Coming Home During Coronavirus: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Ireland's returning young migrants

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Abstract

The global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019/2020 has undoubtedly influenced the international migration trends of young people. Notably, there has been a distinct influx of migrants returning to Ireland. While Ireland has a significant history of mass emigration and well-documented periods of return, the recent experience of returning during the COVID-19 pandemic represents a novel phenomenon worthy of investigation. This paper draws upon 20 semi-structured interviews of returning migrants from across the Republic of Ireland, with the aim of better understanding their experiences, motivations and intentions for returning 'home' during a global health crisis and to assess the potential effect this may have on the future livelihoods and reflexive mobility strategies of Ireland's young people. To conclude, this paper highlights the imperative for policymakers of future relevant research on this subject as the pandemic continues to unfold, presenting a unique set of circumstances and challenges for this cohort of young people with migration experiences.

Key words

Ireland, return, migration, youth mobility, COVID-19

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Introduction

The global outbreak of COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) and the extraordinary public health measures implemented to contain it have led to profound changes in our daily lives. As of 22 March 2021 there have been 123.2 million cases of COVID-19 worldwide and some 2.7 million deaths (Ritchie et al. 2020). According to the International Labour Organization (2021), this period has been accompanied by 255 million full-time job losses, resulting in $3.7 trillion in lost labour income (ILO 2020). Emerging research in Ireland suggests young people have been the worst affected by the labour market impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Roantree et al. 2021). Young people are overrepresented in the service industry, culture/arts, retail and hospitality sectors, which have been worst affected by the public health measures associated with the COVID-19 outbreak (Byrne et al. 2020). These developments have significantly influenced the migratory trends of young people, many of whom have returned to their communities and countries of origin as a result. The Central Statistics Office estimated that in 2020, Irish nationals accounted for 33.8% of the 85,400 people entering Ireland. This figure is the highest number of returning Irish nationals since 2007, with even more pronounced effects expected to be seen in 2021 (CSO 2020a). The motivations for youth mobility are well conceptualised in the academic literature and are increasingly being understood as individualised decisions for personal and professional development, with a growing emphasis on life-course trajectories and human agency within the migratory process. For the youngest generations of EU citizens, there is an increasing imperative to use mobility as a resource, moving towards better educational and occupational outcomes and enhancing their prospects for personal development (Cairns 2014; Krings et al. 2013). However, the recent return experience during the COVID-19 pandemic represents a novel phenomenon worthy of interrogation. The paper aims to capture the life narratives of returning young people through a series of semi-structured interviews, documenting the experiences of Irish migration and return occurring within the unique set of circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research methodology

This paper is based on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted remotely during the spring of 2021 to ascertain self-descriptions of individuals' migration trajectories. An additional aim was to capture, through prolonged engagement with the population of interest, factors unacknowledged by them which may have influenced their migration or decisions to return

during the pandemic. In particular, the 'life-narrative' approach employed by Ní Laoire (2007) is shown to be appropriate for this type of research, as the experiences of migrants can be coherently constructed through the act of 'storying' a set of fragmented memories and events (De Tona 2004; Lentin 2000; Ní Laoire 2007). The sample population, which was identified through purposive sampling using a 'snowballing' technique, consisted of young people who initially emigrated from Ireland between mid-2010s to early 2019 and returned to Ireland during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic from the beginning of 2020 to 2021. The periods they had spent abroad ranged from six months to three years, with the average being approximately 20 months. Most of the respondents returned to the localities in which they had grown up, returning in most cases to a parent's home. The respondents were aged in their 20s at the time of the interviews (ranging from 23 to 29 years old). The sample was limited to participants from highly skilled professional backgrounds and to students; thus, further studies may be warranted to contextualise the migratory process among 'unskilled' migrants and for other age groups. Despite the interviews being treated primarily as conversations, an interview guide was prepared in advance and provided a basic structure for eliciting detailed information and comments from the respondents. The rich qualitative information obtained from the interviews was analysed to identify significant themes in the experiences of migration and return, both generally and with specific relation to the impacts of the pandemic. Given the highly personal and sometimes sensitive subject matter of the interviews, all first names used in the subsequent discussion of findings are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of respondents.

