

Policy Paper

Our Nottingham in 10 Years

The Post-Brexit and Post-Pandemic Student and Alumni Perspective on Graduate Retention, Belonging and Placemaking

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Executive Summary

Graduate retention has long been recognised as a critical issue for Nottingham—a city with two large universities attracting tens of thousands of students annually and a reputation as a thriving student hub. The potential to transition this young talent into long-term residents is significant.

Research background

Of Nottingham's 323,700 residents, an estimated 43,300 were university students in 2021 (Nottingham Insight, 2021). Yet, as highlighted in *The Great Nottingham Debate* (Lawton and Blackley, 2016), the city has historically struggled to retain graduates once they complete their studies. Nearly a decade later, this challenge persists in the context of national and international pressures. Reflecting this, Nottingham City Council's *Student Living Strategy 2023–2028* identifies graduate retention as a key priority and an important contributor to community cohesion and mutual benefit for all citizens (Nottingham City Council, 2024a).

Since 2016, both Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have reshaped the higher education and labour market landscapes. Brexit ended freedom of movement, making it harder for UK graduates to work abroad and more difficult for international students to remain after study. The pandemic, meanwhile, disrupted student experiences, intensified job insecurity—particularly in sectors with a young workforce—and accelerated the closure of nightlife venues central to Nottingham's student culture. These structural shifts underscore the importance of understanding student perspectives, which play a decisive role in shaping graduate retention.

Against this backdrop, this report examines how current students, postgraduates and recent graduates perceive Nottingham as a place to study, live and work. Drawing on survey responses and focus group discussions, the study explores factors that influence decisions to remain in Nottingham after graduation or pursue opportunities elsewhere. It also compares these findings with evidence from 2016 to assess how perceptions, opportunities and challenges have evolved over time. The study provides insights for policymakers, universities, and employers invested in Nottingham's future competitiveness. In particular, it offers further evidence to substantiate the emphasis on graduate retention and talent acquisition in the *Nottingham Vision 2050*, the city's recently published economic and regeneration programme (ARUP, 2026).

Main findings

The evidence presents a clear and consistent picture. Nottingham is regarded as an attractive, affordable and welcoming student city. Participants highlighted the city's cultural diversity, manageable size, strong university experience, social opportunities and relative affordability compared to other cities such as London. These qualities contribute strongly to students' sense of belonging and overall satisfaction with their university experience.

However, positive experiences of studying and living in Nottingham do not automatically translate into long-term retention. The most significant factor influencing graduates' future plans is the perception of limited career progression opportunities within the city. Many respondents reported minimal awareness of graduate-level employment opportunities and questioned whether Nottingham could provide the long-term professional pathways available in larger labour markets. Graduates also frequently viewed Nottingham as a place to begin their careers but not necessarily to build them. This is compounded by concerns with housing, safety and limited professional networks.

Comparisons with *The Great Nottingham Debate* of 2016 reveals both persistent and evolving perceptions and challenges. Positive perceptions of Nottingham as a university city have endured, while concerns regarding career visibility and graduate pathways remain unresolved and new issues have emerged around perceptions of safety.

Key Research Insights

- Graduate retention is not determined by a binary choice of staying or leaving based on a single decision made post-graduation. Rather, graduates follow more complex trajectories based on ongoing professional and personal lifecycles and choices.
- At the same time, Nottingham is largely perceived as a transitional rather than permanent destination. The main barrier to graduate retention in Nottingham is one of long-term economic and professional attachment, rather than student satisfaction or place attractiveness.
- Retention should be understood and addressed as a long-term talent pathway that requires cross-sectoral investments towards economic opportunities as well as overall quality-of-life factors.

Recommendations

Graduate retention can play a crucial role in Nottingham's future competitiveness, vibrancy and wellbeing. Achieving this requires creating the conditions that enable students to envision a successful future within and as part of the city.

Report sets out key recommendations for strengthening graduate retention, as follows:

1. Develop strategies for the varied graduate retention pathways
2. Prioritise career visibility and progression pathways
3. Transform career visibility into a city-wide initiative
4. Build a stronger alumni and professional ecosystem
5. Position Nottingham as a place to build a career
6. Invest in graduate housing transitions and safe & inclusive city experiences
7. Embed graduate retention into Nottingham's long-term strategy

Research Aims and Approach

This project was supported by funding from the Trent Institute of Learning & Teaching (TILT) at Nottingham Trent University (NTU).

Senior academics and undergraduate students worked together to:

- Investigate how current students and graduates perceive Nottingham as a place to live, study, and work;
- Identify key factors shaping graduate retention and onward migration;
- Compare current findings (2025) with The Great Nottingham Debate (2016), identifying persistent and new challenges in the post-Brexit, post-pandemic context; and
- Provide evidence-based recommendations for universities, employers, and local stakeholders.

Methods

To meet these aims, the project employed a mixed-methods approach using an online survey and focus groups.

Survey: A quantitative survey was distributed via social media channels and personal networks to capture broad trends in perceptions and intentions. Survey questions drew inspiration from *The Great Nottingham Debate* (Lawton and Blackley, 2016) and were co-designed with the student researchers and their academic mentors. The survey contained nested questions for current undergraduates, current postgraduates and recent graduates/alumni in respect of their differing circumstances. 122 surveys were completed, generating primarily quantitative data through closed questions alongside testimonials through several open questions.

Focus groups: Three in-depth qualitative focus groups conducted with both undergraduates, postgraduates/alumni and Unitemps students/graduates of Nottingham Trent University, provided space to explore emerging themes in greater depth and capture narrative insights. Responses were collected anonymously and stored securely, ensuring participants' confidentiality in line with NTU's Research Privacy Notice and UK data protection regulations.

Study limitations

While this research provides valuable insights into graduate retention, belonging and placemaking in Nottingham, the following study limitations must be acknowledged.

- **Sample size and representativeness:** While the 122 survey respondents and 3 focus groups provides a rich dataset, the sample is not statistically representative of Nottingham's student/graduate population. Findings are indicative rather than definitive and cannot be assumed to reflect the views of all Nottingham students or graduates.
- **Self-selection:** Participation in both the survey and focus group was voluntary. Respondents may have opted in based on particularly strong positive or negative views, with individuals who feel less engaged with these issues possibly being underrepresented in the data.
- **Reliance on perceptions:** The findings in this report relate to perceptions and beliefs about conditions in Nottingham (and elsewhere), and should not be interpreted as direct evidence of actual conditions or outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the study provides robust and timely evidence for understanding student and graduate perspectives of Nottingham. Specifically, the combination of survey findings, qualitative insights and comparison with previous research offers a valuable foundation for policy insights in the context of the city's new urban regeneration and economic development agenda and the potential opportunities arising from local government restructuring. Future research could further expand the representative sample, and incorporate long-term or ongoing research to capture more dynamic shifts in perceptions over time.

