

Leicester Student Voice

Executive report

February
2020



Foreword

This report sets out the findings of a 'Leicester Student Voice' 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 aimed at increasing the proportion of local graduates who stay in Leicester to begin their career.

In 2017, an average of 28% of graduates from Leicester's two city universities stayed to live and work locally, compared to a national average of 48.4%.

Retaining graduate 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 Leicester Graduate Retention partnership will identify and implement actions aimed at influencing students to stay in Leicester and progress on to high-skilled career pathways with locally-based businesses, including support for start-up activity.

The Project actions will be determined based on hearing the student and business voice throughout the project, as critical stakeholders for developing meaningful change.

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



Sally Hackett



Peter Chandler



Jo Ives

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

Adele Browne
De Montfort University

'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

1. 'Leicester' for the purposes of this report denotes the city, environs and county of Leicestershire.

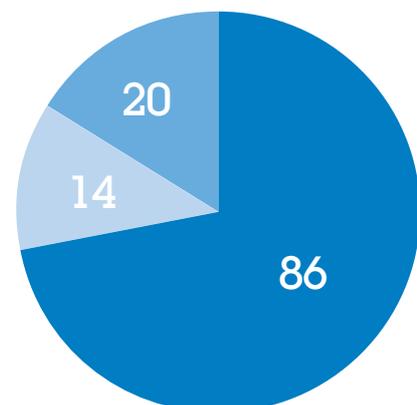
2. Data source: www.hesa.ac.uk. Denotes UK-domiciled first degree graduates.

Leicester student voice event

A total of 120 students took part in a half-day consultation event held at Leicester's City Hall, including 86 students not from Leicester (UK), 14 not from Leicester (international) and 20 originally from Leicester. Participants included a mixture of undergraduates and postgraduates and a range of ages and ethnic backgrounds.

Event participants

86 students not from Leicester (UK)
14 not from Leicester (international)
20 originally from Leicester



The event was designed to generate discussion topics from the students themselves:

01

Each student individually created a mind map of their thoughts about living and working in the city as a future graduate.

02

Students took part in peer to peer focus group discussions, using the mind maps as prompts to explore different themes.

Careers staff from the two universities facilitated the event, receiving training to avoid influencing the discussions with their own opinions. This aimed to ensure the findings are based on students' authentic views.

The findings presented in this report represent views common to at least 10% (12/120) of the mind maps and 33% (5) of the 15 focus group decisions.



Findings

The Leicester Student Voice event generated a large quantity of data on students' perceptions, observations and ideas for Leicester.