"I always knew I was going to leave": Theorising Ireland's youth migration

Emigration has long dominated Ireland's migratory landscape and cultural experience (O'Leary – Negra 2016). While Ireland has a long history of mass emigration, such movement re-emerged as a central feature of the post-recession Irish society and culture following the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy in 2008 (Cawley – Galvin 2016). During the post-recession period, a large-scale outflow occurred, arguably resulting from a truncated labour market that did not provide sufficient employment opportunities for its graduate population (King – Shuttleworth 1995). Existing research highlights the tendency of Irish young people to engage in a lot of 'to-and-fro movement', indicating that they represent a highly mobile labour force that is responsive to opportunities both at home and abroad (King

– Shuttleworth 1995). In 2009/10, 59% of university students surveyed expressed intentions to leave the Republic of Ireland (Cairns et al. 2012). In a similar study in Northern Ireland, 55% indicated mobility intentions during the same graduating year (Cairns – Smyth 2009). This particular wave of youth emigration followed a period of unprecedented economic prosperity and upward class mobility within a context of growing ease and affordability of air travel (Cawley – Galvin 2016), as well as the advent of new media and digital technologies that have considerably altered the transnational communications and social interactions which are known to facilitate return and repeated migration (Brinkerhoff 2009; Levitt – Jaworsky 2007).

There is considerable continuity in the literature in the reasons for migration to and from Ireland, often linked to the state of the domestic economy in periods of economic 'boom' and 'bust' (Cawley – Galvin 2016; King – Shuttleworth 1995; Lulle et al. 2019). As migration of third-level graduates has become habituated, Irish youth have come to rely on their ability to successfully negotiate routes into global labour markets through favourable visa permissions, facilitated by the relatively straightforward recognition of their qualifications as native English-speakers (Moriarty et al. 2015). Strong ties with friends and family overseas contribute to continued and repeated migration, while Irish diaspora communities overseas often provide a source of belonging and support for new arrivals (Carr et al. 2005; Cawley – Galvin 2016; Moriarty et al. 2015). Thus, Irish graduates enjoy some of the lowest barriers to enacting 'global boundaryless careers', and these are further facilitated by institutionally mediated movements such as the European Commission's Erasmus+ initiative and working-holiday visa programmes in the US and Australia (Carr at al. 2005; Moriarty et al. 2015). These programmes establish movement as a regular part of career progression for Irish youth and often influence later decisions to migrate on a more long-term basis.

There appeared to be a normalisation of the migratory process amongst many interview participants and an acceptance of emigration as the commonly *"done thing"* or natural *"rite of passage"* for young people in Ireland. It was also evident that these youngsters were aware of the more well-established migration pathways to familiar destinations. Many respondents indicated prior knowledge of their destinations or that the presence of friends or family in those locations influenced their decision to migrate. Judy (26), from the west of Ireland, mentioned how prior awareness of Australia as a destination for emigrant Irish people had influenced her own decision to move there:

> *Australia's always been on the radar. I think historically, with Irish people moving over there, it's kind of been known within Ireland to kind of make the move there. And I thought it was quite an exciting journey for myself, my partner to go over and experience it. And we always had friends over there, which was a huge motivation to pick Sydney as the location we were moving to. Because we knew some people there it wasn't a scary move for us.*

Judy highlighted the benefit of having access to established social networks abroad in motivating and facilitating her migration. Aisling (23), who spent time working in the UK, had a similar experience, as she chose to move to London based on prior knowledge of the city from family connections, also stating that London is *"still quite Irish space as well, so it's not too scary"*. Interestingly, for both of these young women, the presence of friends, family or simply the prior knowledge of these locations as an Irish diaspora space made them more desirable, diluting some of the fear that might otherwise be associated with moving to a new city abroad. Many young people also engaged in group migration and cohabitated upon first arriving at their destinations. This choice was particularly relevant for migrants establishing themselves in Australia and New Zealand but was also evident in experiences within the EU. It seems that in the case of young Irish migrants, the presence of both friendship capital and non-kin diaspora networks often served to support and facilitate the migratory process and were perceived as lowering the costs and risks associated with migration.