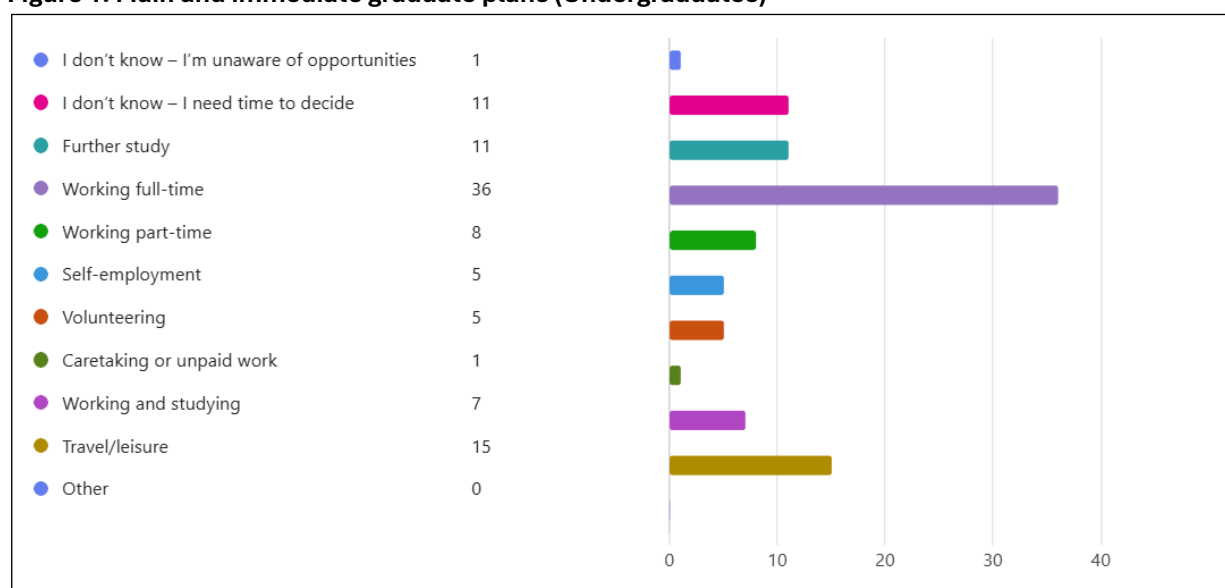
Summary of Findings

The following summary of findings synthesises the qualitative and quantitative data. The evidence presents a clear and consistent picture of Nottingham as an attractive place to live and study, but with various quality-of-life concerns also influencing perceptions of the city. Nevertheless, career opportunities remain the main driver of graduates' decisions of whether to stay or leave Nottingham, which is compounded by perceived invisibility of professional opportunities.

Career intentions and trajectories

According to the survey data (Figure 1), most current **undergraduate** student respondents **intend to work full-time** after graduation, with over half selecting this option. Other popular pathways included further study, travel or leisure, while smaller numbers considered self-employment, volunteering, or part-time work.¹

Figure 1: Main and immediate graduate plans (Undergraduates)



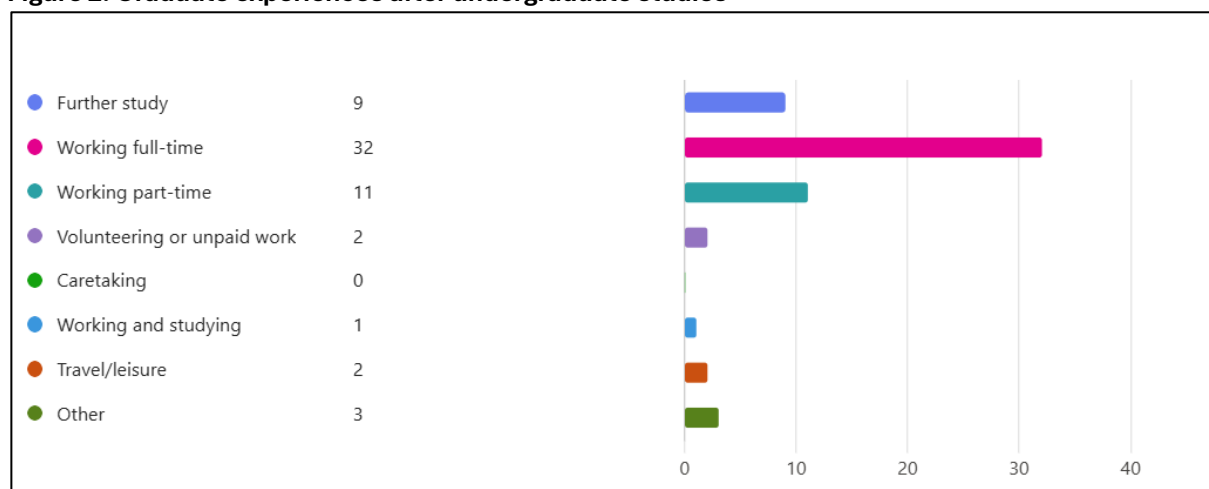
Postgraduates and alumni on the other hand have already made decisions about employment, further study or relocation, with their responses reflecting lived realities of graduate life.

The most common pathways for postgraduates and alumni (Figure 2 below) were **full-time employment**, followed by part-time work and further study. Smaller numbers reported volunteering, travel, or other pursuits, highlighting the varied but pragmatic ways graduates transition after university. These results suggest that, given the opportunity, graduates tend to

¹It is important to note that participants were able to select multiple responses, which explains the spread of outcomes and highlights the flexibility in students' thinking. Nevertheless, the data demonstrates a clear preference among students to transition into full-time employment following graduation.

