove these hypotheses an online survey was conducted among all students of the University of Graz (1,000 answers). The results were analyzed on different spatial levels (provinces, "Learning Regions" in Styria and the "Learning Region Zirbenland"). The Zirbenland analysis was enriched by the key findings of a workshop, where participants – based on the online-survey – tried to find future oriented solutions in relation to the job situation and the quality of life in the Zirbenland region.

The results stress that the attractiveness of peripheral regions is mostly based on so-called soft location factors like natural surroundings, recreation and security. However, the key-factors to return to peripheries are mainly adequate job offers and a good traffic infrastructure. These aspects are superimposed by personal regional identity aspects that are noticeable through local engagement and frequent visits of friends and family "back home". Although this aspect might not be very reasonable it still can be a "final decisive factor" for a return to the native region.

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