In overcoming challenges such as communication barriers and the discomfort of cultural differences, several respondents reported feeling a sense of comfort, understanding and familiarity in connecting with other Irish people abroad. In addition, others pointed towards the critical support network that this provided them. Establishing a connection with the Irish diaspora community abroad is something to which almost all the young people in this sample referred. Many participants connected with Irish communities online to find information and support during the pandemic, helping them navigate the associated public health measures and travel disruptions. Notably, some of the young people in this sample also viewed the diaspora community as an important site for engaging in political activities in their locations abroad, ranging from voting in local elections to protest movements for emancipatory and environmental causes.

Notwithstanding the benefits of connecting with the Irish diaspora abroad, there was also an expressed desire to avoid the perceived cliché of over-relying on that community. Some respondents explained that they tried to avoid migrating to locations where Irish people congregated,

particularly in English-speaking destinations such as Australia and New Zealand. For example, Judy (26) felt it was important to distance herself from the negative stereotypes associated with the Irish diaspora community in Australia:

> *We actually went out of our way to avoid assimilating into the Irish community initially, because we wanted to, we wanted to live there long-term, therefore we wanted to build relationships that were more long-term. A lot of the Irish community stay on shorter visas… The Irish community in Australia has a notoriously terrible reputation with it, especially if you go to Bondi Beach. It's kind of considered, almost, trashy. And because I was going over there and wanted to build a career, I very much didn't want to associate myself with that image. I wanted to go and be, like, above it. Be Irish, be proud of being Irish, but not be associated with this disgusting stereotype that I didn't want.*

Along with several others, Judy recounted experiencing instances of workplace discrimination, including negative stereotypes associated with the Irish diaspora community. Sarah (28), from Dublin, worked in the St Kilda suburb of Melbourne, a neighbourhood that is well known for attracting young backpackers and Irish migrants. She spoke of discrimination that she saw manifesting in the hesitancy of Australian employers to hire Irish people, particularly in the hospitality sector's 'fine dining' venues. She noted that her experience working in Melbourne was the first time she felt like an 'outsider' or had experienced prejudice or racism because of her nationality.

Many of these young people spoke of the difficulties they faced in securing employment abroad. Despite the perceived ease of securing short-term visas as an Irish graduate, many of the respondents felt restricted to certain types of employment and industries that these visa schemes were designed to recruit for, such as the agricultural sector or the service industry. For example, Peadar (26), a recent returnee from Canada working in the tourism industry, felt his visa status in Canada exposed him to seeking precarious, temporary employment, as employers often gave preference to Canadian citizens. Likewise, Judy (26) found building a long-term career challenging in Australia, citing a reluctance to hire migrants outside the service industry due to visa restrictions. The education and professional backgrounds of these migrants were often underutilised due to local institutional factors, such as immigration restrictions and policy-induced vulnerabilities of temporary migrant workers. Thus, despite being highly mobile within

global labour markets due to their English language proficiency and ease of qualification recognition, Irish graduates are also susceptible to impediments within these same labour markets.

"We knew we'd be better off abroad": Motivations for emigration and the perceived benefits of migration

Despite being traditionally associated with the movement of economically disadvantaged groups, livelihood migration is equally pertinent to affluent, skilled migrants moving both within and between high-income countries (Ralph 2015). The mobility strategies of these migrants are similarly informed by opportunities for increased earnings or by contraction of their earning potential in their country of origin; people arguably choose to invest in migration as they would into education or training, if the expected rate of return from higher wages in the destination country is greater than the cost of migrating (Chiswick 1999; Ralph 2015). Even for young people in relatively prosperous societies such as Ireland, a capacity to be transnationally mobile can be crucial in terms of maximising livelihoods; it also acts as a 'safety valve', releasing pressure from the state welfare system during periods of high unemployment and stagnation in the domestic labour market. Many interview participants reflected on their initial motivations to emigrate, and almost all respondents identified the labour market as the single most important factor influencing their decision to migrate. In this sample, several respondents found employment opportunities abroad that they felt would have been unimaginable to them in Ireland, particularly in rural regions.

