

Leicester Student Voice

Final report

February
2020



UNIVERSITY OF
LEICESTER

Graduate Retention Partnership Project

This report sets out the findings of a student voice research event organised jointly by Leicester City Council, De Montfort University and the University of Leicester. The research forms part of a three-year partnership project to increase the proportion of graduates who stay in Leicester to begin their graduate career¹.

Attracting and retaining talent is critical for the success of city economies like Leicester as the UK continues to specialise in ever more high skilled, knowledge intensive activities. The availability of high skilled workers is an increasingly important asset for cities trying to nurture and stimulate growth, with cities with higher shares of graduates performing well. We know that cities are attractive to

graduates and that the share of graduates who grew up in a city and work in that city increases as a city gets larger². In 2015 the top five cities hosting the largest share of all graduates were London, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Newcastle³.

The Leicester Graduation Retention partnership project aims to maximise, grow and promote the assets of Leicester and its region, helping ensure the city is perceived as a vibrant place of opportunity where graduates want to stay.

The project team wishes to thank the students who willingly offered their time, experiences and ideas at the Leicester Student Voice event.



Adele Browne



Rob Fryer



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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Adele Browne'.

Adele Browne
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1. 'Leicester' in this report denotes the city, environs and county of Leicestershire.

2 & 3. <https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/16-11-18-The-Great-British-Brain-Drain.pdf>

'One thing in Leicester is inclusion: No matter who you are - race, gender, sexuality - you can find your place here; you are accepted 98% of the time... Leicester I think has one of the most vibrant cultures I've been to and it's a place where you can be yourself.'

Event participant

Student and graduate migration patterns

Student and graduate migration patterns

Recent analysis of national graduate mobility patterns has shown that student and graduate mobility in the UK involves less migration than has generally been portrayed⁴. Data from 2016 shows that 51% of graduates went to a university in the same region where they grew up in, 58% went to work in the same region that they studied in and 69% went to work in the same region what they grew up. This has led to fresh calls for universities to work collaboratively to increase the availability of high skilled work in their region⁵.

Student and graduate migration patterns have been portrayed in four categories⁶:

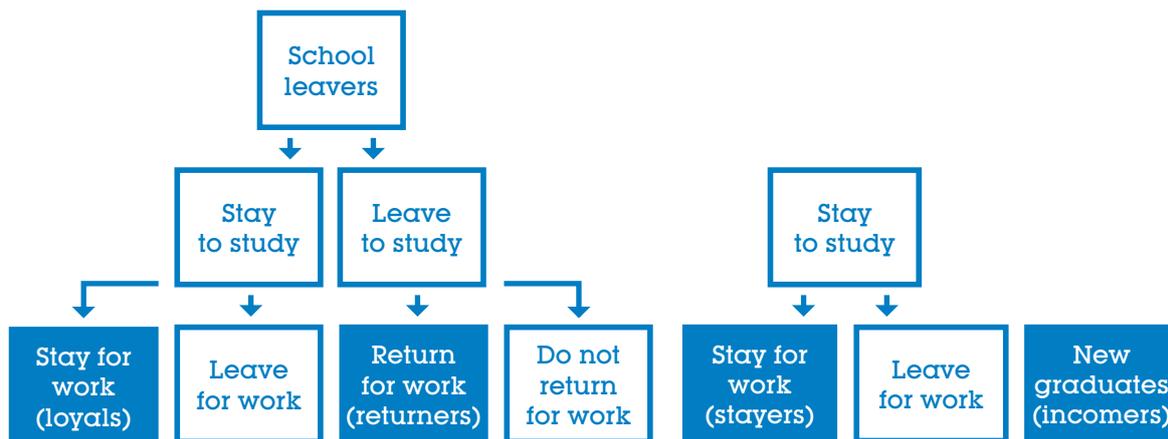


Figure 1: Movement of students and graduates in and out of a city, taken from Centre for Cities, The Great British Brain Drain (2016)⁹

Loyals go to university in their home town and stay there to work after graduation.

Stayers move to a new place for university and stay there afterwards to work.

Returners move to a new place for university but return back home to work.

Incomers are graduates who went to university elsewhere but move into a new place to work⁷.

Nationally, in 2016, loyals made up 45% of all new graduates, stayers 13%, returners 24% and incomers 18%. London attracts 42% of all incomers.

The latest graduate destinations data for Leicester shows that the two city universities retained 27.9% of their graduates combined (comprising loyals and stayers). This is significantly lower than the national average of 48.4%⁸.

Just under one third (27.2%) of students across the two universities are originally from Leicester and Leicestershire, and, of these, 57.6% stay in the area to work, compared to a Midlands Engine average of 50.6%⁹. Of those who move out of Leicester and Leicestershire to study elsewhere, 30.4% leave but return¹⁰.

4. <https://illuminate.prospect.ac.uk/what-do-graduates-do-regional-edition>

5. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/no-place-like-home/>

6. <https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/16-11-18-The-Great-British-Brain-Drain.pdf>

7. https://hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/hecsu_graduate_migration_report_january_15.pdf

8. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-07-2018/DLHE-publication-201617>

9. <https://www.midlandsendengine.org>

10. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-07-2018/DLHE-publication-201617>

Research event

The Leicester Student Voice event gathered primary data on students' perceptions of Leicester as a place to live and work. The project considers students' - and businesses' - perspectives to be key to determining project direction and developing meaningful actions for change¹².

The event aimed to establish whether there are opportunities to influence students' plans to stay in Leicester that could complement overarching regional strategies based on job creation and infrastructure investment ¹¹.

Participants

A total of 120 students participated in the half-day event, split evenly between the two universities. Participants included a mixture of undergraduates and postgraduates and a range of ages and ethnic backgrounds. In total the participants included:

Approach and activities

'Leicester Student Voice' was designed to generate discussion topics from the students themselves, avoiding a questionnaire-based approach. Students were provided with the single word 'Leicester' to prompt all the discussion that followed. This allowed participants to explore the theme in any direction, producing a data set based on students' authentic views, supporting the project approach that achieving meaningful change will be dependent on empowering students as participants. The careers staff facilitating the event received prior training to minimise the influence of staff voice.

Two main activities were undertaken:

01

Each student individually created a mind map of their thoughts about living and working in the city as future graduates. 'The facilitators played a key role to encourage the students to work individually and keep building their mind map until they had exhausted all topics that came to mind. This activity lasted approximately 45 minutes.'

02

Students took part in peer to peer focus group discussions, using the mind maps as prompts to explore different themes. This allowed students to build on each other's ideas and allow collective themes to emerge. Each focus group lasted 50 minutes.

It was important to create a relaxed atmosphere, encouraging the students to express their views openly. The Careers staff were all experienced in working face to face with students in a supportive and impartial manner.

Students were organised in groups of eight, including two facilitators. A short introductory talk explained the event purpose and encouraged students to give their personal views during the day. Minimal information about Leicester was included in these introductions in order to start with a 'blank sheet of paper'.



Results

The event produced a total of 120 mind maps and 12 hours of focus group recordings. All but one student stayed for the event duration and the close support from staff and peer students was seen to positively impact participants' enthusiasm. It had been anticipated that students may be reluctant to work individually on their mind maps, rather than in groups; however, the quality of the mind maps shows that using the explainer video and having staff at each table was effective in putting the students at ease.

On their mind maps most students wrote a mixture of:

- Unqualified single words or phrases that did not clearly express a positive or negative view, e.g. 'part-time work'. These tended to form the first circle of branches around the central word 'Leicester'
- Qualified words or phrases expressing a personal view, e.g. 'friendly'

The two activities together generated a large quantity of observations and ideas. The focus groups involved lively discussion on a wide range of topics stemming from the mind map content. Students generally appeared to have plenty to say on the topics and reflected in their feedback how much they enjoyed being asked to share their views. Evidence of dissent and disagreement, in all groups, appears to indicate that students felt at ease to express their views.



Analysis

The perceptions and opinions reflected in the report have been included where they were common to at least 10% (twelve) of the mind maps and 33% (five) of the focus groups. The mind map data was coded and focus groups transcribed by temporary staff who had not been involved in the event itself. This approach sought to limit bias in the grouping and coding of dominant themes.

The raw data from these sources was then analysed in a reflexive approach, involving:

01

Reviewing the coding of the mind maps data and confirming thematic groups of words and phrases.

02

Counting the incidence of words and phrases belonging to each thematic group in the central (primary) circle of 'branches' on the mind maps.

03

Categorising words and phrases as positive or negative, only where this was explicit (for example 'variety of shops' was not inferred as being positive or negative, but 'good variety of shops' was categorised as positive).

04

Probing students' meanings through detailed reading and comparison of thematic discussions in the focus group transcripts.

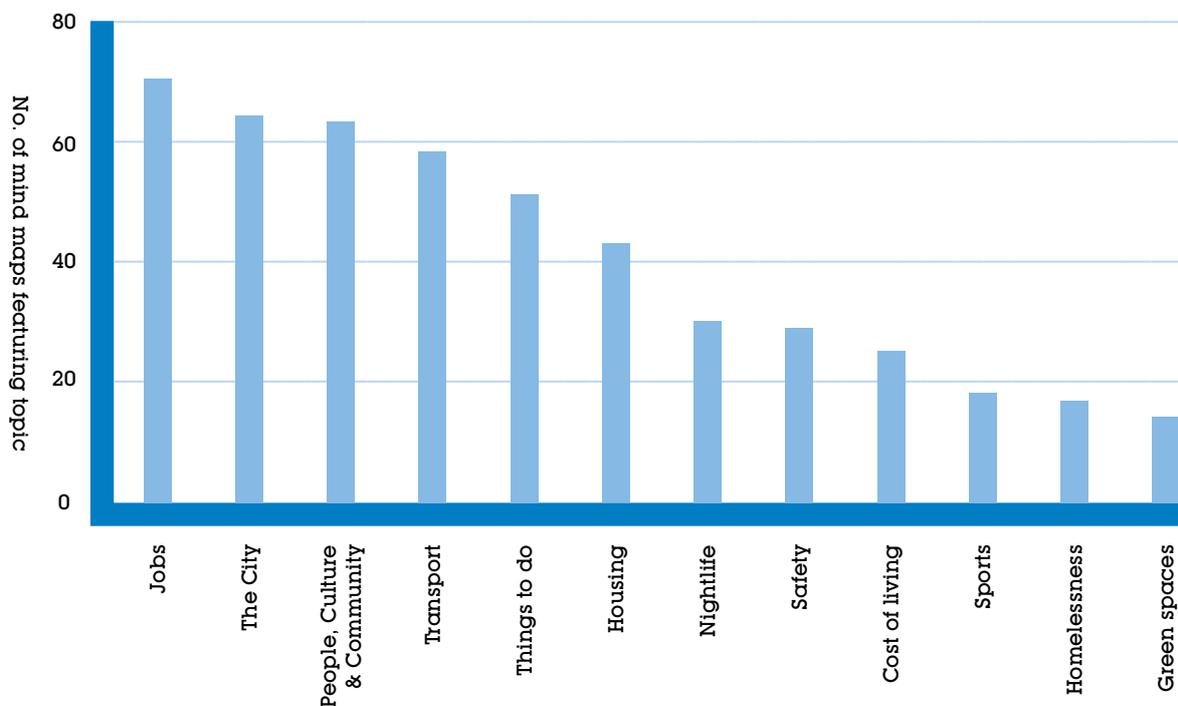
This process was continued to the point where twelve recurrent themes had been generated, all commentary categorised, and no new themes were emerging.

