

Educational Choices and Migration Aspirations: How do Young People from a Peripheral Area in Croatia Imagine Their Future?

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This paper explores how young people from a peripheral area in Croatia combine their educational and migration plans concerning the desirability which they attach to the local, national and global environment. A survey research study involved high-school students from Vukovar-Srijem County in Croatia (N=681), with the intention of ascertaining where they would like to study and where to live after completing their secondary education. Cluster analysis identified 5 groups of students and a multinomial regression analysis showed that the perception of the local developmental potentials, the quality of life and the students' value orientations significantly impact on their educational and life paths. The differences between young people who envisage their educational and migration paths leading them abroad and to other parts of Croatia and those who would like to stay in the local communities are particularly highlighted. Interviews with students confirmed that the differences between these groups indicate varying perceptions of the likelihood of developing a career in the local community, satisfaction with local higher-education possibilities and value differences that point to different preferred future lifestyles. The intention to stay in the local community is related to higher place attachment, traditionalism, and a lower preference for personal autonomy.

Keywords: young people, education, migration, Croatia, globalisation, peripheral area

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Introduction

Contemporary post-industrial societies have introduced a series of new uncertainties to human life, as changes in the different stages of life have become less predictable than they were (Bauman 2000; Giddens 1991, 2006). In such an uncertain context, planning for the future has become even more important. In this sense, it is unsurprising that more and more attention is being paid to how people combine geographical places, identity and mobility – what Gustafson (2001) calls ‘roots and routes’. At the same time, some people still care more about mobility and discovering new things, while others devote more interest to the events in local communities and show greater place attachment (Gustafson 2001; Lewicka 2011). Imagining the future in a social context filled with various risks is particularly challenging for young people, who are faced with important decisions related to where and how they want to live and concerning their education, becoming independent and finding employment. At the same time, the inclusion of the spatial dimension in the analysis of the desirable life paths of young people seems necessary in the time of the global processes that have facilitated the mobility of people (King 2018). In contemporary circumstances, people make their life decisions in a social context that is increasingly interconnected due to globalisation and in which various forms of mobility are facilitated or encouraged. In such circumstances, according to Appadurai (2005), the role of imagination also has changed. Imagination has become part of everyday lives, and more and more people are thinking about the possibility of the place of life and work being far from the place of birth (Appadurai 2005). This is particularly important for young people from peripheral areas since, when thinking about the future, they have to think not only about whether they want to change their place of residence to continue their education but also whether the peripheral areas offer them enough opportunities for continuing their education and career development (Meyer and Leibert 2021; Stockdale, Theunissen and Haartsen 2018).

One such area is Vukovar-Srijem County (hereinafter: VSC), in the Republic of Croatia. In Croatia, there exist substantial regional developmental inequalities (Akrap and Ivanda 2019; Kranjčević, Lukić, Kušen and Klarić 2014; Rihtar 2022). The counties located in Eastern Croatia are in a disadvantageous position involving several important criteria. According to a research study conducted in 2019, when assessing the quality of life in their town or municipality, 53 per cent of the residents of VSC rated it as worse than the Croatian average (Rihtar 2022). Consequently, according to the demographic estimates, from 2013 to 2018, about 200,000 people emigrated from Croatia (Akrap and Ivanda 2019), while the most unfavourable migration balance was recorded in the counties that belong to the area of Eastern Croatia. It is estimated that, in the period from 2014 to 2017 alone, some 14,482 people left VSC – mostly younger people (Živić 2019). The recent data point to a further deterioration of the extremely unfavourable demographic trends in the area (Živić and Šimunić 2024). All the listed indicators of the economic situation in the area of VSC, especially the continuously unfavourable situation on the labour market, are considered to harm the position of young people in the area and, for years, this county has been among those with the largest share of unemployed youth in Croatia (Croatian Employment Service 2020).

The main aim of this paper is to determine both how young people from a peripheral area imagine their future with regards to the combination of migration choices and educational aspirations and the extent to which individual characteristics and the features of the local environment influence their plans and aspirations. Therefore, the following research questions were posed in the paper:

1. What are the dominant ways of imagining the future concerning the combination of educational and migration plans for the young people in VSC?
2. To what extent do the demographic characteristics of young people, their personal values and the perception of the local community influence the combination of desirable educational and migration paths for young people from VSC?

To achieve this goal, a mixed-method approach, i.e. a combination of a research survey and interviews with secondary-school students, was utilised. The study's results should provide the insights that can help the VSC and similar peripheral areas, both in Croatia and elsewhere, to plan and implement policies that can help to improve the local migration balance by making the local communities more attractive to young people.

The structure of the rest of our paper is as follows. First, we provide an overview of research on the migration and educational aspirations of young people. After explaining the methodological framework of the paper, we present the main results of our quantitative research survey; we then discuss these results by comparing our results with previous research, additionally clarifying them using the results of our qualitative research. We conclude the paper by highlighting its main findings, policy recommendations and the limitations of the research.