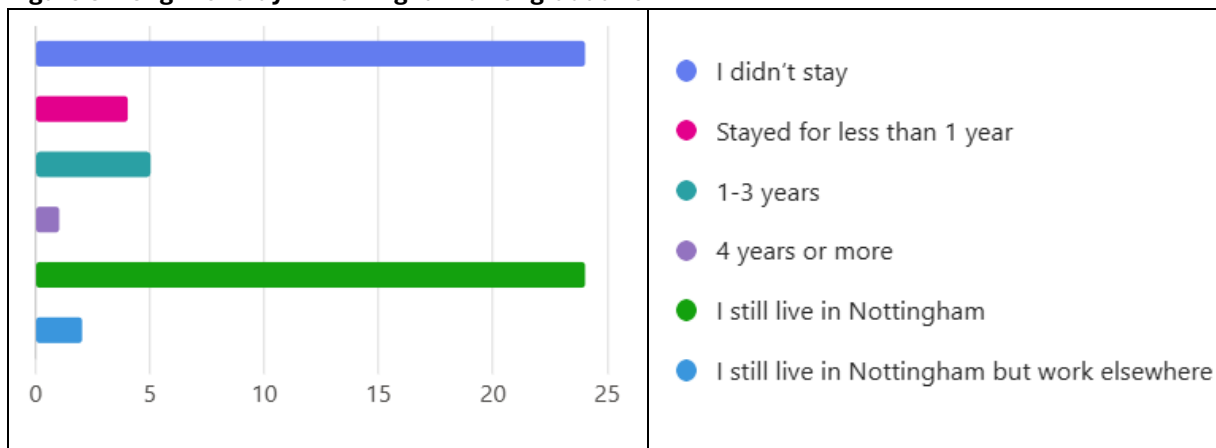
move **decisively into employment**, possibly reflecting the immediate need for stability after completing their studies.

Figure 2: Graduate experiences after undergraduate studies



The same number of **postgraduates/alumni stayed in Nottingham** after their undergraduate studies as those who had left (Figure 3). A small number of respondents indicated that they had stayed for 1 – 3 years or less than a year. These findings suggest post-graduation trajectories are more varied and nuanced than simply a decision to stay or go.

Figure 3: Length of stay in Nottingham after graduation



Nottingham's push-pull social dynamics

Study participants consistently described Nottingham as an attractive and supportive place to study and live, reinforcing the city's reputation as a diverse and welcoming student destination. At the same time, participants highlighted several factors related to quality-of-life that hamper Nottingham's attractiveness as a long-term, post-study destination.

Overall positive experiences

- Across both survey and focus groups, **affordability, accessibility, cultural diversity and quality of life** emerged as key strengths.
- Participants described a **supportive university environment**, with students valuing teaching, staff, accessibility and work placement opportunities.
- Compared with larger cities in the UK, particularly London, respondents valued Nottingham's relatively manageable **cost of living, compact size, transport connectivity and vibrant student environment** and nightlife.
- **Local societies, volunteering opportunities and informal social networks** were identified as important contributors to students' sense of belonging and inclusion. Over 90% of undergraduate survey respondents reported feeling welcome in the city.

Quality-of-life concerns

- **Availability and affordability of suitable housing** emerged as a concern, especially during the transition from student life into professional life. This suggests affordability remains a relative advantage but one under pressure.
- While societies and networks provide a sense of belonging, the city's **drinking culture** is perceived as exclusionary.
- **Safety** emerged as a clear concern. Both student and alumni survey respondents generally reported feeling welcome, but many felt only "somewhat safe". Safety also repeatedly appeared in students' aspirations for Nottingham's future.
- Focus group discussions provided additional context, with **crime, harassment and visible homelessness** identified as issues affecting both quality-of-life and perceptions of the city. Participants suggested these concerns influence personal experience as well as the city's wider reputation and appeal, which in turn affects retention. These issues were often discussed less as direct threats and more as factors that shape impressions of Nottingham as a place to live and work. In this sense, perceptions matter alongside objective measures of safety. Even where crime rates may be declining or concentrated geographically, persistent negative narratives can influence graduate decisions and shape the city's external reputation.

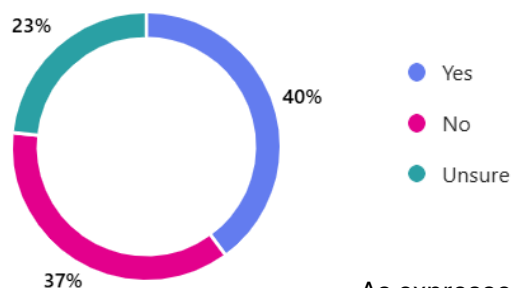
These findings suggest Nottingham's attractiveness is shaped by push-pull dynamics. On the one hand, there are strong levels of belonging, diversity, affordability and student satisfaction. On the other, growing concerns around housing, safety and wellbeing undermine the city's appeal as a place to build a long-term future.

The influence of Brexit and the pandemic

Postgraduate and alumni survey responses were varied about how Brexit and the pandemic had influenced post-graduation plans. While 40% stated their expectations had changed, 37% reported no change, and a further 23% were unsure (Figure 4).

This spread highlights the uncertainty caused by these disruptions, with a significant proportion of graduates reconsidering their career or study trajectories. The fact that nearly two-fifths experienced no change may indicate resilience or that their career paths were less directly impacted, but the high proportion of ‘yes’ and ‘unsure’ responses still suggests a notable level of disruption and instability in the graduate labour market.

Figure 4: Changes in graduate expectations and plans due to pandemic and Brexit



As expressed across the 24 write-in responses, Brexit most often reshaped graduates’ expectations by restricting mobility, reducing access to European study/work opportunities, and introducing new financial and visa barriers. Many respondents described lost or diminished ambitions to study, live, or work abroad, especially in Europe, while others highlighted increased financial pressures, sectoral instability, and a tougher job market.

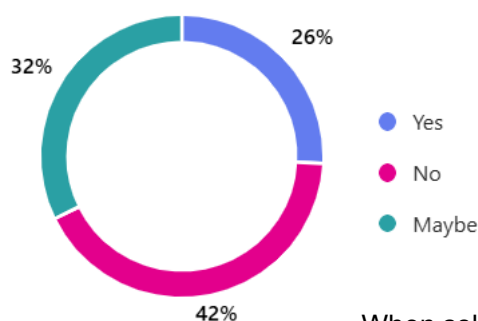
A smaller group noted shifts in personal plans, such as staying in the UK to maintain settlement status or rethinking postgraduate study. These findings resonate with wider debates about reduced international opportunities for UK graduates post-Brexit (see section below on contextualising the findings), and suggest that, while many alumni still feel welcome in Nottingham, their broader horizons have been constrained by geopolitical changes. One respondent explained that, rather than Brexit, it was the pandemic that ‘made [them] look for jobs with a work-from-home element.’