The data was coded and analysed as a whole and also separately for each group of students (from Leicester, from the UK, international). Where differences between group results appeared to have significance, this is highlighted. However, due to the differences in size between the three groups - 86 not from Leicester (UK), 14 not from Leicester (international) and 20 originally from Leicester - comparative group results are treated with some caution.



Findings

What matters to students

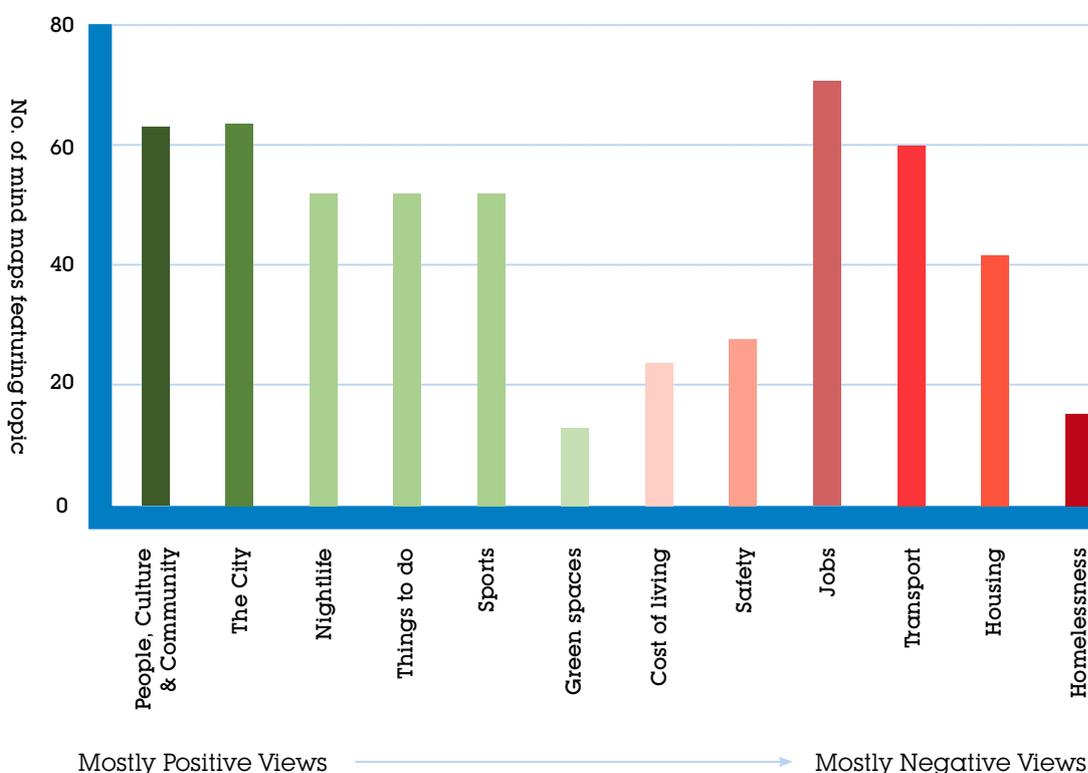


All groups of students, regardless of original home domicile, identified the same top six themes as being of greatest importance: **Jobs, The City, People, culture and community, Transport, Things to do and Housing**. However, taking the groups separately, graduate jobs was only the top consideration for students not from Leicester (UK). 'The city' was the top theme for students originally from Leicester and students not from Leicester (international), covering aspects including physical

appearance, cleanliness, shops, size, layout and atmosphere. 'Transport' was the second most important theme for students not from Leicester (UK) and students originally from Leicester, but came in sixth place for international students. 'People, culture and community' was in the top four for all groups, and 'housing' fifth or sixth for all groups. The separate chart for each group is included in Appendix 1.

Positive and negative perceptions

Students' mind maps and discussions reflected a mixture of positive and negative views related to every theme:



Students' views on the different themes, from mostly positive to mostly negative

The nature of the event tended to generate more discussion about gaps and problems than about positive features. This was especially true of the focus groups, described by one student as a 'moanfest'. As a result, parts of the report may seem to focus disproportionately on negative views. However, the data set taken in its entirety provides detailed insights into both positive and negative perceptions of Leicester.

Graduate jobs

Graduate job opportunities emerged as the top priority theme for students reflecting on whether they would, or wouldn't, stay in Leicester after graduating. Words or phrases connected with employment occurred in the central circle on 71 of the mind maps (59%) and the topic was discussed in 14 out of the 15 focus groups.

Key findings

- ▮ Students' mind maps revealed uncertainty and a predominantly negative view of Leicester's graduate job market. In total, there were 33 positive comments about the local job market compared with 101 negative comments
- ▮ A total of 43 students – 36% of participants - used the phrases 'lack of', 'few', 'limited', 'not many' or 'no' to describe local graduate opportunities

- || The same views were broadly shared by students not from Leicester (UK), not from Leicester (international) and those originally from Leicester
- || Students named London, Birmingham and Manchester as having good graduate jobs and opportunities, compared to Leicester
- || Students were aware of a number of larger employers based locally including KPMG, Hastings Direct, Next, Dunelm, PRS, Mattioli Woods and Leicester City Council
- || 10% of students mentioned low pay and lack of security as a problem and seemed to link their experience of part-time work to their expectations for good graduate employment
- || 7% wrote that graduate jobs 'lacked advertising'. This lack of visibility is also implicit in students' comments about 'no job opportunities' and 'industries lacking'
- || Positive comments about graduate opportunities highlighted Nursing, Retail, Hospitality, IT, 'expanding businesses' and start-ups
- || There was a roughly even split of positive and negative comments about the availability and flexibility of part-time work

Awareness of opportunities

The chief finding from the mind maps was that students have a widespread lack of awareness of graduate level employment opportunities in Leicester.

The majority of students did not positively identify progression routes into graduate employment, a typical mind map comment reading:

'Few big companies, not many jobs, not a diverse range, not as many grad jobs as London, not many well-known businesses in Leicester.' Students in all the groups talked about difficulty finding graduate jobs to apply for. It was revealed that the students typically start their job search by typing 'Graduate scheme Leicester' into one of the large online agencies, such as Indeed or Total jobs. A test of this method using Indeed brought up job vacancies as follows:



Students talked about receiving emails from their universities promoting graduate jobs, but these were not packaged by locality. Students wanted to receive pooled information about 'grad schemes', both in Leicester and commutable from Leicester.

Some students pointed out that, with a predominant small to medium enterprise (SME) base in the city, firms might not have the budgets to advertise their opportunities in the same way as large corporate firms. They acknowledged there might be good opportunities in the city that

'For students when they get to the end of their course, is there anything in Leicester at the moment that encourages people to think 'let me look locally'...

15. Indeed search carried out 6/10/19

would not be found through online search. Several groups made the same suggestion for a central, public resource 'where all the local businesses could advertise jobs for free, or a very small cost'.

Placements

The perceived absence of 'graduate schemes' was seen to have a negative effect on students' views of the city as a place for graduate work. One group talked about students who go on sandwich placement schemes outside Leicester 'having to come back to Leicester and realising there's not the same level of organisations, schemes and training, and going back to that in a graduate position would seem like a step backwards'. Another student, who could not go elsewhere for a placement year due to her personal circumstances, stressed the importance of having good placements locally: More placements in Leicester 'would show students what it would be like to work in Leicester after you finish uni... it would be a swaying factor'. These comments emphasize the likely benefits of increased good quality sandwich placements as part of a graduate retention strategy.

Sectors and industries

Students' knowledge of local opportunities in specific sectors and industries appeared limited. They gave examples of industries they felt were missing, which included Law, Accounting, Technology, Engineering, Music, Media and the Creative industries. Students wrote, for example: 'Lots of students leave for other cities due to the job situation'; 'not enough decent jobs for graduates'; 'lack of professional jobs'.



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- HOUSE -
BAR & RESTAURANT

A number of students found it easier to talk about opportunities in other cities: 'I don't know what jobs are available here, what it has to offer, like Manchester you think Media, Arts and Radio. London has financial industry, Leicester I don't know of any industry or what I would do here.'

Students named some of the larger firms with bases in Leicester, including Hastings Direct, Next, Dunelm, KPMG and PPL-PRS. It was proposed that organisations with a regular placement or graduate intake could reserve a quota of their vacancies for students and graduates from Leicester's local universities.

Students wanted 'more company headquarters', but some also recognised that the city is composed of 'mostly small businesses' and talked about a possible negative impact from this:

'I would say... for industries like engineering, and even creative industries, there's lots of small and medium-sized businesses, there's a strong industry in Leicester, but these are all businesses that can't afford to take on graduates, or undergraduates, as placements, because they just simply don't have the resources to train them, to pay them. Whereas all the larger companies, which is what graduates would tend to go for, are all London, Birmingham, West Midlands, or even up north. So I think that's the common trend, there's not anything in place to support small businesses for taking on graduates, which is what Leicester is sort of known for.'

Positive comments about jobs represented 22% of the total and focused largely on enterprise, business growth and start-ups (further detail below), with comments including: 'Opportunity – problems to be solved'; and 'No. 2 city in the world for start-ups'.

Other positive comments showed some students had a greater understanding of the local job market. Leicester's hospitals were highlighted as being 'great for nursing students'; and one student noted 'high demand for IT jobs, lots of placement/graduate roles'.