James (27), a recent returnee from Germany who had been working abroad as a chef, reflected on his decision to migrate after graduating with a degree in economics from a Dublin university:

> *I knew that work opportunities are pretty limited in Dublin. And, yeah, I had* [been] *finished* [with] *college* [for] *a year or so. I had applied to a couple of internships and didn't get any of them, then started working in the restaurant industry… I just don't feel like Ireland is really a place to be young. And just working day-to-day, unless you're in a strict career, I feel like it's very difficult to be in Ireland, to feel like you're getting anywhere.*

Here, James highlighted that the main factor influencing his initial migration was seeking better employment prospects. He went on to lament the perception that employment opportunities in Dublin seem to be con-

centrated in specific sectors, explaining that the opportunities are *"limited to a selective skill set"* and specific industries such as finance and technology, with the living costs making it too prohibitive to live in Dublin for those with lower earning potential in other sectors. Similarly, Peadar (26) reflected on his initial decision to migrate, stating that he felt there were not many suitable opportunities in his field (environmental sciences) and that Ireland did not have "*much to offer*" him after he graduated from university. Both Peadar and James felt dissatisfied by the lack of opportunities available to them in Ireland and used migration as a strategy to improve their earnings and career potential elsewhere. The lack of domestic employment opportunities, an enduring theme in migration literature, is evident in this sample, with just under half of the respondents referring to the disappointing labour market as one of their primary motivations for leaving Ireland.

Previous research has documented a growing awareness amongst Irish third-level graduates that credentialed qualifications are not wholly sufficient to secure employment within the context of a globalised labour market (Moriarty et al. 2015). One respondent, Nuala (24), a primary school teacher from the west of Ireland who spent time working as an English teacher in France, explicitly described the perceived advantages of the skills she developed abroad in regard to her reintegration into the Irish labour market, articulating this experience as an *"edge"* she might have above young people who haven't had the opportunity to work abroad. Other respondents expressed the perceived benefits of migration in terms of *"professional growth"* and improving their adaptability to the labour market. As one respondent, Aisling (23), explained, the experience of migrating and working in the hospitality sector in London allowed her to improve her social and communication skills and has given her connections that might help her future career progression. An earlier study by Lulle et al. (2019) demonstrated that Irish returnees tend to reference increased confidence in their ability to succeed as well as the ability to operate in an unfamiliar environment, as the migratory process is deemed to have equipped the migrant with a range of skills, both of a formal and informal nature (Lulle et al. 2019). This point was echoed by David (27), who experienced working in hospitality in Australia, as he described how increased self-awareness and the interpersonal confidence that he developed as a migrant have helped facilitate his return. Despite most respondents reflecting on their professional development abroad as a positive experience, there were several instances of skills and opportunities perceived as having been lost due to the migratory process. Judy (26) articulates a perceived loss of local social capital, as she missed the opportunity to build further on the professional connections she had in Ireland prior to her initial migration. However,

it seems she understands this trade-off as being *"worth"* making a move to Australia. Despite potentially losing some opportunities for career advancement in Ireland, most respondents in the sample felt overwhelmingly positive towards the professional progression, training, and education they had pursued abroad.

Another salient theme that emerged was affordable housing for young people in Ireland. In this sample, the poor rental market and the perceived housing shortage in Irish cities were frequently highlighted issues. A recent analysis of the housing situation in Ireland highlights that most young people in Ireland will likely never be able to afford to either rent or buy their own homes (Hearne 2020). This generation of adult children is thus forced to live with parents and commute long distances, with many students and young professionals resorting to 'couch surfing' or staying with friends, and sometimes sleeping in their cars (Hearne 2020). Judy (26), from the west of Ireland, decided to move to Australia with her partner and noted how their experience of renting in Dublin impacted their migration trajectory:

> *I think the renting situation in Dublin forced us to move to Australia sooner than we would have otherwise. I would probably have put it off for a few years and built my career because I was in a very good job in Dublin. I loved my job actually, I just hated living in that situation. Dublin is not a good renting city, prices are really high for quality of life and I pretty much could no longer stand that and wanted to move away from it… In* [my partner's] *field, big tech industries or well, like for him working with robotics, it's very Dublin-centric. I think a lot of the jobs in Ireland, the bigger jobs are in Dublin. But to live in Dublin you have to go back to that awful rental situation.*

Judy explained her insecurities surrounding the perceived lack of protection for young people dependent on the Irish rental housing market. In particular, she mentions the poor quality of rental housing affordable to young professionals, comparing this to the more positive experience that she had renting and living in Sydney, Australia. This intersection of economic challenges has contributed to many Irish young people perceiving their livelihoods as *"better off"* in more affordable cities abroad. Other perceptions that emerged during the interviews included the 'better quality of life' offered abroad, including a more engaging social scene and political landscape for young people. Others similarly highlighted the quality of public amenities, infrastructure and services, including healthcare, public transportation networks and leisure facilities. These lifestyle factors were highlighted as a significant advantage of living in cities abroad.