Coupled with the perception that Nottingham has fewer relevant employment opportunities (discussed below), the economic and policy impacts of Brexit have important implications for graduate retention in Nottingham.

Main factors influencing intentions to stay or leave

Only 26% of undergraduate survey respondents reported planning to stay in the city, with a further 32% unsure. This is despite (as noted above), 90% of undergraduates feeling welcome.

Figure 5: Undergraduate plans to stay in Nottingham after graduation



When asked to state why they would choose to stay or leave Nottingham, respondents tended to emphasise ‘opportunities.’ The survey also showed a clear ambition to leave for larger markets like London (36% of undergraduates), driven by the perception of ‘more attractive or higher-quality opportunities elsewhere’. However, the non-negligible (32%) ‘maybe’ group in Figure 5 above suggests some students could be open to staying in Nottingham, especially if they are more aware of opportunities. This underscores that stakeholders need to focus resourcing on targeting this ambivalent group.

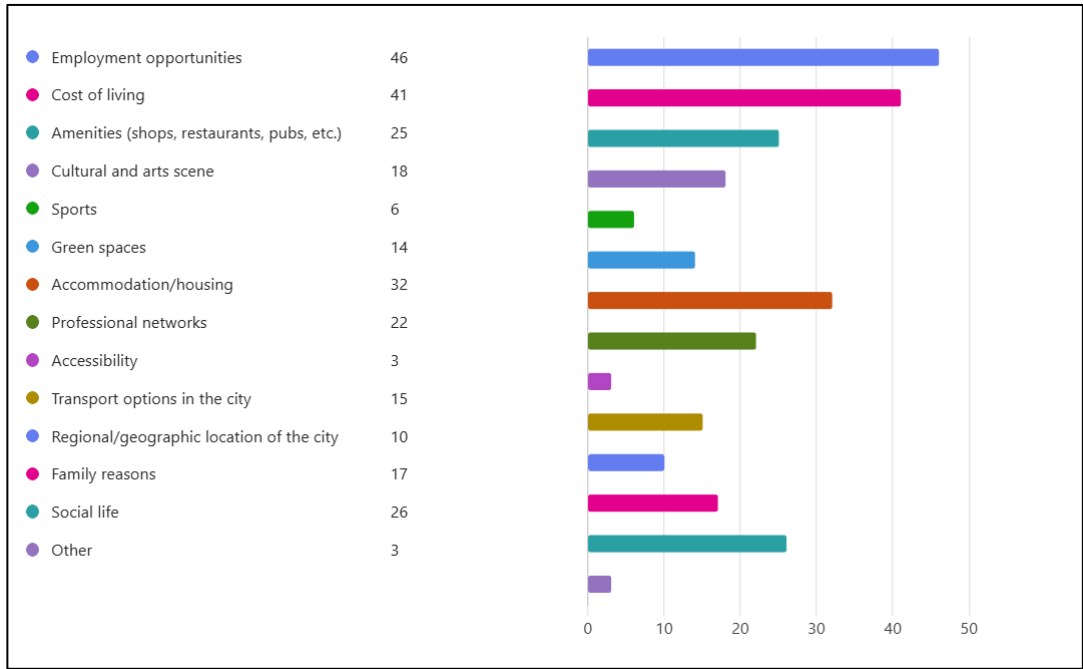
Figure 6: Reasons stated for plans to leave or stay in Nottingham



A significant proportion of undergraduates are drawn to alternative destinations, most notably London, where over one-third of students expressed a desire to work. This trend reflects a wider perception that **more attractive or higher-quality opportunities exist outside of Nottingham**, particularly in larger metropolitan areas with stronger graduate job markets.

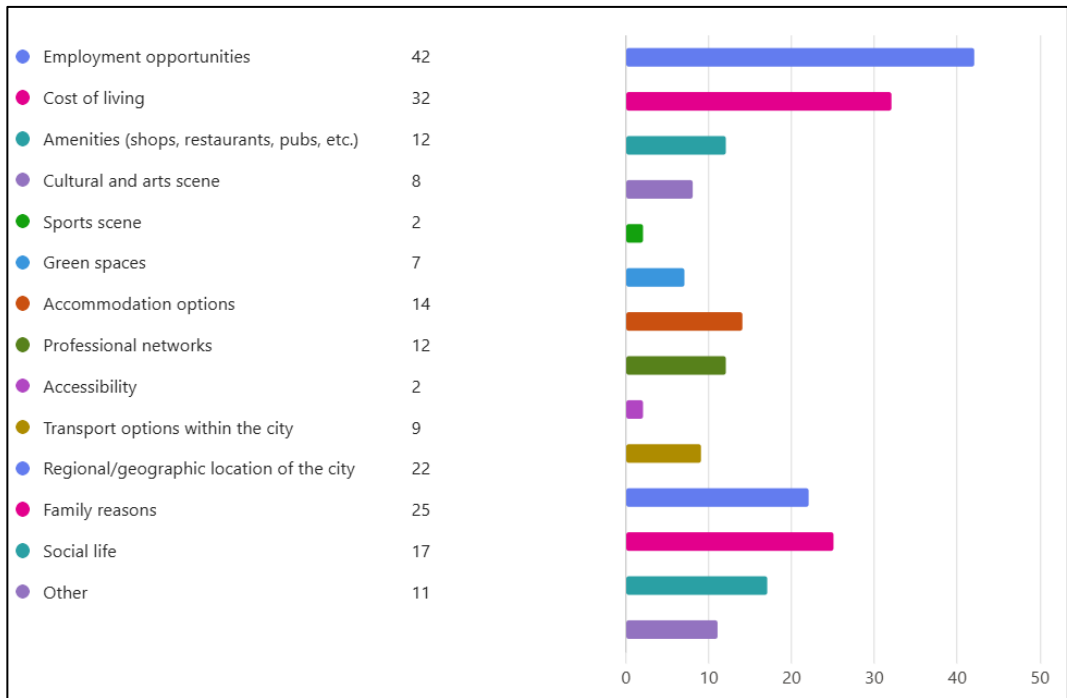
Other prominent factors informing **undergraduate plans to stay in or leave Nottingham** include cost-of-living, amenities, housing, professional networks and social life (as discussed above).