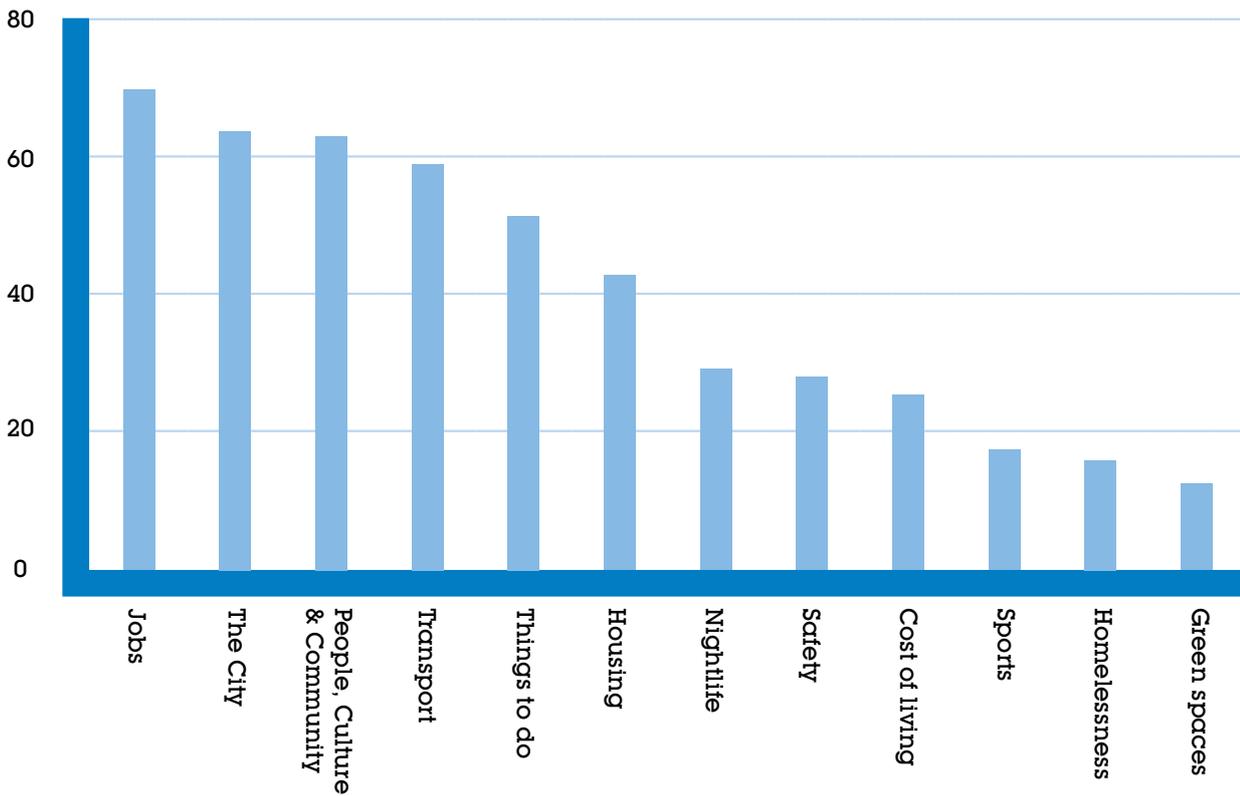
The findings overall indicate many positive opportunities for increasing the city's appeal to graduates. Students tended to describe issues and propose solutions at the same time, presenting many original suggestions for change. **Students often saw themselves as active agents who could participate in enhancing the city and addressing issues, working in partnership with city authorities and agencies.**

1. What matters to students

The mind maps revealed twelve themes as being of greatest importance when students considered staying to live in Leicester.