Although factors related to livelihood maximisation were important to these young people, cultural values and notions of the adventure, independence and personal growth offered by international travel were equally important. Many respondents in this sample expressed their decision to migrate in terms of seeking new experiences, choosing locations that better align with their interests and preferred lifestyles. For example, Judy (26) explained her motivations to move regarding the specific lifestyle that Australia offered to her, including sunny weather, leisure activities and a sense of adventure. She highlighted the self-realisation aspect of her experience, saying that she felt more *"grown-up"* and *"completely independent"* living abroad. Similarly, James (27) felt that living in Germany offered him a greater degree of independence as it allowed him to move away from his family home for the first time. For many of the young people in this sample, the initial migration experience offered a sense of self-confidence and independence that may have been lacking in their place of origin. Fiona (29), a musician and childcare worker from Dublin, explains that her confidence gained from living abroad was because she was no longer tied to *"old narratives"* about herself. She articulated the benefits of developing her cultural understanding and self-perception, having migrated to several different countries, including Sri Lanka, New Zealand and Australia. Previous ethnographic research has revealed a narrative of escape permeating migrants' accounts of the decision to migrate, further emphasised by their negative presentations of life before migration (Benson – O'Reilly 2012). The self-descriptions offered in this sample included breaking free from old versions of oneself and the sense of freedom and independence that several respondents identified as some of the main positive aspects of their time spent abroad.

"With COVID getting worse, we decided we had better come home": Young migrants' experiences of returning during the pandemic

Several of the returnees interviewed had reportedly always viewed their migration as short-term or temporary, emphasising that living closer to family and friends in Ireland was always their long-term goal. This sense of anchoring in their communities of origin has similarly been identified among Irish returnees from Britain (Ní Laoire 2007) and the United States (Corcoran 2002). Joe (27), a senior software developer returning from working in Scotland, succinctly pointed out:

> *I think when you're abroad, especially if you're Irish and abroad, there's always a thing in the back of your mind that you will be moving home eventually.*

Evidently, a strong, undiluted sense of Irish identity and Ireland as 'home' was voiced by many of these migrants. Almost all of the young people interviewed reference returning to Ireland in general as returning 'home'. The most commonly identified positive aspect of returning to Ireland was often narrated in terms of proximity to friends and family, reflecting the strong emphasis on family and kinship in Irish society in general. This tendency is not unusual among returning migrants – several studies have similarly found family ties to be the central influencing factor in decisions to return (Jones 2003; Lulle et al. 2019; Ní Laoire 2007). Many of the returning migrants in this sample, whether returning to rural or urban areas, were explicit that one of their main reasons for returning was related to accessing family support; or, occasionally, was related to a family death or illness; or was born from the desire to spend more time with friends and family during the difficult times associated with the pandemic. Several female participants in this research talked about returning to support their ageing parents through this stressful period, associated mainly with uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Gray (2004) and Ní Laoire (2007), this sense of obligation, as well as the complex system of responsibilities that bind migrants with their family members, is a recurring theme amongst returning migrants, even if it is not always explicitly articulated as such (Gray 2004; Lulle et al. 2019).

Travel disruptions, the associated financial stress, and the mental strain of physically returning to Ireland during the pandemic were most frequently brought up by the interviewees. The economic impacts and financial hardships associated with the pandemic could not be understated. Principally, loss of employment deeply affected the young people represented by this sample, with 18 of the 20 respondents reporting job loss abroad related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Peadar (26) recalled his experience working in the tourism sector in Canada:

> *I was working in a ski resort in Canada, and had to help with the shutdown of the ski resort because of COVID. I had to let 60 people know that they're out of a job. And then I was out of a job. I was the assistant manager in one of the departments. So* [I was] *the bearer of bad news, basically. And then I had to fly back. And, yeah. I haven't had a job since getting back… My girlfriend and I both lost jobs over there and then our living status was pretty precarious. We were living in the back of a car. So there were just so many uncertainties.*