Figure 7: Most important factors that inform undergraduate decisions to stay or leave



Not unlike the undergraduates, **postgraduates and alumni** also reported that cost-of-living, amenities, housing, professional networks and social life were important factors in **deciding whether to stay in Nottingham or leave**. However, they were also more likely to cite family reasons and the location of the city as important factors.

Figure 8: Most important factors that informed graduate/alumni decisions to stay or leave

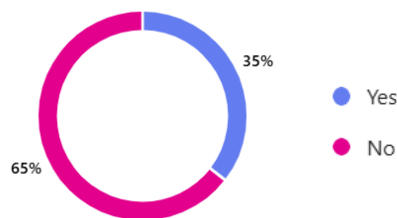


The decisive factor: perceived career opportunities

One area outweighed these factors and had a dramatic influence on graduate retention overall: **perceptions of limited career opportunities.**

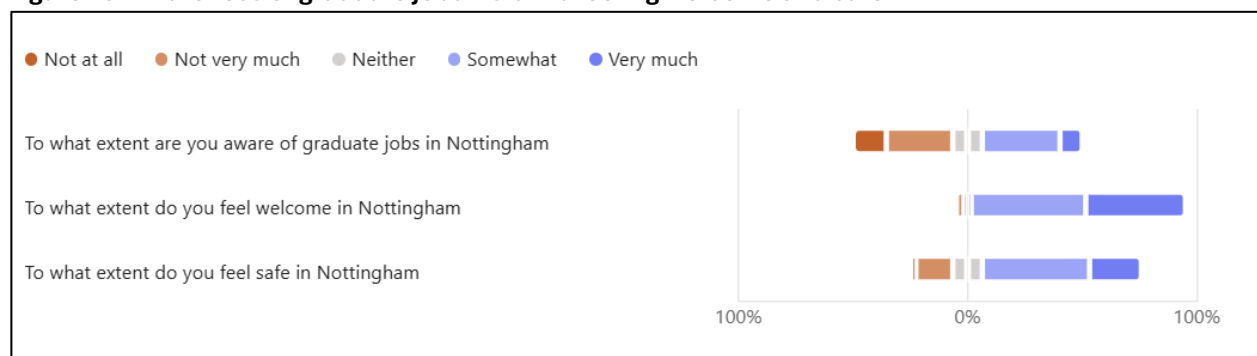
65% **undergraduates** reported **not being aware of graduate jobs** in Nottingham specific to their degree.

Figure 9: awareness of graduate jobs in Nottingham



These findings are notable given the highly positive responses on whether students feel welcome and safe in Nottingham.

Figure 10: Awareness of graduate jobs vis-a-vis feeling welcome and safe



The significance of perceived limited career opportunities was confirmed across the **focus group** discussions. Participants felt there was a **lack of visible, future-focused roles** and **structured career pathways**. Employment options were often described as “too traditional,” making the city suitable for early career **entry-level work** but less attractive for long-term progression. (In this sense, traditional roles were described as jobs that have the potential to be replaced by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and entry-level hospitality.) Stronger **alumni programmes and professional networks** were identified as ways to make these opportunities more visible.

Although participants acknowledged the city’s potential, both current students and graduates felt that stronger employer-university integration and **a more developed professional ecosystem** would be required for Nottingham to be seen as a viable long-term career destination.

Key implications

The findings suggest that graduate retention is more complex than a simple once-off decision to stay or leave Nottingham after graduation. Rather, students and graduates exhibit a range of personal and professional trajectories, and a multi-faceted relationship to the city as they progress through and beyond student life.

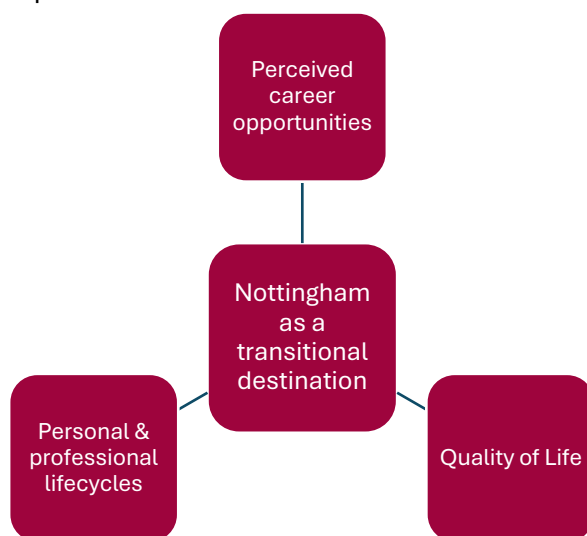
Nottingham is generally regarded as an attractive, affordable and welcoming student city. Participants highlighted the city's cultural diversity, manageable size, strong university experience, social opportunities and relative affordability compared to other cities. These qualities contribute strongly to students' sense of belonging and overall satisfaction with their university experience.

Although quality-of-life matters and a strong sense of belonging is an asset for Nottingham, career opportunities remain the key driver of decisions about whether to leave or stay in the city post-graduation.

A consistent theme across both survey and focus group data is that Nottingham is perceived as an exceptional but temporary student city, offering a lively, affordable, and attractive place to study, rather than a viable professional and permanent destination. Many respondents struggled to envisage a long-term professional future in Nottingham.

*"A perfect place for a student's university experience, but not a viable place to build a future."
(Undergraduate student)*

While students value their experience of living and studying in Nottingham, many perceive stronger career pathways, professional networks and advancement opportunities elsewhere. These findings suggest graduate retention should be approached as a long-term talent pathway rather than a short-term retention problem.



How Nottingham has changed since 2016

Prior research on graduate retention in Nottingham was conducted in 2014 and 2016. The ‘*Great Nottingham Debate 2014*’ analysed socio-economic data to identify challenges and opportunities. This was followed by *The Great Nottingham Debate 2016* report, published by The Nottingham Post and Nottingham Business School (Nottingham Trent University 2016), which was informed by discussions with local stakeholders. These discussions focused on two core questions:

- *What can be done to attract and retain graduates, other young people and skilled workers in the short term?*
- *What sort of economy should Nottingham aspire to develop in the long term and what are the lessons for place marketing?*

The 2016 study combined a literature review with secondary data analysis (including the Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education survey), focus groups with 41 NTU students and alumni, and five semi-structured interviews with employers and specialist recruiters. This body of work provides a valuable baseline for comparison with the 2025 study to assess whether and how conditions and perceptions have changed or remain stable over nine years later.