Fit between degree and job

The question of relevance of roles came up in the conversations. Students talked about relevant industry links being important for a range of fields such as Accounting, Pharmaceuticals and Law. They suggested that where career pathways in Leicester were in place, this could be advertised in universities' student recruitment marketing: 'You need the city to be good for your field for natural progression from university into a job'.

Some students felt there was a 'mismatch' between degree subjects and the skills local employers need; for example, there were 'too many graduates in areas like Law and Business'.



Others, however, were very positive about opportunities for their course. One student commented she chose Leicester:

'...because of the amazing partnerships with all the amazing Law firms, which was perfect for networking opportunities and (the uni) even had open days specifically for Business and Law students where every kind of person you want to meet for your career would be in one room... so that was my reason for coming to Leicester or staying in Leicester I should say'

Students' comments about job relevance also, however, reveal that they can tend to picture career paths as linear, probably reflecting the narrative reinforced in schools, colleges and wider society that course choices lead to career choices. Many of the transcripts show the students lack understanding of the flexibility of the UK labour market and value of transferable skills in accessing a wide range of professions, industries and occupations. This is likely to impact students' ability to search for and identify a full range of graduate-level roles to apply for: 'There are a lot of vacancies but it is so hard to find something for me.'

On the employer's side, the study highlights an opportunity to review the way job openings are framed and advertised. A number of students felt they were excluded from applying for jobs because they could not find information online or employers asked for significant work experience that graduates could not evidence. Research carried out by social enterprise Access Generation has evidenced a mismatch between the way employers recruit to job vacancies and their accessibility to young people. Their research into 200 East Midlands-based organisations in the Manufacturing/Engineering, Food/Drink and Transport/Logistics industries found that 67% did not promote entry level roles on their website, 43% had no functional jobs section on their website and 80% promoted themselves largely on a B2B footing but not as an employer¹⁷.



This contrasts with the way large corporates seek out graduates and invest in training programmes for young people, who may be recruited as much for their potential as for their existing skills and attributes. The largest graduate employers spend an average £3,850 per graduate hire per year on development training, covering an average 21 days training per year over two years¹⁸. On average, new graduates on these development programmes spend 70% of their time working, 20% in training and 10% in developmental relationships. This investment in training programmes shows the importance large graduate employers attach to managing the transition of young people into their workplace. The three pillars of formal education, recruitment and selection screening, and transition into the workplace are treated with equal weight in delivering a successful graduate resourcing strategy.

***'Smooth transitions are good for business and mean that firms have positive and engaged staff who start producing value quickly and who develop with the business's needs... Young people are spending longer and longer in education and emerging with ever greater collections of qualifications. But when they first enter the workplace, they are arguably tested in ways that the education system can never fully prepare them for.'*¹⁹**

¹⁶ <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/course-does-not-usually-equal-career-lets-celebrate/>

¹⁷ <https://accessgeneration.co.uk/app/uploads/2018/06/Youth-employment-accessibility-research-report-by-Access-Generation-CIC-2018-1.pdf>

¹⁸ https://ise.org.uk/global_engine/download.aspx?fileid=7EB80F16-71C2-44A6-B2F9-6D19F0AA7C59

¹⁹ https://ise.org.uk/global_engine/download.aspx?fileid=7EB80F16-71C2-44A6-B2F9-6D19F0AA7C59

Visibility of opportunities

The students' mind map comments also stated that jobs are 'not well publicised'; 'need better advertisements of graduate jobs in Leicester'. The physical presence of employers in the city made an obvious difference to their visibility. The organisation Mattioli Woods was mentioned more than any other organisation both on the mind maps and in the focus groups. There is a clear benefit to having a physical presence for gaining profile as a local graduate employer. One Accounting and Finance student remarked: 'I feel like a lot of these businesses are hidden in Leicester... because I did not even know there was a Mazar's in Leicester... they seem to be hidden within New Walk and University Road, whereas in Nottingham it is blaring.'

The negative impact of not being able to see 'graduate jobs' was compounded, for some, by their impressions of the city centre: 'Shops closing down in the city centre is off-putting around future prospects – what will come in to take their place?'

Low pay was highlighted on 12% of mind maps. Salaries were thought to be poor compared to other areas, with one student stating Leicester is 'one of the lowest paid cities in the country'. These impressions were often seen to be connected to students' experiences of casual work as well as to their difficulties covering their living costs in general: 'Pay is really bad, really low compared to London. You can't live off that, £6 pay is not good. I don't feel stable here.'

One student suggested that commuting to Birmingham could be better to get higher pay, rather than lower pay 'and still having to get a bus to work in Leicester, which is so expensive, it's just not worth it'.

Others, however, pointed out that the value of pay rates is relative to the cost of living, and some had found Leicester cheap to live in compared to other cities they knew.

Large-scale studies have shown there is no clear relationship between the size of a city and the mean graduate salary on offer. This suggests that high graduate salaries are not the main reason for the popularity of big cities and that other factors, such as the opportunities for career progression, may be more important²⁰.

Enterprise

Business start-up support and entrepreneurial opportunity was a topic in a large number of the focus groups, with students voicing a wish to be involved in creating solutions for improving the city. It was suggested the City Council or other local stakeholders could run city-wide entrepreneurial competitions that focused on problem-solving ideas rather than innovations for profit. Criminology students, for example, could be asked to explore new ideas for solving the city's safety issues. Students felt that the knowledge they gain at university, and potential for fresh thinking, make them a valuable asset to the city:

'Like California, Leicester could bring everyone together when they finish university for 'massive investment in young talent, young ideas.'

20 <https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/16-11-18-The-Great-British-Brain-Drain.pdf>

The students felt that their immersion in real city projects would both help them develop professional level skills and benefit the city as a resource. The embedding of students and graduates in every area of city development had the potential to make Leicester 'world leading'.

Students were aware of De Montfort University's Innovation Centre and the University of Leicester's Innovation Hub but they were uncertain who could access these. One student suggested there should be a central innovation centre run by the City Council rather than the universities, with ambassadors promoting activity focused on different city challenges. It was felt that a council-run innovation hub would have a clearer identity and value for graduates and members of the public.

Contact with local businesses

A running theme through the focus groups was students' appetite for greater interaction with city businesses and opportunity. One advertising student, for example, wanted to be able to 'show off (her) work through projects, helped by the university'. Another suggested that a 'taster' of a firm could help encourage students to stay. Students felt there would be greater potential for them to become attached to Leicester if they engaged in opportunities directly with the city during their studies:

'Most of the opportunities we hear about only come from uni – there's nothing to engage us outside of uni, to make us more involved that really attaches us to the city itself. Rather than Leicester city being our centre, our centre is university, so once university is over, for a lot of people the incentive to stay is finished.'

These discussions led to suggestions for 'What next?' schemes to help students transition from student to graduate life. Students felt there would be benefits from having a 'platform' to help them get involved with different areas of industry in the city – 'not exactly work experience, but something to try before full time work to get experience, know people in the sector, create your own network'.



University support

Those who had experienced them were positive about placements, internships and university jobs portals. However, the research findings, across many topics, made it clear that the universities aren't promoting Leicester's opportunities under a single banner, instead requiring students to 'sieve': 'You see all these offers coming up in your inbox for London and other bigger places and you think perhaps it's not feasible for me to stay in Leicester. Perhaps I'll have to move away and you start making your plans around that and then, even if something does pop up, you're already...'

The study also highlighted potential conflicts in the universities' marketing messages about 'career success', which tended to feature recognisable big name employers and corporate jobs, rather than more nuanced, diverse and original opportunities in the locality.



Despite these comments, some students emphasized that once they found the information or resources they needed on their university careers portals, these were 'amazing': 'As much as we won't say this right, we're all grown-ups at the same time right now. The majority of people in this room live on their own. Everyone is living away from home. We're not doing A levels any more, we're not doing GCSEs, so we can't be expecting our teachers to be spoon-feeding us every single time... the uni should not be telling you to tailor your CV this way when the uni's got all the material you need online for you to just go and check and see...'

Casual work

The types of casual work students were carrying out were typically unrelated to their aspirations for graduate employment, such as bar work or food delivery. The key finding was that negative experiences of casual work led to negative feelings about the city in general: 'I've had so many jobs where they mess me around, they've treated me as a disposable essentially, which, when you need that money to survive, that's a pretty bad situation in the end.'

Students suggested that accessing more meaningful part-time or temporary work could help them gain professional skills, make connections and be better prepared for graduate level work in the city. One student commented:

'Because you're a student you almost get pushed to the back of the queue... I've not stopped looking for a temporary job since I finished my last exam, and I just don't want a recruitment agency saying 'Do you want to be a salesman on the phone?''

Links to housing, transport and friends

The students talked about a graduate career in Leicester as part of an overall decision linked to living practicalities, costs and family/friends. The importance of getting a graduate job was seen to be the first piece of the puzzle, but other factors were inextricably linked: 'There are good jobs like Hastings and KPMG but if you stayed you'd have to rent a place and that's impossible including social, travel, food, rent. It would be hard to have a graduate job in the city you study in if you don't live in that city.'

A number of students were clear that they were planning to move back to their home town where their friends and families were, because their other friends were going to leave 'so if I stay I am going to be alone'.