The majority of respondents experienced job loss and unemployment due to COVID-19, with several experiencing periods of homelessness abroad

or perceiving the threat of homelessness due to the inability to secure enough income to pay rent. The financial uncertainty and travel restrictions related to the pandemic were two of the most commonly identified factors triggering the young people in this sample to decide to return to Ireland. Nuala (24) and her partner Mark (25), who were both working as English teachers in France, explained the factors that influenced their decision to return as the pandemic worsened, namely their loss of income and uncertainty about not being able to travel 'home' due to travel restrictions. In many instances, the increasing risks and costs associated with returning home motivated the young people to relocate to Ireland earlier than they had initially planned. Judy (26) explained her fear that she might run out of money and thus not be able to afford flights anymore, stating that this motivated her and her partner to return during the early stages of the pandemic. She described the relief she and her partner felt upon returning to Ireland, knowing that she would no longer be under such financial duress or the threat of becoming homeless, which according to her, *"happened to a lot of Irish people in Australia"*. For others, the sense of financial relief from returning home was accompanied by relief from threats to their physical safety. Several respondents mentioned safety concerns abroad, including access to healthcare and lack of familial support in the event of sickness. Several respondents referred to having better access to healthcare in Ireland as a significant motivating factor to return. Some even felt fearful of the economic and political instability that might accompany the pandemic and specified that being at 'home' in a more familiar setting in Ireland, they would feel safer. It was clear from the interviews that the decision to return home during the pandemic was most often undertaken from a position of emotional distress, economic uncertainty and fear. It is vital to bear this context in mind in discussing the specific challenges facing this cohort of returning migrants.

"Moving home, even in normal times, is already very difficult. But I'm moving back during a pandemic": Challenges perceived by migrants returning to Ireland

Returning to an uncertain domestic economy has been particularly challenging, with the COVID-19 adjusted unemployment rate reaching 24.2% as of March 2021 (CSO 2021). One aspect differentiating this period of return migration from earlier such waves is the higher incidence of 'boomeranging', a phenomenon whereby adult children who have previously been living independently choose to return to live with their parents. The increasing trend in parental co-residence had been well-documented even before the

emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and is primarily attributed to high housing costs, rising student debt, and adverse labour market conditions for young people across many industrialised countries (Chan et al. 2020). In this sample, it was observed that most of the returning young migrants had decided to live once again in their 'family home', with few finding the financial security to be able to live independently. Peadar (26) described his struggle to find appropriate housing and vocalised his frustration with the ongoing lack of housing support for returning young people. Judy (26) described how this uncertainty, both in employment and the housing market, has negatively affected her and her partner as they meet the challenge of *"having to start all over again"* in Ireland. This issue represents a significant challenge for returning young people as they try to re-adapt to living at 'home'.

Research on return migration highlights the desire of returnees to access a 'social field,' their local network of family, friends and community where they are 'known', both in preparation for their return and once they do return. This networking is arguably necessary to successfully reintegrating, particularly in rural settings (Farrell et al. 2012). Several respondents expressed frustration at not accessing their expected or perceived social networks upon returning to Ireland due to social distancing measures and public health policies, which limited their resources for making a smooth transition back into their 'home' communities. In this case, the impact of pandemic restrictions has aggravated the challenges these migrants face in returning, as they are more likely to lack access to social networks as a result of the pandemic restrictions, with a notably detrimental effect on their mental health. Poor mental health was evident in this sample population, as several of the respondents explicitly mentioned mental health challenges as part of their return experiences. Peadar (26) described the challenges he faced returning to Ireland in the context of the COVID-19 government-enforced 'lockdown':

> *So I've moved house maybe 12 times since I got back. Maybe I can talk a bit about that. There is a lot of uncertainty. The whole rental situation in Ireland isn't great. Honestly. I was pretty depressed when I got back initially, like, I found the first lockdown the hardest. And, and I'd say like, I didn't really have a very good handle on my drinking and stuff during the first lockdown.*

Fiona (29) also experienced depression and anxiety throughout the process of returning. She explained that experiencing poor mental health was an essential factor in her decision to return to Ireland, saying:

> *I realised Australia wasn't going to financially support me. I wasn't established or set up there, I didn't have a job, I had two Irish friends that were my age, and I didn't feel like it would be appropriate to lean on them the amount that I would have had to lean on them. And again, it's just like everyone's juggling their own balls like and, and the stress was really high… So it became a matter of prioritising my immediate, like, basic level of security and safety, like, I need somewhere to live and to eat. And for my sense of safety in terms of my mental health. Honestly, I think I needed to be brought home. I think and I think I needed support. And I think I was too afraid to admit that, like that would be some kind of failure.*

This final sentence is telling. Existing research on return migration to Europe (for example, Farrell et al. 2012) has discussed the potential for return migration to be interpreted as a failed attempt by the individual to improve his or her status. The sense of failure in this cohort seemed to be magnified by the high prevalence of unemployment, the increasing trend of 'boomeranging', limited social fields, and social distancing measures, all compounding the mental health challenges facing these returnees.

"Now we're all back home, like, what are we supposed to do now?": Looking towards the future and the post-COVID reality

When speaking about the future, the fear that their unemployment will persist, as many companies have delayed recruitment and suspended graduate programs and internships, is of particular concern for these young people. Both Alannah (23) and Eoghan (23) had been enrolled in postgraduate programmes at British universities during the pandemic. Overnight it seemed that higher education became digitised, and many workplaces were abandoned to prevent further spread of the virus. They both relayed the stress and isolation they experienced as their courses switched to online models and voiced concerns that their qualifications would be considered worthless as a result. However, the advent of widespread 'remote working' or working from home represents new opportunities for these returning migrants, particularly those returning to rural areas. Peadar (26) relates the opportunity that he perceives remote working to offer young people in rural areas, including the potential for counter-urbanisation:

> *Growing up in rural Ireland is a mixed blessing. You know, it's such a great place, but you kind of feel like you have to leave it to get on a career path and stuff. But I think, for me, this whole pandemic*

> *has given me a new appreciation for how brilliant the quality of life is in rural Ireland, there's much greater social capital and in rural Ireland than in, say, Dublin. It's really awesome knowing everybody in the community. And you can live somewhere like rural Ireland, and have a more alternative lifestyle and have a lot more freedom on how you want to live your life. Working remotely, it definitely opens up a lot of avenues… And so that's been a kind of positive outcome of the pandemic and I think maybe it's triggering a bigger move towards decentralisation in Ireland, which I personally think would be the best thing ever for Ireland.*

Despite having a preference to remain living in his rural community in Ireland, and his optimism regarding the potential of remote working, Peadar expressed willingness to engage in further onward migration if he was *"forced to"* by economic uncertainties associated with the pandemic, despite not having any explicit plans to do so at the time of being interviewed. Evidently, the narratives of these young Irish migrants acknowledge that in times of recession, their livelihood strategies will include mobility. It remains to be seen whether this cohort of returnees will successfully renegotiate their position in the domestic labour market and Irish society in a broader sense, or if they will be left without the necessary support and structure to do so. Despite very few of the returnees in this sample population harbouring the explicit initiation to migrate or spend extended periods abroad again in the future, it is not unreasonable to assume that many of these young people will potentially re-emigrate, once again seeking out more prosperous or fulfilling lifestyles overseas.

Conclusion

This qualitative investigation into a small, specific sample of young migrants returning to Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic has been analysed using a constant comparative method, considering the 'cultural inferences' suggested by the individuals' narration of their migratory experiences. In deciding whether migrating was a suitable option, the young people in the sample expressed a wide range of motives, from personal aspirations to professional opportunities. It emerged during the interview process that the decision to return home during the pandemic was often undertaken as a result of financial distress and job loss, with many young people deciding to return 'home' to access financial and family support. Many of these young people also indicated the desire to be close to friends and family, and for some, the return to their communities of origin was

always part of their long-term plans to 'settle down'. The life narratives of these returnees revealed a unique set of challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, including limited social fields, poor mental health, and lack of employment opportunities. This context of high youth unemployment, declining rates of homeownership, and rapidly rising prices in the private rental market (ERSI 2020) has left many young people with little other option than to return to live in a parent's home. Despite many returnees expressing willingness to re-emigrate in the future in response to these challenges, the relative ease of Irish third-level graduate mobility may be directly challenged by the ongoing pandemic and international travel restrictions, leaving a significant challenge for policymakers and communities as to how best to support and reintegrate these returning young people during a public health emergency that will define Ireland's social and economic landscape for the foreseeable future.

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