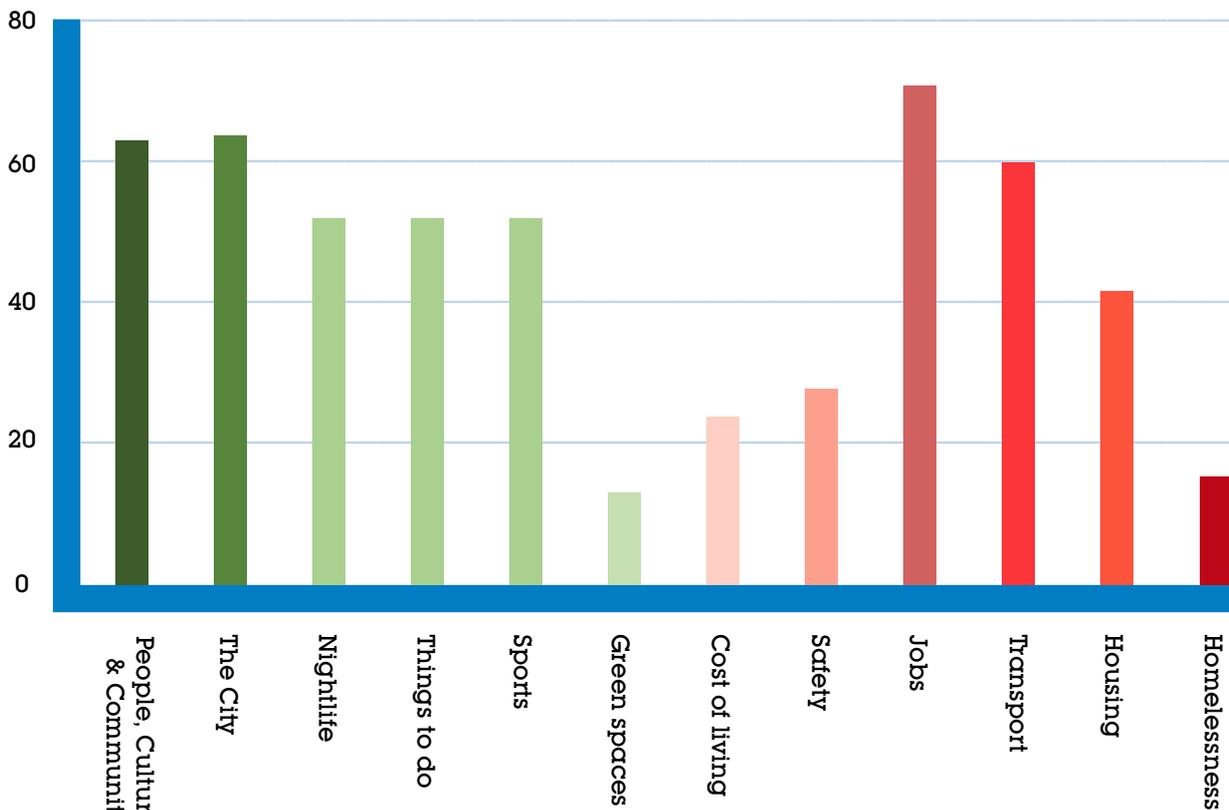
All groups of students, regardless of original home domicile, identified the same top six themes: Jobs, The City, People, culture and community, Transport, Things to do and Housing.

No. of mind maps featuring topic



2. Positive and negative views

Students' views on the different themes, analysed from the mind maps, from mostly positive to mostly negative:



Mostly Positive Views → Mostly Negative Views

People, Culture and Community

Students were overwhelmingly positive about Leicester's **People, Culture and Community**, describing the city's multicultural population as having a significant positive impact on their university experience.

A total of **47% of the mind maps featured the words 'diversity' or 'multicultural'**, as well as repeated mentions of 'welcoming', 'interesting', 'happy', 'friendly' and 'vibrant'.

Some students not originally from Leicester had been taken by surprise by the cultural diversity and said that as a result they fitted in more quickly. They valued the variety of foods available in shops and restaurants, particularly those students coming from London (who had not expected this) and international students. Students' expressed great appreciation for the city's multicultural community in many of the discussions, in relation to foods, places, communities and events.

Students talked about Leicester's heritage. This included Leicester's best known history, such as the discovery of Richard III, but students also felt it important to highlight the city's history of immigration. They thought this could be better celebrated, and **proposed setting up a permanent exhibition that explained the city's migration patterns over time** and presented Leicester as a success story for cultural integration.



The city

Students were positive about the compact size and layout of the city, which made it easy to get around on foot, and thirty mind maps (25%) mentioned Leicester's parks and green spaces as something they valued.

Leicester's variety of shops was also popular, featuring on 21% of the mind maps. Students also talked about liking the Cultural Quarter, New Walk and the Town Hall area.

Over a quarter (26%) of the students wrote 'homelessness' on their mind maps and described this as a significant problem affecting their experience. Students' main concern was that they did not think the problem was being addressed. Some talked about finding homeless people intimidating and said they felt uncomfortable going into the centre.

A key point regarding the city space is that many students had not explored far beyond the centre itself. This was seen to limit students' awareness of opportunities and features further out, including jobs, industries, places and attractions. Students often seemed to associate the prospect of staying in Leicester with having a job right in the city centre; as a result, negative impressions of the centre - whether empty shops, homelessness or run-down areas - discouraged students from wanting to stay.