Table 1 below compares key findings from the 2016 and 2025 studies. As the table shows, safety, once absent from the 2016 debate, became a major concern by 2025, with both surveys and focus groups highlighting crime, harassment, and visible homelessness as deterrents to staying. Housing, meanwhile, remains an unresolved issue across both studies. In 2016, a shortage of graduate accommodation was already noted, and by 2025 this challenge had intensified, with early-career professionals struggling to find available, affordable housing options as they transition from study to work. These pressures risk damaging Nottingham’s long-term viability of relative affordability and appealing size, unless addressed directly.

Reflecting further on the 2016 research, some themes stubbornly persist. Mainly, the lack of visible alumni networks, the “student bubble” effect, and the weak promotion of Nottingham’s professional identity. However, some issues have evolved, notably perceptions of career opportunities. From frustration at the invisibility of SMEs in 2016 to disappointment at the lack of future-focused industries in 2025.

Table 1: Comparing 2016 and 2025 key themes

Theme	2016	2025	Change	
Career opportunities above all	Career advice focused on large graduate schemes & under-promoted local SMEs. Public sector roles common. London seen as the main career destination. International graduates constrained by visa rules.	Career opportunities still decisive, but Nottingham seen as reliant on traditional roles with limited progression and few future-focused sectors (tech, digital, creative). London reinforced as default hub. Visa constraints persist.	Worsened – from visibility of options to lack of long-term, future-focused pathways	!
Positive university experience	Strong reputations for employability and research. Nottingham viewed as an excellent place to study.	Universities and study experience remain highly positive. City continues to be well regarded for studying.	Sustained positive	—
Lack of (visible) alumni & professional networks	Alumni identified as under-utilised; willingness to mentor existed but no structured system.	Continued absence of visible, structured alumni and professional networks.	No progress	—
Belonging limited to the student experience	Strong student culture & appreciation of nightlife, sports & creative districts. But belonging largely confined to a “student bubble” with limited awareness of wider professional assets.	Lively and diverse student experience continues, but social life seen as overly centred on drinking and still weakly linked to professional networks.	Persistent	—
City identity & image as untapped potential	Seen as affordable and full of potential, with strengths in healthcare, life sciences and creative sectors; branding viewed as under-confident.	Still perceived as having untapped potential; stronger emphasis on promotion, clearer pathways and digital/social media branding.	Reframed but unresolved	—
Safety	Safety and crime did not emerge as a notable issue.	Concerns about crime, safety and visible homelessness seen as direct barriers to quality of life and retention.	New issue	+
Affordable student living but limited graduate housing	City praised as affordable and accessible, but concerns about oversupply of student housing and limited options for young professionals.	Affordability remains a strength, but graduate housing shortages are more acute, making the transition from study to work harder.	Unresolved, now urgent	!

Contextualising the findings

Understanding why students and graduates choose to stay in or leave Nottingham requires looking beyond headline survey results to the wider causes that shape their decisions. This section considers available data on local, national and international trends to contextualise student and alumni concerns and perceptions of key issues.

Availability and quality of green space

Concerns around the availability and quality of green spaces were consistently raised by both undergraduates and postgraduates as a priority for Nottingham's future. Nottingham City Council also recognises this issue in its *Nottingham Greenspace Strategy*, which highlights the health and wellbeing benefits of cleaner air, cooler streets, and connected green corridors (Nottingham City Council, 2024b, pp. 9–10). The strategy also acknowledges unequal access to quality greenspace across the city, echoing student and alumni concerns that more accessible and evenly distributed green areas are needed to improve everyday life. While local initiatives such as planting nearly 24,000 trees and 13,500 flowering bulbs in 2022 demonstrate progress (Nottingham City Council, 2024b, p. 4), the persistence of this issue in surveys and focus groups suggests that more progress is needed to meet graduate expectations.

Social life

Some students raised concerns about Nottingham's over-reliance on alcohol-centred social life. With two universities, the city has a vibrant nightlife sector featuring numerous clubs, pubs, and bars including well-known venues such as Rock City, Stealth, Unit 13, The Level and Ocean (Wellington, 2023). While this contributes to Nottingham's reputation as a lively student city, it can also limit the availability of inclusive spaces for those who prefer alternatives to drinking-focused activities. However, the nightlife sector has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. In February 2024, Pryzm Nottingham closed following rising costs and increased business rates, resulting in staff redundancies (BBC News, 2024a). Nationally, the UK has lost 396 nightclubs between March 2020 and early 2024, amounting to a 31% decline (Richards, 2024). While this contraction may reduce the dominance of alcohol-focused activities, it also reduces part-time employment opportunities often taken up by students and dampens the attractiveness of the city's vibrant arts and culture scene. This suggests a changing landscape that may create new challenges around inclusion, employment and retention.

Safety

Safety was a consistent concern raised by both undergraduates and postgraduates, with recent data supporting these perceptions.

- Nottingham's overall crime rate is 102.9 crimes per 1,000 people, with violent crime accounting for 33.4% of offences (Plumpot, 2025).

- Although "possession of weapons crime" represents only 1.4% of total offences, Nottingham ranks 9th out of 99 England and Wales postcode areas, at 156% the national rate and 1,600 cases recorded in the year to February 2025.
- Following public consultations in 2026, the City Council has reintroduced a three-year Public Spaces Protection Order and is debating whether to ban the wearing of balaclavas in response to growing concerns around antisocial behaviour (BBC, 2026).

Beyond official statistics, reputation also matters. In 2024, uHomes.com, a student housing platform, ranked Nottingham sixth among the UK's most dangerous cities based on crime perception indices (uHomes.com, 2024). While such rankings are based on perception indices rather than official crime data, they shape how prospective and international students view Nottingham as a place to live and study, with potential consequences for retention.

Homelessness

Focus group discussions highlighted visible homelessness as a concern. In June 2024, a local headcount found 51 people were sleeping rough in Nottingham, the highest June figure in a decade (BBC News, 2024b). Data from early 2023 suggests the scale is far greater, estimating that 1,614 people were recorded as homeless in Nottingham, equating to one in 201 residents, the highest in the East Midlands (Zagnat, 2023). Local charities have highlighted a lack of social housing, amongst other reasons, as a key cause. These figures reinforce student perceptions that housing insecurity is a persistent issue in the city.

Cost of living

Living costs were another factor informing post-graduate decisions. Compared to London, Nottingham is considerably more affordable, with rent on average 62.4% lower and general costs 27.5% lower (Numbeo, 2025). Despite this advantage, students continue to view London as more attractive due to its concentration of graduate roles, professional networks, and clearer career progression pathways, highlighting a tension between affordability and opportunity.