Graduate jobs: list of recommendations

- ||| Improve provision of factual information for students about the industries and businesses operating in Leicester and career prospects in different sectors
- ||| Explore local industrial strategy information and development plans with students via relevant courses or events
- ||| Run and maintain a communications campaign for students that balances out the universities' marketing about big name employers and profiles the benefits of working for Leicester's small and medium sized businesses
- ||| Improve students' understanding of the potential non-linear nature of progressing from their degree subject to their career path, and the multi-faceted roles available with SMEs. Increase students' awareness of the actual breadth of 'relevant' opportunities and how to search effectively for work
- ||| Involve students with Leicester's business and industry networks throughout university, via projects, insight visits and placements
- ||| Give city centre visibility to employers based on the outskirts, in business parks and the county, for example through promotional hoardings or digital campaigns

- ||| Consider a central 'Leicester and Leicestershire graduate jobs fair' or large-scale networking/interview event with SMEs, open to students from both universities
- ||| Publicise Leicester & Leicestershire graduate job opportunities on a single dedicated platform, giving students and graduates a one stop shop for finding work in the locality
- ||| Develop good quality undergraduate placements offering perks to compare with big corporate placement schemes. Explore an offer of shared resources and training programmes across a consortia of SMEs, with support from the universities
- ||| Reserve a quota of the established placement and graduate opportunities offered by larger organisations in Leicester for locally-based students only
- ||| Work with the business community to reframe and promote entry level job vacancies as 'graduate jobs'. Include information about potential progression opportunities
- ||| Work with businesses to re-assess the potential value of graduates even if they don't have significant work experience or lack workplace skills. Develop shared training programmes to boost graduates' early years performance in the SME workplace, supported by the universities, adapted from large corporate graduate development programmes
- ||| Work with Leicester's temporary job agencies to offer students more meaningful job opportunities arising in local companies, giving them a better connection into city businesses, rather than basic casual work
- ||| Run campaigns promoting the financial benefits of living and working in Leicester compared with other cities, including comparative take-home pay



The city

'I fell in love with the university and the city in one open day. I came and I took a twenty minute walk around the city centre and I saw people helping the homeless, I saw people helping people with buggies upstairs, holding elevator doors open for people, things like that I don't really tend to see in my home city, and this what drew me here – because the attitude of 98% of the people here is so amazing and so inclusive and happy; it is an amazing, uplifting city, I think.'

Students' comments about 'the city' on their mind maps branched out into a range of aspects including physical appearance, cleanliness, shops, green spaces, size, layout, vibrancy and homelessness.

Key findings

- ||| Students were positive about the size and layout of the city, with key locations being in walking distance of each other
- ||| 12% of the mind maps showed dissatisfaction with levels of cleanliness

- ||| Students were generally positive about the shops, although 9% commented on their mind maps that shops close too early
- ||| 30 mind maps (25%) mentioned parks and green spaces as a positive asset
- ||| 26% talked about homelessness as a problem affecting the city centre

Appearance and cleanliness

Students talked about parts of the city they found attractive including the Cultural Quarter, New Walk, the Town Hall and the fountains and green spaces dotted around. They welcomed the use of graffiti art and flowers, plants and greenery to improve the appearance of run-down areas. However, they also commented on poor levels of cleanliness in areas including Evington, Highfields and St Matthews, as well as closer to the city centre.

Other students talked optimistically about development work they could see:

‘There’s always some form of development... and improvements like more houses being built, more flats being built, more activity centres as well... you can see that Leicester is making the effort to improve and to develop.’

Shops

'Shops' or 'shopping' featured on 21% of the mind maps and students were generally very positive about the variety of shops available, whether smaller independents or large retailers. They were enthusiastic about being able to buy food and other goods from shops reflecting a wide range of cultures, as well as cheap fresh produce from Leicester Market.

A lack of public transport options was found to be a problem, however, for getting to the other shopping hubs around the city, such as Fosse Park: 'The shops in Leicester are absolutely fantastic, but because we are a small hub of a city with lots of isolated things... if we had a little shopper hopper which linked everything, (we) would love it because you get off one, you get on to another, your day is spent mooching around the city..'

Students also wanted shops to stay open later, partly for convenience, but also to offer alternative evening entertainment for students who don't like pubs and clubs.

Homelessness

Homelessness was one of the most discussed topics in the focus groups and several students felt the situation had deteriorated. The students shared mixed views how the homelessness problem affected them directly. One student found people 'rude, very aggressive, and if you don't give them money or what they want, they're quite rude and verbally very angry... '. However, another student, originally from Chester, commented that the problem there was similar in size but he found homeless people in Leicester much nicer than at home, and 'people in Leicester are nicer to homeless people as well'.

Students were not aware of actions in place to address the homeless problem in the city and, overall, homelessness was felt to be an 'off-putting' issue.

'If you look at many cities, especially neighbouring Loughborough, Nottingham, Birmingham, young people generally are attracted to the city centre because of the cultures, the activities, the convenience, but in Leicester in particular they're not, and (homelessness) is a big part of that... it's a difficult problem to solve but it is a problem that's getting worse and worse, and... people are questioning their safety that live near the universities especially.'

Induction and integration with the city

Students repeatedly said they would like to be integrated more closely with city activity and meet more local people. One student talked about her experience spending the summer in Leicester: 'It feels very bare when you're a student off term time – we know very limited things about Leicester and it's hard for us to know about other things, other places and other people.'

The focus groups included several discussions about the benefits of seeing a city during university open days and induction events. Students wished they had known more about Leicester before they came, describing university cities as 'a huge part of your experience'. They came up with a range of ideas for giving applicants a better immersion into the city during open days, induction and Freshers' week. It was suggested it could be beneficial if the City Council led open day city tours, because the Council wouldn't be 'biased' trying to promote either university, but would give valuable information about the whole city's offer. Some students mentioned enjoying an app-based activity during Freshers' week that had taken them on a tour of the city, setting them challenges with prizes such as Walkers crisps. They felt they had learned interesting facts that they wouldn't have otherwise known, and the experience had increased their early engagement.

Students also said it would be useful for everyone new to Leicester to have a welcome pack on arrival. These were provided for international students but not for students from elsewhere in the UK. One student pointed out:

'(I only come from) two hours away, but what would I know about Leicester? So (a welcome pack) would be a really good way to implement integration from first year so students have that information by the time they graduate and it kind of instils this is what Leicester is, this is what we do, this is what is going on.'

The city: Recommendations

- ||| Establish a welcome and information centre for students and visitors at the train station
- ||| Introduce city council-led tours on university open days
- ||| Increase orientation and integration activities for students during Freshers' week
- ||| Induct students not from Leicester (UK) in the same way as international students, including a welcome pack on arrival with information about city events, the countryside, things to do and places to go during the year
- ||| Arrange more day-out events and excursions that include students not from Leicester (UK), helping them get out of the city centre and learn about attractions further out
- ||| Introduce city and county-led entrepreneurial competitions inviting students to pitch ideas to address issues in the city
- ||| City council to systematically involve students and graduates in city council projects and planning

People, culture and community

Key findings

- || 47% of the mind maps featured the words 'diverse' and/or 'multicultural'
- || Leicester's multicultural and diverse demographic was seen as a major positive feature of the city, with frequently occurring positive words including 'welcoming', 'interesting', 'amazing', 'happy', 'friendly' and 'vibrant'
- || The multicultural nature of the city had taken some students by surprise and helped them fit in more quickly than they had expected
- || Students noted how the city's diversity had a positive influence on food, activities, events and people to meet
- || Almost all the students expressed a wish to integrate and make friends with local people



Community

The mind maps and focus groups highlighted students' view that Leicester has a friendly community: 'Everyone is nice... if I don't know where something is, people stop and help and give me directions and things... everybody's friendly and happy; they're nice people in Leicester.'

It was noted that, compared to a bigger city, more people would smile at strangers. This was unusual for students coming from bigger cities such as London.

'It's easy to socialise, everything's in walking distance, the people are nice, and it's a diverse city, so coming from London it was easy to adapt to the city.'

Students talked about making friends and the emotional pull of having friends and family at home. Some felt it would be beneficial for the city to foster more informal networks helping people form friendships. Students pointed out that while the universities had clubs and societies, after graduation these were no longer available and it would be helpful to have information on joining in with local activities instead.

'If (you have) no community you just feel like you can't stay in the city – there is nothing to hold on to.'

Echoing this, one student talked about how working in the city had enabled her to meet different people from different age groups, and to discover different places to eat and drink that she would not have gone to otherwise: 'It's only through work that I have become integrated into the city.'

The 'segregation' of student housing was found to be a problem by students pursuing postgraduate study. Rental agencies were reported to have an inflexible attitude to students and were not willing to let them rent 'non-student' properties and integrate in other areas, even if they could afford this. One postgraduate student felt that because of this attitude the city was making it harder for him to stay.

Cultural diversity

Leicester's multicultural diversity received the greatest amount of positive commentary across the mind maps and focus groups combined, described as having a significant positive impact on students' university experience: 'You have a mini-world in one place, that's so amazing... there's loads of different shops and restaurants because obviously whenever people come here they bring their own culture, so it gives you opportunities to explore different cultures and learn more about other people – that's one of my main things I love about Leicester.'

'I've met so many new people from different cultures and... it makes you a more open person, and more learned and developed and that builds you into your future career, because obviously you're going to be working with so many people from different backgrounds... I really like the whole diversity of Leicester.'

One student liked the way different cultural events were celebrated at the city centre clock tower, giving everybody an opportunity to watch. He had enjoyed the switching on of the Christmas lights – ‘so vibrant, colourful.’ An international student commented that they liked: ‘...being able to identify with a community of believers... Leicester is very diverse... as an international student, access to international food stuffs that I like to buy... I think Leicester covers that very well and that’s one thing that attracts me to stay here.’

A recommendation made by one group of students was to have a festival of cultures that brought together all cultures at once in a showcase, rather than ‘segregated’ festivities. ‘There should be events for Leicester in general, for everyone, and that way you can include diversity but... it’s there as an event for everyone, a festival for everyone.’

History

A number of students were enthusiastic about Leicester’s history, especially the discovery of Richard III. It was suggested that the city’s broader history and architecture could be much better celebrated, perhaps via a permanent exhibition focused on multiculturalism. Leicester could make more of the fact it is one of the most diverse cities in the UK and open up positive conversations about immigration: ‘...inform people why it’s a good thing as opposed to saying yes, we’re the most multi-cultural society. It’s more like, yes we are, and this is the good or positive aspects that it brings.’

One student recommended the example of an exhibition in Birmingham showing a model of the city and the arrival of new groups of immigrants over time, bringing new industries and shaping the city’s culture and development.

People, culture and community: list of recommendations

- ||| Promote Leicester’s history of immigration as a model of tolerance and success. Establish a central Leicester exhibition permanently showcasing the city’s demographic history and culture
- ||| Consider holding a Festival of Diversity celebrating all cultures at once, promoting integration for all

Public transport

Comments about transport covered the cost and convenience of buses and trains, getting about in the city and county and connectivity with other regions. In the discussions, transport was closely linked to work and housing as students assessed the overall financial and practical viability of staying on as graduates.