Students talked about wanting to be more closely integrated with city activity to meet more local people. Some had enjoyed an app-based game, that had led them to explore the city centre, local landmarks and products. They felt they had learned a lot from this simple activity and the experience had increased their attachment to the city early on.

Students from other parts of the UK recommended a Leicester welcome pack. These were provided for international students, but UK students were overlooked, even though they may know nothing about the city, its festivals, traditions and attractions. It was felt there was little information, on arriving at the train station, to tell visitors about Leicester and what it offers.

I fell in love with the university and the city in one open day. I came and I took a 20 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 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.

25%
mentioned parks and green spaces as a positive asset

12%
of students found the city dirty

26%
Over a quarter of the students wrote 'homelessness' on their mind maps

21%
like the variety of shops

Things to do

Students' expressed mixed satisfaction with the amount and quality of leisure activities. Their views were often linked to their home domicile and the relative size of Leicester in comparison.

A key insight was students' appetite for leisure activities such as trampolining, crazy/mini golf and escape rooms. Students said they would welcome more of these types of activities, to provide a non-drinking alternative to bars and nightclubs. Food choice and options for eating out were seen as very positive, with lots to try and cheap prices.

Sport had a positive mention on one quarter of the mind maps, whether for spectators or players. However, local arts or cultural events were felt to be more elusive and not always well promoted to the student population. Students expressed a wish to be involved in the city's social scene as local citizens and were especially keen on the idea of alternative events during Freshers' Week that focused on getting to know Leicester as a place.



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 being our centre, our centre is university, so once university is over, for a lot of people the incentive to stay is finished.



Cost of living

Thirty-one mind maps mentioned the Cost of living, of which 84% positive comments. Eating and drinking out, taxis and Uber were widely felt to be good value. Several students had chosen to stay on for postgraduate study in Leicester because of the lower cost of living compared to other cities.

Key issues concerned students' transition from living at home to renting a property and paying travel costs and household bills. It had come as a shock to many students to discover that little or nothing was left after these were paid. Students' comments showed they anticipated a similarly challenging transition when moving from student to graduate status. It was clear that, for practical and financial reasons, some students had firm plans to live with their family after graduating, which meant leaving Leicester was inevitable if they came from elsewhere in the UK.

Safety

The topic of 'Safety' occurred on 35 (29%) of the mind maps and was raised for discussion in nine out of the fifteen focus groups. Students reported they felt unsafe going from university to home as they had to cross areas they knew to be hotspots for crime, such as Bede Park and Victoria Park.

They asked for more lighting in the parks and for more security cameras to be installed. Safety fears were seen to be a real concern for these students and a considerable negative factor deterring them from staying on as graduates.

Comments about Leicester being a dangerous city were made exclusively by students not originally from Leicester (UK), while students originally from Leicester, and international students, generally found the city to be safe. The words 'crime' and 'dangerous' made up 28% of all mind map comments about safety and were only used by students not from Leicester (UK).

The location of both private housing and purpose-built student halls were factors in students' safety concerns. They felt strongly that being housed in 'student areas' made them targets for thieves and many had witnessed or heard about violent incidents in their neighbourhood.



Graduate jobs

A key positive finding was that a majority of students stated they would remain in Leicester if they could find suitable graduate work.

A second key finding, however, was that students lacked awareness of job opportunities and this seemed to lead them to think that opportunities do not exist; 36% of participants used the phrases 'lack of', 'few', 'limited', 'not many' or 'no' to describe the local graduate employment market. Students did name Leicester's industries and talked about London, Manchester or Birmingham as better alternatives. They were aware of larger local employers such as Next, Hastings Direct and Mattioli Woods, but did not name any businesses from the region's SME community or what these companies might offer them. Students also identified a problem where their universities tended to celebrate graduates working for big name employers, but these were not representative of the local graduate labour market.