Employment opportunities

Concerns over employment opportunities in Nottingham were consistently raised. These concerns are also reflected in available data, with Nottingham's economic indicators comparing unfavourably with national averages, as evidenced in 2023 data from the Office for National Statistics (n.d.) (see Table 2 below).

These disparities help explain why many students and graduates look beyond Nottingham for long-term career prospects, and especially to larger labour markets such as London. These concerns are also reinforced by wider labour market trends following COVID-19. Young people have been disproportionately affected, with the number of those aged 16–24 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) peaking at 11.6% in late 2020 to approximately 797,000 individuals (Nottinghamshire County Council, 2021, p.5), and rising again to an estimated 987,000 individuals

by December 2024 (Office for National Statistics, 2025). These figures help contextualise graduate anxieties around job security and long-term stability.

Table 2: Economic indicators comparing Nottingham to the national average

Economic indicators	Nottingham	National average
Economic inactivity	29.7%	21%
Employment	66.1%	76.8%
Unemployment	6.5%	3.4%
Benefit claimant count (2024)	6.2%	3.2%
Gross disposable household income	£15,015	£20,425
Gross median weekly pay (2024)	£502	£604
Number of businesses	10,445	5,635

Brexit

Brexit has further compounded these issues. UK graduates now face significant barriers to working in the EU, including work permit requirements, 90-day Schengen visa limits, and reduced employer demands in favour of EU nationals. This has made seasonal or casual roles far less accessible and limited opportunities once viewed as a formative career step (Bartholemew, 2024). At the same time, Brexit has hindered international graduate retention in the UK. EU student enrolments fell by 57% between 2020/21 and 2023/24, driven in part by the sharp rise in tuition costs following the end of fee caps (from £9,250 a year for undergraduate studies for EU students to between £11,400 and £32,000 a year in 2021/22), although this was offset by students from other countries (Cuibus, 2025).

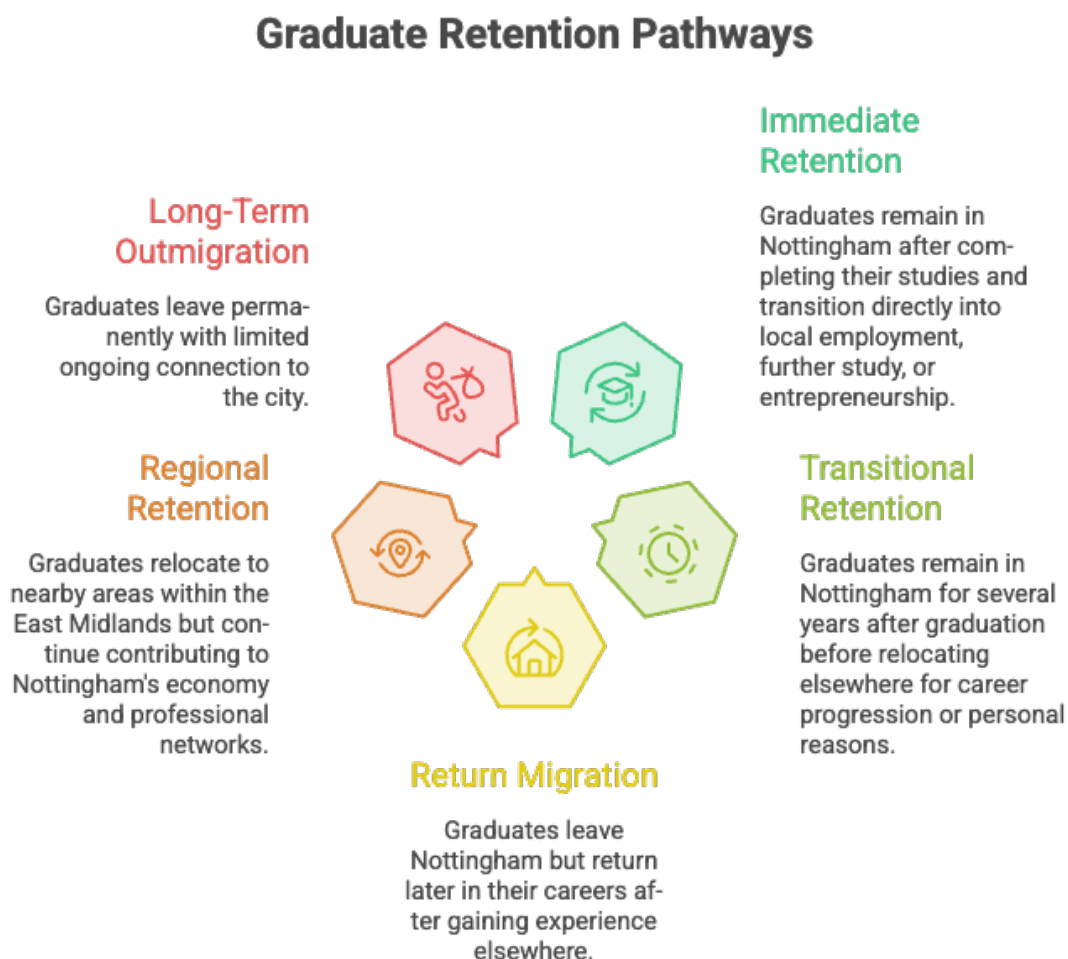
Overall, this evidence suggests that student and alumni concerns are well founded. Challenges around safety, housing, employment and green space intersect with broader national and international pressures including from Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. While Nottingham offers clear affordability advantages, these are often outweighed by perceptions of limited opportunities and safety concerns, alongside the enduring pull of larger cities. Graduate retention, therefore, is shaped by structural factors extending beyond local policy alone.

Recommendations

This study underscores both Nottingham's considerable strengths and its pressing challenges in retaining graduates. For stakeholders committed to the city's long-term prosperity, several strategic recommendations emerge:

1) Develop strategies for varied graduate retention pathways

Some graduates remain in Nottingham immediately after graduation and continue building their careers locally. Others leave to pursue employment or further study elsewhere before returning later in life. Some remain for a short period while establishing themselves professionally, before relocating to another city. Others move within the wider East Midlands region while maintaining strong personal, professional and social connections to Nottingham.