Key findings

- ||| The mind maps produced 9 positive comments about buses compared with 22 negative comments
- ||| All mind map comments about buses mentioned that services were 'expensive'
- ||| Other issues raised were the lack of a late-night bus service; confusing system; and unreliability
- ||| Students were very positive about the introduction of app-based bus tickets

- ▄▄ Train services received more positive feedback than buses; 50% of the mind map comments were positive
- ▄▄ Half the positive comments about trains described the train station as 'good' and easily accessible
- ▄▄ Train links to other cities were found to be convenient, quick and reliable
- ▄▄ Negative comments about trains focused mainly on cost
- ▄▄ Comments in the focus groups that transport was 'cheap' were made exclusively by students not originally from Leicester
- ▄▄ Some students commented on a good overall network of trains, buses, coaches and taxis; and some good cycling facilities. Negative comments tended to say the opposite, mentioning bad transport links into the county, long journeys, roadworks and fragmented bike lanes
- ▄▄ Connectivity with other regions was seen as a strong asset, representing 75% of the total positive comments about transport. Students highlighted 'easy access' to other cities, making Leicester a good base for exploring, and 'good transport links to London'. This was highlighted as a 'huge advantage' for international students
- ▄▄ Students raised concerns about the trade-off between finding better or cheaper housing and having reasonable public transport options for getting to work

Students' discussions intrinsically linked transport cost and convenience with the viability of pursuing their graduate career in Leicester. As students, their experience of public transport had mostly involved getting from their student housing to their university or the city centre; their comments therefore tended to focus on problems with these connections. These negative experiences were seen to influence their feelings about staying in the city more permanently.

Getting about on foot

There were many positive comments about Leicester being compact and well connected for getting about on foot. Students enjoyed the 'excellent pedestrianisation' and the city itself being 'small and easy to navigate'.

Buses

Despite the predominantly negative comments on the mind maps, in the focus groups there was more positivity about bus services. Students liked the transition from a cash-based service to a mobile ticket app and being able to check live bus times. One student commented: 'There's great public transport – it's there for you, it's available and there's plenty of it – buses run every 20 minutes if not even more frequently.' Several students had also found buses reliable on their route.

The more negative comments concerned a number of issues. A lack of night services was highlighted repeatedly as a problem for students wanting to travel back late from the university library or a club, from a night out in the city or from the train station in the evening. Buses were found to be much reduced after 6 pm on many services. Students felt this presented a safety issue because it left them with the choice of paying for a cab or Uber, which was an extra cost, or walking home.

It was widely commented that bus links were poor for different areas around the city, restricting the amount students chose to travel and explore: 'I think there are other places to go. But... because of the transport you can't see other places. I live in Braunstone; it should be easy for me to get to Fosse Park, but I can't go there, as there are no buses from my house, so I have to go to town and then take another bus. So I just don't go.' One student summed this up as a 'linking issue' every time she needed to travel through the city centre.

'It's not that big a city but you have buses from different companies that will take you to areas that are quite close to each other and it's really inefficient... so you end up spending more on tickets just for two buses going a few miles.'

Students recommended introducing a student pass to access attractions and events in different parts of Leicester, while several asked for a rent-a-bike scheme to get around: 'The main difference between Leicester universities and other universities is that they give discounted bus passes so that way students get to explore the town and go to other places.'

It was clear that students' experience of Leicester's buses was a factor that made them hesitant about working in Leicester in the future: 'The transport links from Leicester... are very good – you can get to Nottingham, Birmingham, London, all within an hour... but the transport within Leicester is... quite poor, unreliable and very expensive, so if you can find the cheaper housing you've got the trade-off of not being able to get to work, so I think that's a big factor that drives graduates away... '

Uber

The 'super cheap' cost and convenience of 'student-friendly' Uber was remarked on positively by many students. It was clear that Uber was frequently used as a necessary alternative when buses weren't available, and was also cheaper than bus fares for students if travelling in a group.

Cars and parking

Cars and parking featured more than anticipated in the focus groups, generally because students felt having a car would be necessary due to their perceptions of public transport services. A number of students factored in parking costs when imagining living in Leicester as graduates, seeming to assume they would need to drive to get to work. Some were aware of organisations and business parks on the outskirts of the city and in the county, but thought these may only be accessible to them if they drove a car.

A student who had started driving in her second year of study 'got to see the countryside so Leicester is actually really nice, it is a really beautiful city but you don't really get to see that much until you kind of go a bit out of the town centre, you get to see the natural life.'



Another student made the suggestion that the 'Hospital Hopper' could be used as a model for a more flexible bus service for all: 'If a hospital hopper works really well to get people linking the hospitals, think holistically about how your system could work for other things as well... that way you are going to get people out of their cars onto public transport and we're going to be able to move through the city a bit more... it's not all about bikes... Make me feel safe.'

The environment

A number of students wanted to see a tram system in Leicester, noting that the city 'needs to show it cares about the planet, or people won't want to come.'

Local transport: list of referrals

The study produced considerable information about students' experiences of local transport, housing and infrastructure and how these affected their feelings about staying on in Leicester as graduates. These are highlighted in this report for the attention of relevant city planning authorities. In summary the main issues related to transport include:

- Students had largely negative views of the cost of buses in Leicester, exacerbated by the need to pay fares to two different bus companies to travel fairly short distances.
- Students expected Leicester to have better concessions for bus travel for students, such as a student pass allowing travel on all networks connecting through the city centre and making it easier to explore the surrounding areas.



Things to do

The students' mind maps and focus groups produced three areas of discussion forming a theme of 'things to do': Daytime activities, Nightlife and Sports. There was a mix of satisfaction levels with the amount and quality of things to do in Leicester; views often seemed to depend on whether students came from larger cities originally or from smaller, rural areas.

Key findings

- ||| Students are enthusiastic for daytime activities such as crazy golf, trampolining and escape rooms. A number of students were eager for more of this type of activity
- ||| 10% of students noted that nightlife was 'cheap'
- ||| Some students were keen for more evening activities that didn't focus on drinking or clubbing
- ||| 23% of the mind maps mentioned sport
- ||| Food and eating out was seen as a positive, with lots of options to try and cheap prices

- || Students felt that things to do in Leicester were not well promoted. As a result, they might miss great things going on in the area of arts and culture.
- || Students were especially keen on the idea of alternative social events during Freshers' Week that focused on Leicester as a place.

Communication and promotion

Students felt it was easy to miss activities or events that were going on in the city, and this was something universities could help with. Communication was felt to be worse for events outside the city centre, and poor transport links were seen as a problem for getting there, meaning 'you're not really in the loop with anything.'

One group raised an issue with not having a welcome centre for students and visitors arriving at the train station: '... so if they want to come for the cultural experience, unless they google stuff there is no information, it's in the city centre, but they need to get there first.'

A number of students felt that the city's attractions and things to do were very highly concentrated in the centre, with fewer options further out. This led to a concentration of demand for housing and parking and made costs high.

Daytime and non-drinking activities

Students proposed a range of activities they'd enjoy that were not focused on drinking and pubs, including more sports-based places, funfairs and theme parks. One student, originally from Leicester, talked about wanting more year-round attractions such as ice rinks, which Nottingham had. She pointed out that students not from Leicester don't experience the city's Christmas festivities or summer events because they've gone back home. However, a number of other students noted they'd enjoyed Leicester's festivals and weekend events throughout the year.

Several groups talked about the possibility that 'the city' could offer alternative activities to students who didn't want to join in the drinking activities during Freshers' Week.

'Maybe the city can join up groups of people and have something (during Freshers') that's more about the culture, more about the city, more about Leicestershire as a place, that raises awareness on what you can do, what opportunities are out there and how you can better experience the place you're going to be living for the next three to five years.'

Integration with city activities

As with other themes, students were keen to get involved with creating new events, such as talent shows or open air theatre, to take place in city locations and be organised in partnership with city organisations. Students expressed an interest in events promoted and run by 'the city' rather than university-run events without a link into the city's spaces.

One student commented that her outlook on things to do had changed as a result of her part-time job, which had led her to speak to more people who live in Leicester and 'know about these things'. The student had started following the social media channel 'Cool as Leicester' and finding out more about events at venues such as the LCB Depot.

Sports

Sport also featured positively, mentioned on one quarter of the mind maps, whether for spectators or players. Students who played sports regularly asked for the opportunity to be involved with city sports clubs as a way to meet people locally, rather than university-only teams. In this way sports could also serve as a bridge into a graduate life in the city.

Nightlife

On average students found the amount of nightclubs to be adequate for their needs. Some mentioned going to the Curve and shows at De Montfort Hall, and enjoying getting involved with the cultural side of the city.

Students felt the multicultural nature of Leicester meant there was a great variety of restaurants, 'always new places popping up', and the quantity of cinemas, cafes and pubs was widely considered to be good. Students enjoyed having lots of different places to try different foods, and liked Leicester's dessert cafes.

Those who had explored outside the city centre made positive comments about the range and variety of independent bars and cafes, rather than chains.

Things to do: list of recommendations

- ||| Increase students' awareness and participation in social and networking events popular among Leicester locals
- ||| Support local social opportunities and amenities for new graduates such as integration with city sports clubs, linking with city-based alumni
- ||| Invite students to develop arts and cultural events working with city organisations
- ||| Raise awareness of students' appetite for more daytime activities as a business opportunity



Housing

Students talked largely about student housing in the focus groups, meaning the data was not always relevant to living in Leicester as a graduate. However, it was clear that the experience of student housing often had a deeply negative effect on students' experience of living in the city, affecting their ability to integrate as well as travel safely and easily from home to university or nights out.

Findings

- ||| The cost of student housing had come as a shock to many students, amounting to more than their whole student loan.
- ||| Lack of disposable income due to housing costs was a primary cause of stress.
- ||| Students were widely dissatisfied with the location of student halls, and more dissatisfied with the condition of landlord-owned student houses.
- ||| Students wanted more honest information from letting agencies and landlords about the location and condition of properties.

- ||| Students recommended creating a new accommodation type between 'student housing' and 'professional lets', giving graduates a decent yet affordable housing option for the start of their career.

Cost and quality of student housing

Some students were satisfied with the cost of housing in itself. However, cost relative to quality was seen very negatively, and many students had bad experiences with agencies and landlords: 'I can't stress this enough, I think it is very important. The council or someone needs to look into accommodation... it is too expensive for what they are offering and there are so many crook landlords that make it seem like it's a good deal, then you get all these hidden costs ... you are struggling to pay and when you do pay you don't have enough money left.'

Renting rooms in private houses (as opposed to student halls) was described as: '... going into a big ocean – you don't know what's going to happen, you don't know who you're going to live with and that may cause future problems...'