The findings showed that students were under-equipped to identify local jobs effectively, both because they restricted their search to 'graduate jobs' and only used major job search engines (such as Indeed), and because the majority of local high-skilled jobs were not

framed explicitly as graduate jobs using any channel. Students were seen to restrict their job search to specific job titles linked to their degree subject, rather than exploring a wider range of roles and industries. These findings highlight a clear missed opportunity to establish a go-to platform showcasing Leicester's employers and full breadth of opportunities, as well as provide students with better information and training in effective job search techniques.

Students held broadly negative views about pay rates in Leicester, often associating their experience of casual work with prospects for graduate work in the city and suggesting general pay rates were exploitative; only one or two voices contextualised salaries in relation to the local cost of living.

Despite these more negative findings, **22% of mind map comments on the theme of jobs were positive; these focused on opportunities related to enterprise, small business growth and start-ups.** The idea of entrepreneurial activity came up repeatedly in the focus group discussions. Students expressed a strong wish to be involved in helping resolve the city's issues, proposing the creation of city-wide entrepreneurial competitions that focused on problem-solving ideas rather than commercial innovations for profit. They felt these experiences would help them gain valuable skills, integrate with the city and offer original ideas to Leicester. This connected with students wanting increased contact with city organisations and businesses during their time as students, suggesting that increased interaction would help them understand the opportunities available, make good connections and encourage them to stay.

The reason is jobs, if you don't have a graduate job lined up within two months after graduating, you're not gonna have any money, and you're not gonna physically be able to stay... how do you make people be able to afford to stay... we'd love to, I think most students would stay in Leicester, but they just can't.

Public transport

Public transport and housing were closely interlinked with discussions of graduate jobs, as students assessed the financial and practical viability of staying in Leicester.

Approximately 50% of comments about transport facilities talked about Leicester having a good network of trains, buses, coaches, taxis and cycling facilities. Connectivity with other cities and regions of the UK was seen positively, especially by international students. Trains were described as convenient, quick and reliable, if not cheap.

The city bus services were found to be problematic: Two-thirds of mind map comments noted buses are 'expensive' and half of the twelve groups that discussed transport complained about needing to buy multiple bus tickets with different bus companies to travel quite short distances. Students also asked for more evening and night-time bus services, citing safety concerns as well as convenience, and wanted a student travel card enabling them to explore further out. The recent introduction of a mobile app to pay for bus tickets was popular.

The subject of cars and parking was raised by students who seemed to assume they would need a car if they were to have both decent and affordable housing and be able to get to work, due to lack of confidence in the city's public transport. The environment was also mentioned, with several suggestions for a tram system to demonstrate Leicester's commitment to the environment.





Housing

Students' experiences of student housing had a strong knock-on effect on their feelings about living in the city in general, their sense of being welcome and expectations of being able to integrate well and feel safe.

A lack of disposable income due to housing costs was a primary cause of stress for students living independently for the first time. This was compounded by the perceived poor value for money of accommodation. Students were dissatisfied with the physical condition of privately rented student houses and described poor relationships with unpleasant and unscrupulous landlords. They expressed a strong wish for student housing to be integrated in local neighbourhoods rather than separated in student areas.

Some postgraduate students had found barriers trying to rent housing that was not 'student housing', even though they were willing to pay more to live in other neighbourhoods. They reported that letting agencies only dealt in 'student housing' or 'professional lets', and **students suggested that postgraduate students and new graduates would benefit from a new type of 'graduate housing' that fitted between the two.**

Summary and next steps

Leicester Student Voice was a highly informative event that showed students' appetite to take part in serious discussions about the city and share their views of its advantages and disadvantages as a place to stay.

Students expressed a strong wish to get involved in hands-on work to help resolve issues in the city, and their positive comments on many of the city's features have provided fresh reasons to further build, enhance and promote these assets.

Some students had more experience than others of living and working in different regions and some of the most positive comments came from students able to contextualise Leicester compared to other places. Students who had lived in more affluent regions highlighted the opportunities Leicester offered to build a fast-track career due to affordable living costs and a culture of enterprise. Students who had been on university work placements had a more optimistic and confident view of their ability to source and apply for good graduate work. Mature students offered more nuanced views of Leicester's homelessness problem in the context of social policies and funding.