Made with Napkin

Understanding the relative scale of these pathways requires further research, but the evidence suggests that graduate experiences are varied and fluid across these categories over time. Approaching retention as a lifecycle which can follow diverse pathways has important implications for policy and practice:

- It shows the limits of short-term measurements of graduate retention.
- It highlights the importance of maintaining long-term relationships with graduates, including those who leave the city.
- It encourages a focus on both retaining and attracting talent.

Alumni networks, professional communities, mentoring schemes and digital engagement platforms can help sustain connections that may eventually encourage return migration.

2) Prioritise career visibility and progression pathways

The single most decisive factor shaping graduate retention is the availability and visibility of career opportunities. We recommend coordinated investment in graduate-level roles across future-focused industries (e.g. AI-driven, digital/technology, creative sectors, and green industries). These are examples of the so-called eight strategic sectors [recently identified by the UK Government](#) that are expected to have the “greatest growth potential over the next decade and a critical role to play in supporting economic security and resilience, net zero and regional growth”.

Rather than a simple job board, employers, NTU, University of Nottingham, and local authorities should work together to develop and promote structured graduate pathways, including internships, apprenticeships, and graduate schemes aligned to these strategic sectors. The *Nottingham Vision 2050* presents a unique opportunity to get this right by deliberately accounting for these pathways in the specific economic development plans which form part of the vision, including the ‘innovation lab,’ the net zero ‘commercial district,’ the ‘centre for small business and innovation’ and the ‘independent mile of local retail, culture and food clusters (ARUP, 2026). Clear communication of these opportunities to students while they are still studying is critical.

Nottingham could take inspiration from a similar successful scheme run by Manchester City Council. The [Our Manchester Graduate Scheme](#) is a partnership between Manchester City Council and Manchester Metropolitan University that helps local businesses recruit graduates. Employers, especially SMEs, gain access to fresh talent, while graduates receive CPD training from the council. The scheme provides funding and support with attraction, recruitment and selection. Businesses offer graduates a 12-month graduate role (with the potential to become permanent), and the university manages advertising and applications. Once enrolled, graduates benefit from council-led CPD and ongoing support from their employer through regular one-to-one meetings.

With the establishment of the East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA) and their focus on inclusive growth, this is also an opportunity for wider investment into this programme with several local Universities, rather than just Nottingham. This brings further awareness, talent and

investment into the Midlands on a wider scale, and does not put sole responsibility into Nottingham City Council.

3) Transform career visibility into a city-wide initiative

Awareness of graduate opportunities in Nottingham must move beyond isolated university initiatives and become a coordinated, city-wide effort. We suggest an annual, city-wide festival that transforms awareness raising into a celebration: a city-wide Carnival of Careers. This moves beyond university-based careers/employability communications and campus-led career fairs, to a tangible experience that breaks down campus walls and encourages an immersive experience.

This could be a week-long, annual festival, as a unified initiative co-branded by the local media, Nottingham City Council, East Midlands Combined County Authority, University of Nottingham, Nottingham Trent University, Marketing Nottingham and a mix of major local employers (e.g., Boots & Capital One, SMEs).

In addition, a common complaint across our research was less popular degrees feeling left out of career fairs. Here, it is recommended to host themed days focusing on key sectors, such as a "Creative Crawl" with studio tours and creative spaces, and a "Healthcare Hub" with insights from the NHS and life sciences companies.

4) Build a stronger alumni and professional ecosystem

Both the 2016 and 2025 findings identify the lack of visible, structured alumni and professional networks as a persistent failure and gap. Stakeholders should establish a city-wide alumni network that is accessible and connects current students and graduates (already working in Nottingham) with professionals across industries. Professionalised network that moves beyond a culture centred on social drinking would create inclusive events that bridge the gap between the university and the city's professional community.

Leveraging NTU's Unitemps platform and alumni databases could also create a stronger bridge between graduates and employers, transforming a perceived weakness into a defining strength.

5) Position Nottingham as a place to build a career

Nottingham is praised for its affordability, diversity, and student life, but is still perceived as a transitional, "student" city. A targeted place-marketing strategy, driven by social media and employer-university collaboration, could reposition Nottingham as a place where graduates can both begin and build their careers, rather than just an "amazing place to be a student". Beyond retention, this repositioning would also attract new professional talent to the city and signal to investors that Nottingham is an ambitious, future-facing hub.

This strategy could showcase successful local professionals, highlight sector strengths, and counteract the narrative that progression is only possible in London or other larger cities. We also

recommend an authentic narrative that addresses negative perceptions head-on. Universities should also leverage their international students and influencers (or those willing to share content) who have come to study in Nottingham, so that international talent fully understand Nottingham's offer and life.

6) Invest in graduate housing transitions and safe & inclusive city experiences

Safety has emerged as a new and pressing issue. Investment in public safety measures, community wellbeing initiatives, and addressing visible homelessness will improve both lived experience and the external image of Nottingham.

Housing affordability remains a relative advantage, but the shortage of graduate accommodation was described by our participants as urgent. In line with *Nottingham Vision 2050*'s plan to develop 'homes in the heart' through major brownfield and small site delivery (ARUP, 2026), stakeholders should collaborate on developing affordable, graduate-friendly housing to support early-career professionals transitioning from student to working resident.

In addition, greater investment in urban regeneration across designated areas would not only improve the city's physical environment but also signal Nottingham's ambition to grow as a professional hub. Revitalised neighbourhoods and city spaces, as set out in *Nottingham Vision 2050*'s plans around the 'children's forest,' 'green grid,' and 'connected energy city,' can help attract and retain graduates, draw in professional talent from outside the region, strengthen Nottingham's appeal to investors and help make the city more liveable for local residents as well.

7) Embed graduate retention into Nottingham's long-term strategy

Graduate retention should be framed as both a social and economic priority. Retaining talent will dramatically enhance Nottingham's capacity to invest and innovate as well as its cultural ecosystem.

We recommend stakeholders commit to a multi-pronged approach focused on sustained investment in future-focused industries, talent systems/pipelines, community wellbeing and urban regeneration, ensuring Nottingham evolves from a transitional student hub into a thriving professional city.

By making progress and implementing these actions in a coordinated way, Nottingham can begin to transform its competitiveness. The goal for the future would be to ensure the city is celebrated not only as a world-class place to study, but as a vibrant, sustainable, and ambitious place for people to live, build their careers and invest in the future. We argue that exploring these issues through the lens of graduate retention can help stakeholders to think more critically and imaginatively when designing a liveable city for existing residents, newcomers and investors alike.

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