Some students recognised that accommodation issues were similar for their friends in other cities, but nonetheless, their experience renting in the private sector had led to 'distrust'. They reported that speaking to landlords in a 'normal and polite way' did not get problems resolved; instead they needed to behave aggressively for action to be taken: 'I don't know if there is a way to improve the relationship between landlords and tenants; I think that would greatly help the accommodation situation in Leicester.'

Students thought overall that rental prices were rising, whether for student accommodation or in the city more generally, as it became more of a commuter town or people bought properties to let. Some students from London said they 'might as well live in London' as a result.

Link to safety

Students found it unwelcoming to them that, in their experience, the more affordable the housing, the more run-down the area of the city. This was also seen as being socially exclusive because it penalised the students with the least money: 'There are some nice parts of the city but there are also parts you don't want to go to... for me crime is quite high and that links in with housing, affordable housing.'

Students were worried about safety and talked about non-residents entering student halls, making a mess and dealing drugs nearby: 'It's clear... and it's visible and students are very concerned... The area needs clearing up, needs attention and it needs students to be heard about where they are staying to complete their courses, because if not the society of students will collapse.'

Integration in the city

The segregation of student housing areas was seen to be a barrier to students' personal integration with the city. Students wanted access to more accommodation living next door to 'someone normal' and expressed a wish to live among Leicester locals. This was particularly the case for postgraduate students, who felt that mixing up accommodation types could help students feel that Leicester could become their home.

Housing options for new graduates

Some students had explored further afield and found housing that was safer and more satisfactory. One student had moved from LE1 to LE4 and found 'nicer houses there, it's more peaceful'; as a result she felt she would probably stay in Leicester to live and work, but not in LE1 if possible.

'The accommodation and the transport sort of go hand in hand. There is cheaper housing even for students and early career people and graduates, but that involves being further away from the university or the city centre. The transport links (are very good for getting to other cities, though expensive), but the transport within Leicester is ... poor.'

Another student talked about the pressures of signing a contract twelve months before moving in and paying deposits and agency fees on top of rent: 'It drives you away from Leicester and from wanting to be there because it's so difficult to build your life here. These are problems I think that are everywhere, but Leicester in particular due to the transport going hand in hand'.

However, a mature student who had moved from a more affluent area noted the cost of a three-bedroom house was half the price in Leicester:

'There is so much more opportunity for young people to start their life in Leicester, and great local and private investment for business.'

Some students recommended that universities should provide information for new graduates on the practicalities, rights and responsibilities of renting privately.

Housing: list of recommendations

- ||| Provide practical and financial information for students leaving university, such as managing rental costs, council tax and legalities
- ||| Provide financial support or subsidy to help new graduates with their rent while they transition to managing their income and finances as graduates

Housing: list of referrals

Some findings from the Leicester Student voice event are not within the control of the project to affect directly, but are highlighted in this report for the attention of relevant city planning authorities. In summary the main issues related to housing include:

- ||| Students' experience of private rented housing is largely negative due to condition of housing, value for money and reported unscrupulous behaviour by landlords
- ||| Students in purpose-built student housing are particularly negatively affected by perceived low levels of safety in their neighbourhood
- ||| Students experience social disadvantage from the segregation of housing into 'student areas', disconnecting them from local communities. Postgraduate students would like to access non-student housing via letting agencies. Graduates would like access to a new type of housing that is neither student housing nor a professional let, and is designed to help them transition into graduate life



Cost of living

Positive remarks about the affordability of day to day costs in Leicester appeared on 26 of the individual mind maps, compared to only 5 negative comments on this topic.

Key findings

- || Eating and drinking out, taxis and Ubers were widely felt to be good value compared to students' home cities
- || Several students had chosen to stay in Leicester for postgraduate study specifically because they had calculated the relatively low cost of living in the city, combined with university discounts for postgraduate study
- || Students felt it wasn't widely understood that they don't all get the maximum amount of student loan, and don't have the same amount of money to cover their costs
- || The transition to becoming a student and having to pay for rent, monthly bus passes, and other costs upfront had been a shock for many students. Students expressed stress and anxiety at the prospect of managing the financial transition to becoming a graduate
- || Some students not from Leicester had plans to live with their family after graduating to help with living costs and saving, which inevitably meant leaving the city

Moving back home after graduation

The benefits of Leicester's low cost of living tended to be outweighed by factors such as perceived greater job opportunities at home and the emotional pull of family and friends: 'Leicester is a cheaper place to live, even though you get paid less you will save more, but I feel like to live in Leicester I would like to travel out to other cities and that would contribute to more costs, so it wouldn't really balance out.'

Costs as a graduate

Several of the groups talked about the shock of realising the full costs of living as a graduate. It was felt that discounts would help graduates find their feet:

'Most graduates will start their career with more debt than savings... temporary support with things like council tax could attract more graduates to stay because they'd feel more supported by the council and city that they studied in.'

Cost of living: list of recommendations

- Run campaigns promoting the financial benefits of living and working in Leicester and Leicestershire compared with other cities. Use factual data such as relative take-home pay compared with bigger cities





Safety

Findings

- || On the mind maps 16% of comments by students not from Leicester (UK) used the word 'safe', compared with 50% not from Leicester (international) and 60% originally from Leicester
- || Use of the words 'crime' and 'dangerous' made up 28% of all comments on safety and all were written by students not from Leicester (UK)
- || Safety arose as a substantial topic of discussion in nine out of the fifteen focus groups

Problem areas in the city

Students' concerns about safety centred on areas including Bede Park, Eastern Boulevard, Victoria Park, Evington and Highfields. Most of their fears related to the neighbourhoods where they lived and the journey to and from their housing. Students talked about finding the journey from the university library to Bede Hall or Narborough Road unsafe at night. Issues they raised included a lack of lighting when students were returning from nightclubs 'perhaps not in the best state of mind'.

Bede Park and Victoria Park were identified as areas that are not well lit, and students wanted more cameras to be installed as a deterrent. Students reported they had to cross dark sections between lights 'where someone could jump you'. They felt more reassured the more they saw security staff patrolling, but wanted 'more first-hand actions to start with'.

The fact that only students not from Leicester (UK) mentioned crime on their mind maps seems to provide evidence of a link between safety concerns and student housing. Incidents on the fringes of the DMU campus were seen to be one of the main problems, with students living 'in the middle of this hotspot... we are there and it could easily just happen one day'. Students originally from Leicester talked less about safety as an issue and described feeling safe as they travelled from their campus into the city centre or to the bus station.

Fear and reports of crime

Students reported they were unnerved by reports of stabbings, muggings, sexual assault and violence in their neighbourhoods. This included hearing about students being forced to withdraw cash at knife point and an increase in muggings after student loan payments came in, which 'didn't aid people's love for the city'. Many were conscious of theft risks and had been advised by the Police that opportunistic thieves operated in student areas due to knowing there were multiple laptops and other gadgets in any single house. One student had been burgled on her second day in her house. Another had called the police due to hearing sounds of violence or 'domestic abuse' in the house next door. A third student had felt afraid after helping the police with a serious crime in his street, reporting that the police had exposed him as a witness and made the whole student household feel vulnerable in their neighbourhood.

The consensus among many students was that the city is less than safe, especially at night, and that the information circulating, through police advice or reported incidents, impacted negatively on the city's reputation. 'Since the first week I came here that's what I've been hearing about - people saying 'Be careful''. Students talked about feeling afraid when hearing people shouting in the street or 'on drugs'. Occasions where the police had gone door to door advising students of nearby incidents had left students feeling 'panicked... police are feeling threatened enough to say that to us... it doesn't ease our minds at all'.

As students they felt 'on their own' in the city when trouble broke out, even though they belonged to their university the rest of the time. Students urged the city to provide night buses and the means to travel safely. It was also felt that should an incident occur, universities shouldn't text their own students separately but should have a joined-up communications channel for all students living in the city. There was a call for 'case closed' reports to be circulated on social media showing that the police were dealing with incidents of crime.

Different perspectives on safety

It was clear from the discussions that students who had a close experience of crime, or came from 'safer' towns and cities, found Leicester off-putting as a place to stay long term. Overall there was a consensus that safety problems are getting worse: 'For someone who is very afraid, it is very difficult to concentrate and do your work, and therefore you want to finish immediately and get out of this city.'

In contrast, students from London found Leicester safe in comparison and contextualised that knife crime isn't exclusive to Leicester. These students recognised that all cities have challenges and the local media reported 'all sorts of fraud, crime and scary things'; however, they also acknowledged there were parts of Leicester they preferred to avoid. The route from the train station to the centre of the city (Granby Street) was seen as unpredictable and intimidating for students arriving into Leicester in the evening.

A minority of students found the city to be safe. A postgraduate student from Nigeria had never witnessed any incident, mugging or threat and found the city 'considerably safe to live in'. Another student, originally from Leicester, found Braunstone 'really safe' to live in.

As with other themes, students felt the universities and their students could help lead on city improvements due to their expertise in areas such as artificial intelligence, criminology and security.



Summary of findings

The Leicester Student Voice event successfully engaged students in expressing their views about living in the city and generated twelve key themes for exploration and further work. The student participants showed a willing appetite to be involved, and the use of the City Council to host the event was effective in demonstrating they were contributing directly to city planning and developments. The approach, using individually-produced mind maps and facilitated focus groups to raise all relevant topics from the students' perspective, produced rich primary data for analysis.

The students collectively described issues and proposed solutions at the same time, making the event highly successful for guiding project direction. The data set in its entirety provides detailed insights into both positive and negative perceptions. The majority of the aspects seen as negative point to opportunities for quick win improvements as well as longer term strategic enhancements.

Leicester's biggest risk currently appears to be that students perceive insufficient reasons to stay. The weaknesses in the way the city's graduate labour market is currently defined and publicised mean students are not seeing the potential opportunities the city offers them. There is a need to dissect skills needs, working with both employers and students, and to increase clarity on both sides around the flexible skillsets graduates can bring. The current lack of visibility of graduate jobs, combined with students' experiences of housing and transport, leads them to feel there are many barriers to staying on.

The challenge of transitioning from student to graduate, on a financial, practical, social and emotional level, was found to be a critical factor. The majority of students at the event appeared to be approaching the end of their degree without a plan or the means to stay on in Leicester. The moment of transition was shown to be acutely precarious, requiring most new graduates to maintain financial stability while changing their source of income, move into decent and affordable housing, start a job, have the means to travel to work and continued access to disability support or other personal support in place at their university. The abrupt cessation of university life is seen to be extremely challenging to students if they have not planned and prepared this transition at an earlier stage of their course. Almost all students at the event were unprepared for this step and expressed a sense of powerlessness and anxiety about the end of their degree and next stage in their journey.