The Centre for Cities' report on graduate retention (2016) found that access to employment is the key determinant of graduate movements and 'amenities matter, but not as much as employment factors'. This has been reflected in the Leicester Student Voice study. People, community and culture, city amenities and things to do were viewed favourably by a majority of students and represent potential pull factors. However, these assets do not predominate the core economic concerns of having a job and somewhere to live, which could be described as push factors based on many students' current views.

4. <https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/great-british-brain-drain-where-graduates-move-and-why/>





Influences on students' decision-making were seen to be interlinked and complex. **Students anticipated the transition from student life to graduate life as a major financial, practical and mental life change and the majority did not feel they had the tools or know-how to approach this head-on.** Work, housing, transport, community and friends were closely interlinked and students expressed a sense of anxiety about what to do or how to set themselves up.

A highly positive finding from the study, however, was that a majority of students expressed an appetite to build a life in Leicester if they had the means to do so. The meandering nature of many students' planning, revealed in the focus groups, points to real potential for the project to influence students' movements and decisions.

'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 project recognises that inward investment and job creation are key factors for the significant increased retention of graduates over the long term, driven by Leicester and Leicestershire's industrial strategy. However, the Leicester Student Voice study has revealed a range of quicker win opportunities to bring enhancements and reduce negative perceptions. In particular, students' widespread lack of accurate knowledge points to the benefits to be gained from information, communication and integration strategies.

Recommendations

The Leicester Graduate Retention project will seek to deliver positive changes for graduate retention:

- || Through direct actions, where these fall within the power of the respective partner organisations;
- || Through sharing the Leicester Student Voice findings and recommendations for change with relevant city authorities and stakeholders

The principal recommendations emerging from the study fall into four categories:

01

Implement policies and programmes that integrate students with the city.

