

THE CONVERSATION

Scotland the brainy: why are there so many graduates in Edinburgh and Glasgow?

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Smart: Edinburgh's Cowgate. Lauren, CC BY-SA

A major factor shaping urban life is the quality of the workforce, particularly the presence of highly skilled and educated workers. Urban policymakers often argue that graduates are a driver of economic growth. Having a local university and making the city attractive to graduates are key instruments of urban renewal.

In this connection, here come some statistics that might surprise you. According to recent data from *City Outlook*, the city with the largest number of higher education graduates after Oxford and Cambridge was Edinburgh.

When you look at the proportion of the population who are higher education graduates,

inner London is way out in front with 60%. Even outer London is on 45%, way above the 34% national average. It is not as high as Edinburgh, though, where more than half the population falls into the category.

Two other Scottish cities – Glasgow and Aberdeen – also make the top ten. This is way ahead of **big North English conurbations** such as Newcastle (35%), Manchester (31%) and especially Liverpool (23%).

This over-simplifies reality, of course. The figures refer to people holding any third-level qualification, meaning that alongside degrees it counted Higher National Certificates and higher-level National Vocational Qualifications.

Scotland's distinctive education system means it has a **much larger proportion** of people holding Higher National Certificates and diplomas, one reason why its cities do so well.

The public sector effect

All the same, Scotland's figures are strong. The first and probably most important reason is the occupational structure of Scotland's main cities.



There be grey matter in them glens ... Stephen Mackenzie, CC BY-SA

Two sectors – the public sector and banking/finance – employ 62% of Britain's working graduates. Edinburgh is Britain's second financial services centre after London. And Scotland's urban economies – especially Glasgow – generally depend more on public sector employment than elsewhere.

Second, cities attract graduates because universities are based there. Oxford and Cambridge are obvious examples, but Edinburgh has four universities, which between them account for one in five of Scotland's undergraduates.

The University of Edinburgh in particular is highly regarded internationally, regularly performing well in **global quality rankings**. It has little difficulty recruiting well qualified students nationally and internationally.

Attractive lifestyles

Lifestyle might also help explain the tendency of Scotland's cities to attract the well educated. Recent graduates seem attracted by such factors as:

Relatively easy access to housing; Glasgow rates well here as a city losing population.

A variety of shops catering to a wide range of tastes, rather than just the standard high street stores; Edinburgh is well known for quirky small independent stores, many owing their origins to graduates.

A wide range of leisure activities; while London is out ahead of everywhere in the UK, the Scottish cities also offer easy access to outdoor pastimes, which families are more likely to want.

Good schools; London scores relatively well despite its reputation, but not as well as Edinburgh, partly thanks to the city's concentration of private schools.

The possibility of commuting to work from attractive suburbs; again, the Scottish cities rank highly on this score.

Security and low crime rates, where once more Edinburgh scores relatively well (though Glasgow does not).

Opportunities for life-long learning, since graduates like to continue improving their qualifications.

Finally, regional or national attachments might influence graduates' decisions on where to live. Recent changes in student funding since devolution in 1998 might reinforce such loyalties, since Scottish (and Welsh) students now face a financial penalty if they wish to study outside their own country.

There is little evidence to support this hypothesis, though a recent study of graduate mobility in Wales suggested that while the country was a net exporter of graduates, it managed to hold on to a much higher proportion than most English regions. It would be interesting to know whether current debates in Scotland about independence are leading students to stay on after migration.

Are there lessons for others from Scotland's relative success? For the most part, it seems that the conditions for attracting academically well qualified young people are relatively clear.

On the supply side, you need strong universities with a global reputation as well as a more local system promoting lifelong learning. On the demand side, cities that are a centre for graduate recruiters will, unsurprisingly, also become centres for graduate citizens.

It also helps if the region includes services and amenities that appeal to the tastes of cosmopolitan knowledgeable affluent and highly mobile adults without alienating the rest of the population so that resentment spills over into open hostility.



Fettes of Edinburgh, Tony Blair's alma mater Keltek Trust, CC BY-SA



Lifestyle

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