In every topic discussed students talked about wishing to be more integrated with the city itself, whether to make local friends, play sports, discover places and activities, or build connections for the future. Students saw the organisation of social events and activities led solely by universities, and segregation of student housing, as creating unhelpful barriers to integration.

As well as wishing to increase their connection with the local community, students repeatedly offered to get involved with addressing the city's problems, contributing their ideas and skills for innovation in all aspects of city life. It was suggested that councillors and civic leaders should build student and graduate prospects into everything the City Council does, 'embedding graduates into all your policies and strategies' and making Leicester a world leader for the integration of graduate talent to benefit society and the economy.

Students frequently saw themselves as part of the solution to problems they identified in the city. They wanted ways to become integrated with the city while they were students, from increased contact with industry to playing for local sports teams or working on city projects to solve neighbourhood safety issues.

It was apparent that students who came from larger urban centres, especially London, saw fewer opportunities in Leicester, while those from rural postcodes or smaller cities seemed to find more excitement and opportunity. Students' age and experience also influenced their views. Students who had been on placements were more confident about the prospect of finding work and setting themselves up.

Degree subject was also a factor: Students on healthcare degrees were highly positive about opportunities in hospitals and clinical centres, and students who talked about enterprise described Leicester as a 'key hub' in the Midlands; a well-connected 'young city' with 'massive' opportunity for growth and development.

The highly positive finding from the study was that many students expressed an appetite to build a life in Leicester if they had the means to do so. Influences on students' decision-making were seen to be interlinked and complex. The meandering nature of students' planning points to the apparent real potential of the project to intervene and influence students' movements.

'I haven't got any friends round here so I would probably go back home – it depends on whether they want to stay or not. I love the city and everything but I've also got a life back at home and I would probably go back home... but it depends on jobs as well... what opportunities there are... but I would be open to staying here after uni... yeah.'

The Leicester graduate retention project will seek to make the city itself, and students' integration with the city, the solution to graduate retention barriers, rather than Leicester being the backdrop to a 'pitstop' on a student's longer journey. This includes opportunities to build networks, experience business environments, go on placements and have accurate information on jobs they can apply for. While fresh inward investment and job creation are part of the solution to increased retention of graduates over the long term, the Leicester Student Voice research has revealed that there is much to be gained in the short term from information, communication and integration strategies. These will form the backbone of the Leicester graduate retention project to 2022.



Full list of recommendations and referrals

Develop and promote a defined and visible graduate employment offer

01

Provide factual information for students about the industries and businesses operating in Leicester and career prospects in different sectors.

02

Develop a single platform promoting information and vacancies for graduate jobs in Leicester and Leicestershire, enabling students to explore opportunities from early in their degree.

03

Run and maintain a communications campaign for students that counters the dominance of universities' marketing about big name employers and profiles the benefits of working for Leicester and Leicestershire SMEs.

04

Work with businesses to understand their thoughts about the value of graduates, exploring perceived skills gaps and training needs.

05

Explore options to provide support to SMEs with upskilling graduates during their first year in work, mirroring large employers' graduate development programmes.

06

Educate students about the non-linear nature of progression from degree subject to career path and the multi-faceted roles available in SMEs. Increase students' awareness of the real breadth of 'relevant' opportunities and how to search effectively for work.

07

Give city centre visibility to employers based on the outskirts, in the county and in business parks, for example through promotional hoardings.

08

Involve students with Leicester's business and industry networks throughout university, via projects, insight visits and placements.

09

Consider a 'Leicester and Leicestershire graduate jobs fair' or large-scale networking/interview events with SMEs, for students from both universities.

10

Develop more good quality undergraduate placements, providing support to the business community.

11

Reserve a quota of the established placement and graduate opportunities offered by larger firms in Leicester/Leicester for locally-based students only.

12

Work with the business community to reframe and promote entry level job vacancies as graduate jobs. Include information about potential progression opportunities.

13

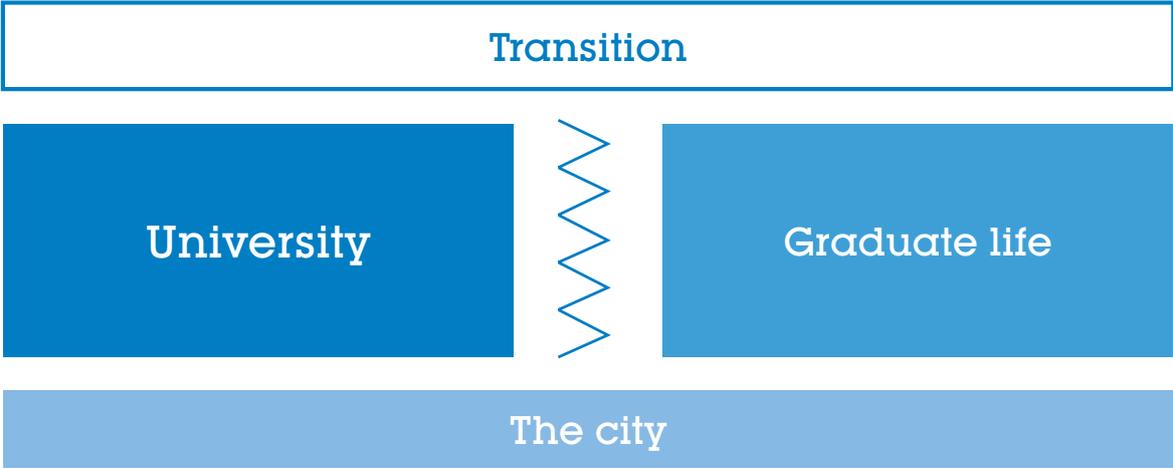
Work with businesses to communicate the value of graduates even if they don't have significant work experience or polished skills.

14

Work with Leicester’s temporary job agencies to offer students more meaningful job opportunities arising in local firms, giving them a connection into city businesses, rather than only matching them to basic casual work.

15

Work with student recruitment marketing teams to promote relevant links between specific degree programmes and local career opportunities, such as healthcare.



Representation of recommended long integration of students with Leicester to increase graduate retention.

Implement policies and programmes that integrate students with the city

16

Provide welcome signs and information for students at the station.

17

Introduce city-led tours on university Open Days.

18

Increase orientation and integration activities for students during Freshers’ week, helping students find out about Leicester and Leicestershire’s attractions and the option to discuss some of the challenges faced by the city.

- 19 Induct students not from Leicester (UK) in the same way as international students, such as a welcome pack on arrival with information about city events, the countryside, things to do and places to go during the year.
- 20 Arrange more day-out events and excursions that include students not from Leicester (UK), helping them get out of the city centre and learn about attractions further out.
- 21 Share and discuss local industrial strategy information and development plans with students via relevant courses or events.
- 22 Involve students with Leicester's business and industry networks throughout university, via projects, insight visits and placements.
- 23 Introduce city and county-led entrepreneurial competitions inviting students to pitch ideas to address issues in the city.
- 24 City council to invite students and graduates to take part in city council projects and planning.
- 25 Increase students' awareness and participation in social and networking events popular among Leicester locals.
- 26 Invite students to develop arts and cultural events working with city organisations.
- 27 Run campaigns promoting the financial benefits of living and working in Leicester and Leicestershire compared with other cities. Use factual data such as relative take-home pay compared with bigger cities.

28

Promote Leicester's history of immigration as a model of tolerance and success. Have a central Leicester museum permanently showcasing the city's demographic and culture.

29

Consider holding a Festival of Diversity celebrating all cultures at once, promoting integration for all.

Invest in programmes to support the transition from student to graduate

30

Involve students with Leicester's community, business and industry networks throughout university.

31

Offer a single platform promoting information about graduate jobs in Leicester and Leicestershire, enabling students to explore opportunities from early in their degree.

32

Develop local social opportunities and amenities for new graduates such as integration with city sports clubs, working with city-based alumni.

33

Provide practical and financial information for students leaving university, such as managing rental costs, council tax and legalities.

34

Explore options to provide financial support or subsidy to help new graduates cover their rent while starting in work and adjusting to managing their finances as graduates.

35

Implement transitional arrangements for students who have accessed university services for disabilities and mental health, avoiding an abrupt end to their support.

List of referrals

The Leicester Student Voice event produced evidence of students' experiences of public transport, housing and infrastructure, and how these affect their feelings about Leicester. While it is not within the Leicester Graduate City project's scope to directly address these issues, they are highlighted in this report for the attention of relevant authorities and city planning departments.

01

Students had largely negative views of the cost of buses in Leicester, exacerbated by the need to pay fares to two different bus companies to travel fairly short distances.

02

Students expected Leicester to have better concessions for bus travel for students, such as a student pass allowing travel on all networks connecting into the city centre.

03

Students' experience of private rented housing is largely negative due to condition of housing, value for money and attitudes of landlords.

04

Students in purpose-built student housing are particularly negatively affected by perceived low levels of safety in their immediate neighbourhood.

05

The homelessness problem in Leicester negatively affects students' perceptions of the city; this is made worse by the fact many students do not explore far out of the city centre to discover other areas and attractions.

06

Students experience social disadvantage from the segregation of housing into 'student areas', disconnecting them from local communities. Postgraduate students would like to access non-student housing via letting agencies. Graduates would like access to a type of housing that was no longer student housing, but less expensive than professional lets, while transitioning into their graduate life.