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

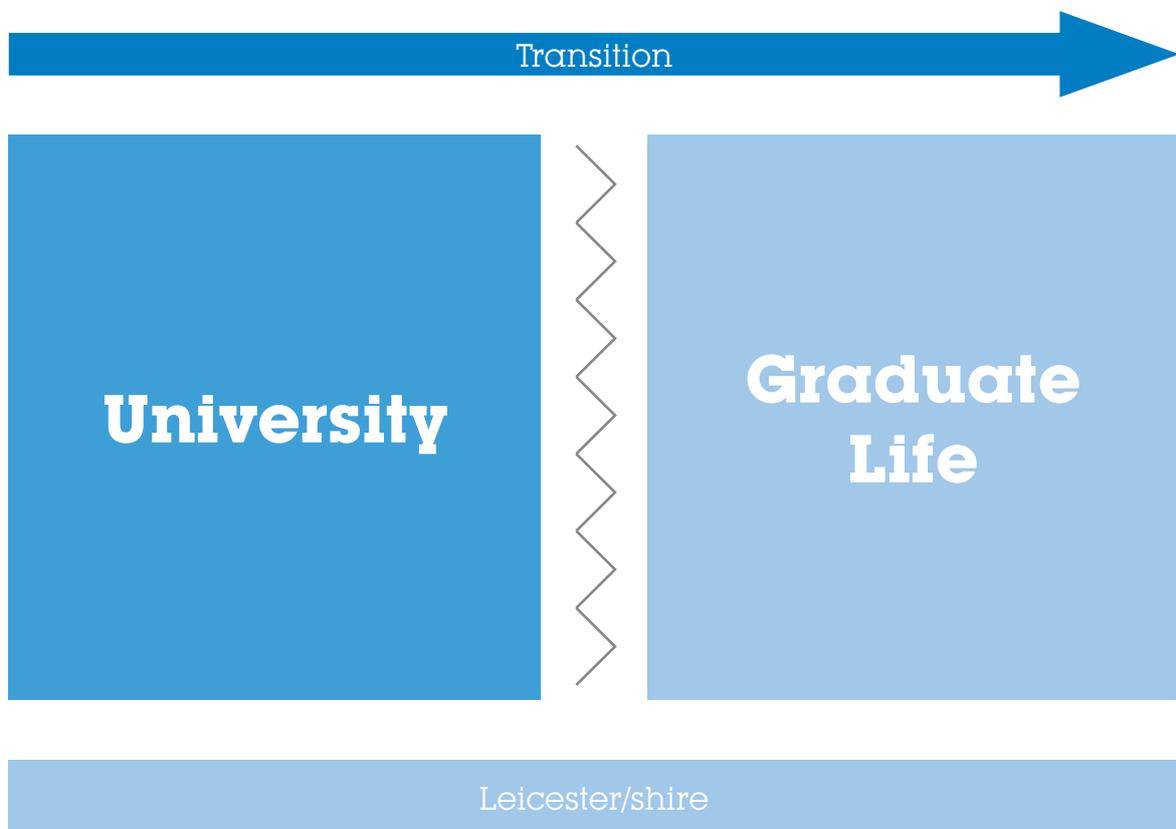
02

Develop and promote a defined and visible graduate employment offer. It was highly apparent from the study that Leicester's graduate employment opportunities are not being framed and promoted to students in a coherent and effective way. **There is a clear opportunity to establish a single digital platform for Leicester's graduate opportunities** and to assist businesses with the re-framing of entry-level opportunities to attract graduate talent. At the same time it is seen as important to work with local businesses to understand their thoughts about the value of graduates, exploring perceived skills gaps and training needs. This could lead, for example, to jointly funded schemes that provide support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to upskill graduates during their first year in work, copying the model of large employers' graduate development programmes.

03

Invest in programmes to support the transition from student to graduate. 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 formerly in place at their university. The abrupt cessation of university life, social circles, activities and support is seen to be extremely challenging to students if they have not planned and prepared this transition at an earlier stage of their course, and without new forms of external support.

The study shows that **preparation from an early stage is essential to give students the confidence and means to progress smoothly into a graduate life in the city.** This includes opportunities to build networks, experience business environments, go on placements and have accurate information on jobs they can apply for. Improved integration with the city is seen to provide a key opportunity to deliver this preparation throughout the student's degree, making Leicester 'sticky' for students not originally from the region, while also ensuring Leicester -domiciled students progress to high-skilled graduate work and fully contribute their talents to the economy.