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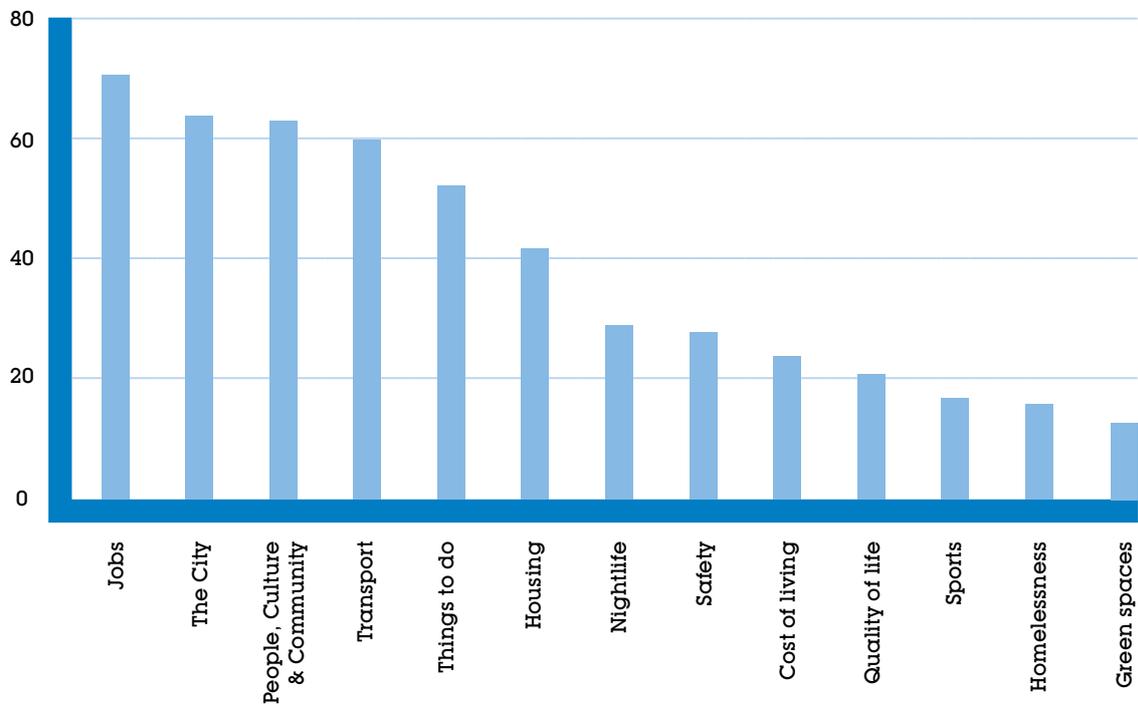
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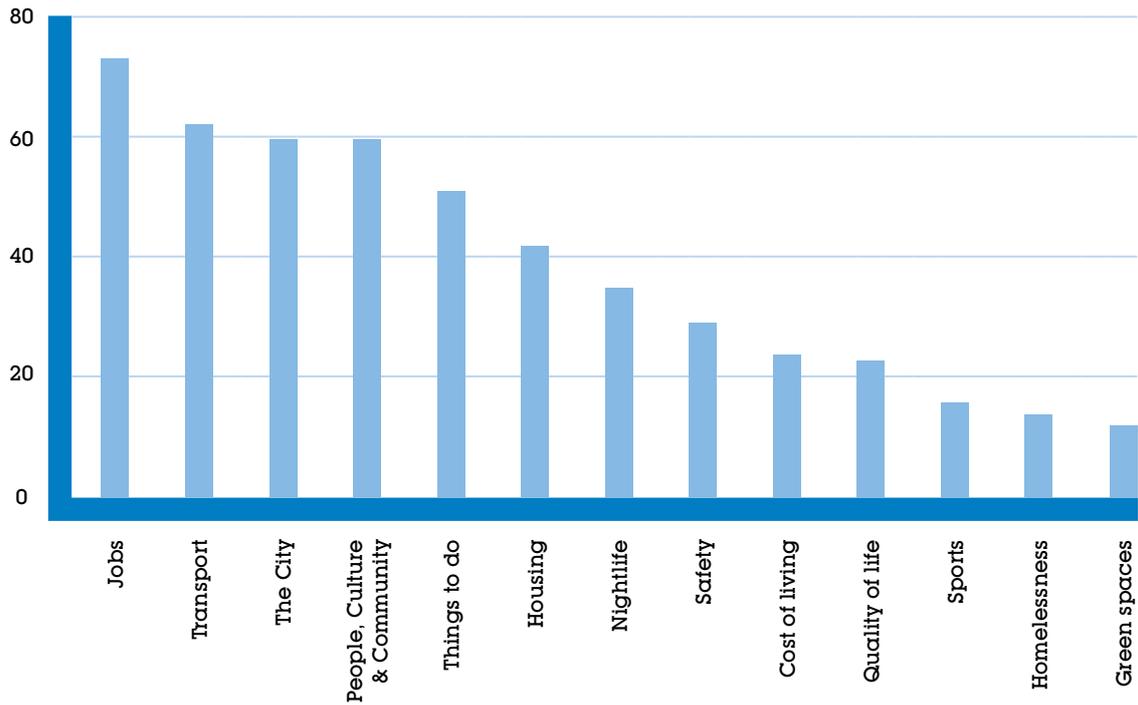
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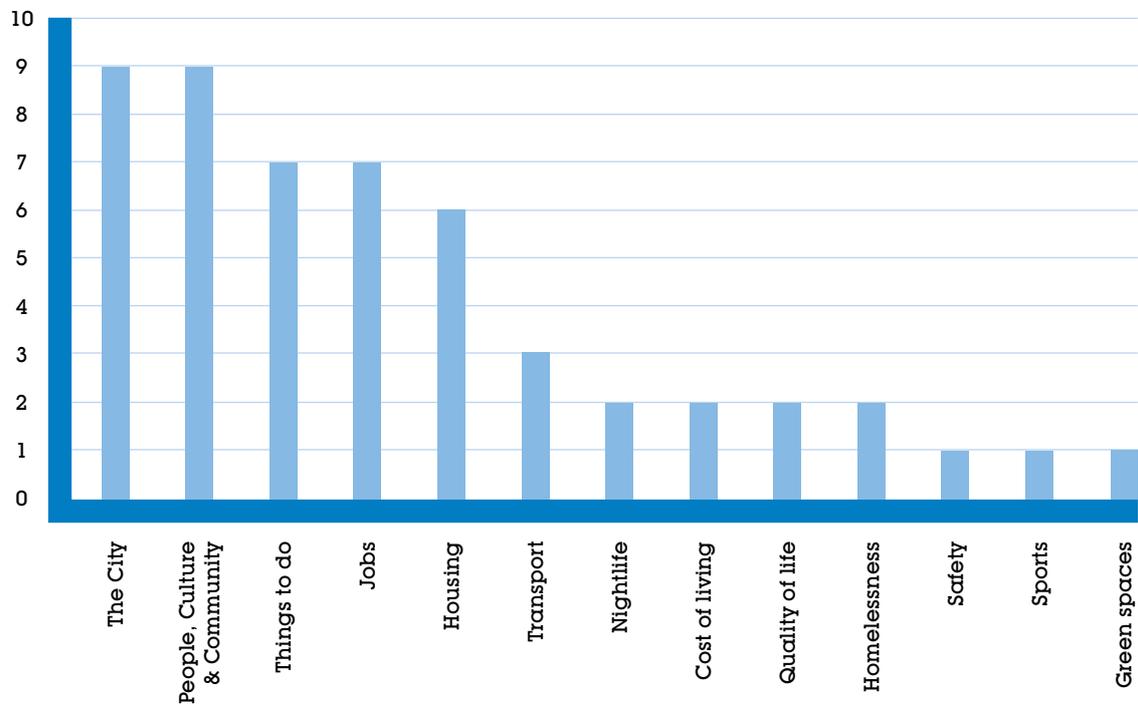
Appendix 1



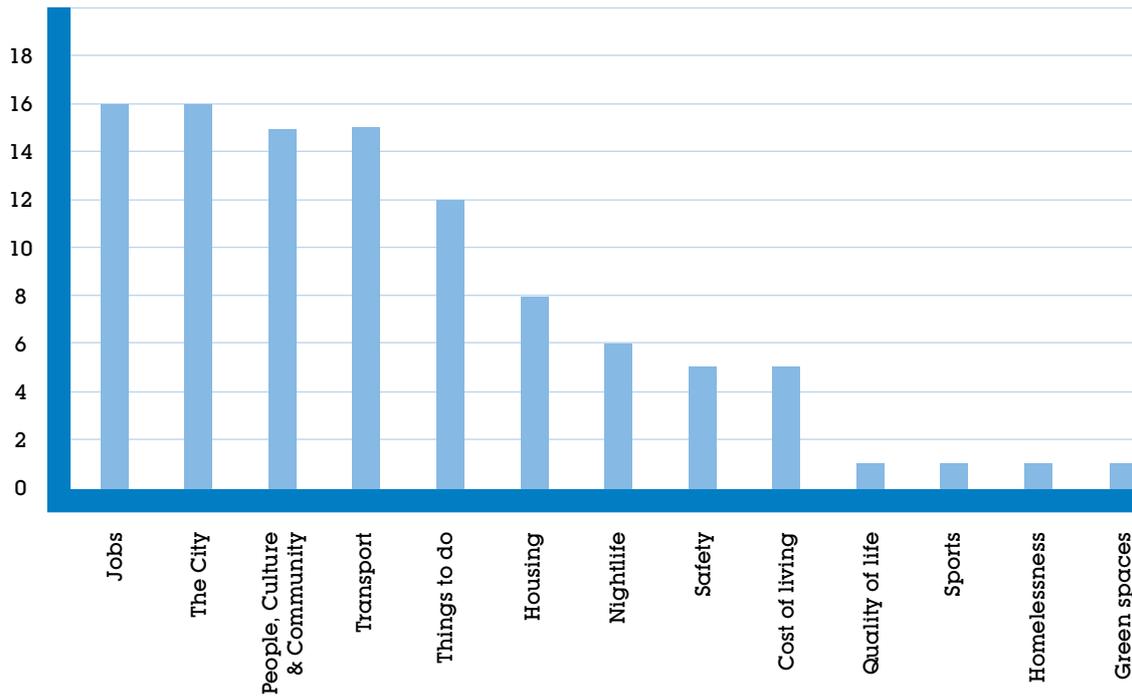
Mind map themes in order of incidence - All students (120 mind maps)



Mind map themes in order of incidence - Students Not from Leicester (UK) - 86 mind maps



Mind map themes in order of incidence - Students Not from Leicester (International) - 14 mind maps



Mind map themes in order of incidence - Students Originally from Leicester - 20 mind maps



'We don't necessarily want it on a plate. We just want some kind of insight into jobs and opportunities... that first starting point... Making that a bit clearer for students would be really helpful and... being classed as a graduate city, that would be really amazing, that would bring so many people to Leicester saying "we do take care of students when they graduate, we do have a bit of a plan for them, you know we can guide them". It would bring so many students and it would help in so many areas... just that first step and you know students can take it from there.'