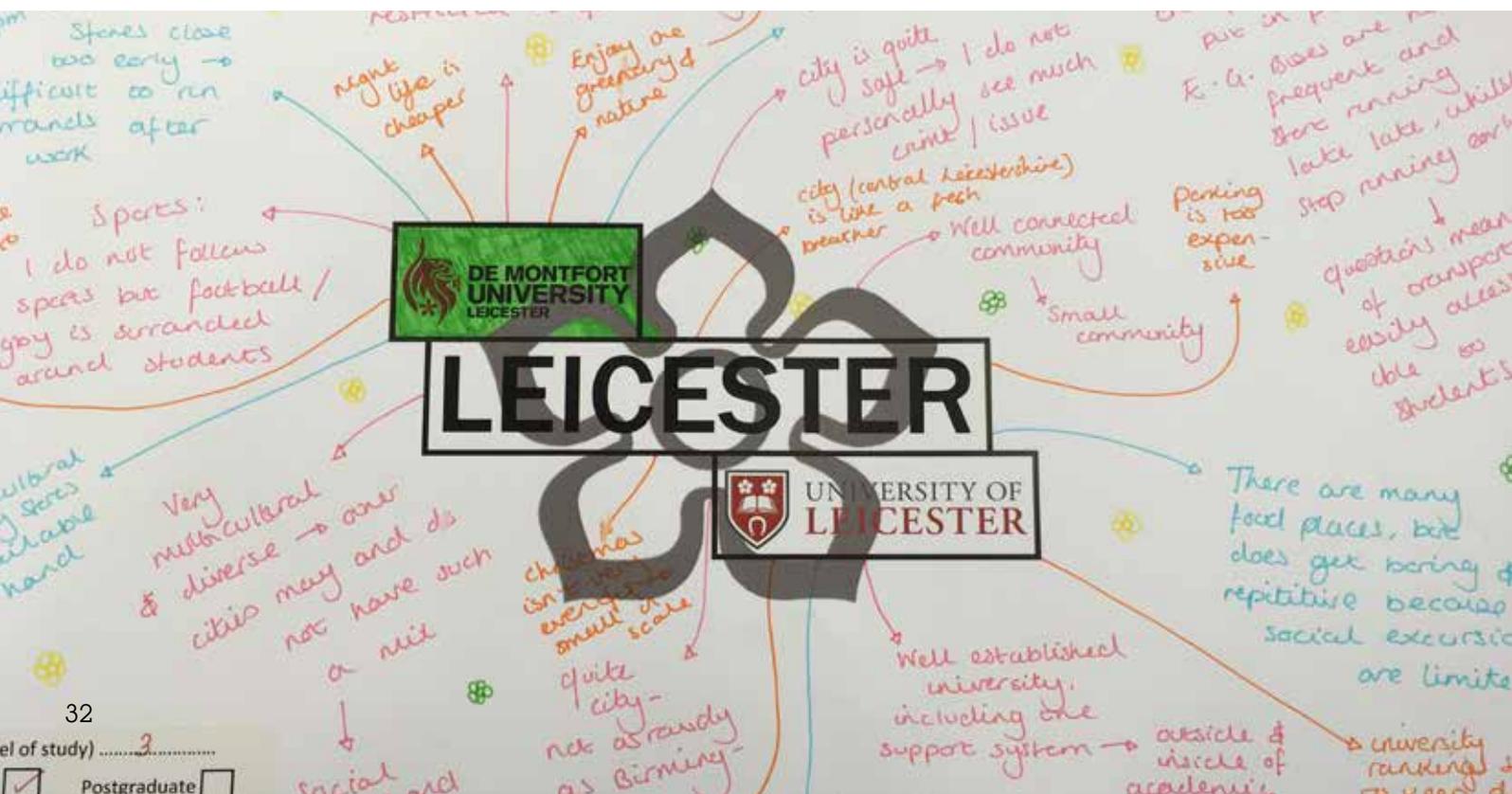
04

Deliver information and communication campaigns. The 120 student voices recorded through this study showed clearly that students' perceptions of Leicester are often misinformed or non-contextualised. For example, students' comments on pay rates did not factor in the relative cost of living in Leicester and affordability of housing compared to other cities. There was very little awareness of the range of successful businesses operating in the city. This presents an opportunity to dissect these myths and better promote Leicester's full offer to prospective and current students. We also learned from the study that students place high value on features such as Leicester's cultural diversity and city amenities. There is potential to make even more of these assets in promotional campaigns and fully realise Leicester's unique selling points for the purposes of both student recruitment and graduate retention.



Referrals

The Centre for Cities report¹ underlined that effective economic fundamentals are essential to build successful city economies; these include transport, housing and planning. The Leicester Student Voice event produced considerable evidence of students' thoughts on 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. In summary the issues are:

- ||| 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 into the city centre.
- ||| Students' experience of private rented housing is largely negative due to condition of housing, location, value for money and attitudes of landlords.
- ||| Students in purpose-built student housing are particularly negatively affected by perceived low levels of safety in their immediate 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 type of housing that is no longer student housing, but less expensive than professional lets, while transitioning into their graduate life.
- ||| 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.

1. <https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/great-british-brain-drain-where-graduates-move-and-why/>