Migration choices and the educational aspirations of young people

When researching the lives of young people, it is important to investigate how they imagine their future, where they would like to study and where they would like to live and work (Gruning and Camozzi 2022). Migration aspirations are one of the key elements of imagining the future of young people but they need to be explored more specifically in order to connect the different aspects of young people's lives with the spatial contexts in which they live (Carling and Collins 2018). It seems that young people from rural and peripheral areas are in a particularly complex situation, so it is not surprising that, recently, several studies have been devoted to their attitudes towards migration and planning for the future (Cuzzocrea 2018; Evans 2016; Farrugia 2020). Several studies have indicated various aspects of the quality of life (Farrugia 2020) and the lack of opportunities to develop a career (Evans 2016) as the key migration factors of young people from peripheral places. In addition, when interpreting the life plans of young people, it is necessary to consider how they perceive the local environment and the local community. In this context, concepts such as sense of community, social cohesion and place attachment give us a better understanding of the meaning of local social influences in a rapidly changing world (Forrest and Kearns 2001; Mahmoudi Farahani 2016). It has, unsurprisingly, been shown that young people who show a greater connection with the local community and the local environment show a higher tendency to stay in peripheral and rural areas (Evans 2016; Haukanes 2013; Theodori and Theodori 2015). In this way, it is possible to monitor how, in parallel with globalisation influences, local social relations influence the planning of young people's lives. Finally, in some cases, the concept of lifestyle migration can be useful for interpreting youth migration (King 2018). For example, some cities can be attractive to young people due to a developed cosmopolitan lifestyle (Emilsson and Adolfsson 2019).

Previous research on the factors influencing young people's decision to choose a foreign country as a desirable educational environment has indicated that it depends on the students' characteristics, as posited by Netz (2021: 1050):

...student personality traits, beliefs, attitudes, norms and corresponding benefit expectations, socio-demographic features, such as their gender, age, ethnicity and social origin, previous experience with spatial mobility, academic performance in school and higher education and literacy, numeracy, technical and foreign language skills.

In addition to the listed personal determinants that have been found to influence young people's intention to study abroad, the influence of various contextual factors has been additionally noted, such as the attitudes of peers and parents, institutional and economic factors (Netz 2021) and cultural aspirations (Wright, Ma and Auld 2022), as well as the attachment to local communities and local identities (Cairns and Smyth 2011). It is also considered important to study and interpret the influence of social networks (Brooks and Waters 2010; Carlson 2013), as well as the perception of the place of origin and destination, above all in the macroeconomic context, which can both limit and enable their mobility (van Mol and Timmerman 2014). Aside from place attachment, other personal values, to the best of our knowledge, have been studied only regarding the experiences and satisfaction of international students (Arambewela and Hall 2011; Grayson 2008).

When it comes to Croatia, it is noticeable that the issue of migration aspirations has attracted the most attention in recent years (Vukić, Perić Kaselj and Škiljan 2023). Given that Croatia has joined the European Union, the opportunities for the mobility of young people have also increased. Consequently, the data indicated a large number of young people who showed an interest in and desire to migrate (Vukić et al. 2023). Young people from smaller communities show greater migration aspirations, as well as those who assess the economic situation in Croatia more negatively, thus expressing the intention to emigrate to find better employment opportunities and higher salaries (Adamović and Potočnik 2022).

Although it is generally considered that student mobility has multiple beneficial effects, such as a positive impact on students' academic performance, various skills and employment prospects (Matković, Gregurović and Šabić 2023), especially for those from new member states of the European Union (di Pietro and Page 2008), the data show that young people from Croatia are less represented in international student mobility programmes and in studying abroad without financial support. Although it is observed that interest in studying abroad is on the rise and is expressed by almost a third of students (Puzić, Šabić and Odak 2020; Rimac 2021), only 3.2 per cent of young people from Croatia have experienced international mobility during their studies. While various barriers to the mobility of students from Croatia can be listed, the key motivational factors are the desire for personal development, the desire to improve a foreign language and the quality of study programmes (Puzić et al. 2020). However, for the majority of young people from Croatia, the main obstacle to studying abroad is the additional financial expense for their families (Rimac 2021).

What has been said thus far indicates that research studies have established that the intention of young people to study abroad is not the result of personal ambition alone but, rather, the result of a complex interaction between various drivers and obstacles, wherein some of these reasons are also related to the experience of the local environment. Thus, for example, for young people from Italy, the improvement of language skills by studying abroad is a strategy through which they want to improve the unfavourable situation on the labour market in their home country (van Mol and Timmerman 2014). However, in addition to the fact that previous research has established that studying abroad can subsequently result in a positive impact on various domains of their life in the home country, research findings also indicate that young people who study abroad subsequently become more involved in international migration on the labour market (Baruch, Pawan and Khatri 2007; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Netz 2021; van Mol and Timmerman 2014). A study conducted in Poland showed that the temporary migrations of secondary-school

students from peripheral areas for the purpose of studying usually translate into permanent migrations, while the main factor behind migration is the mismatch between the development of the labour market in peripheral areas and the structure of the educational system, whereby peripheral areas are unable to offer young people adequate jobs (Dolińska, Jończy and Rokita-Poskart 2020). Similar findings are confirmed in studies conducted in other parts of Europe, such as Belgium and the Netherlands (Thissen, Droogleever Fortuijn, Strijker and Haartsen 2010), Iceland (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson 2006) and the post-Soviet countries (Chankseliani 2016). In these studies, employment opportunities appeared to be an important factor influencing the intention of secondary-school students from rural areas to emigrate. On the other hand, in some of these studies, a stronger attachment to the local community proved to be an important reason for staying (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson 2006; Thissen *et al.* 2010).

Methods, samples and measurements

The study comprised quantitative and qualitative sections. First, a cross-sectional survey research study was conducted in February and March 2019 of whom the target population was third- and fourth-grade students from secondary schools in VSC. A two-stage cluster sample was employed. In the first stage, all secondary schools from VSC were included in the sample. In the second stage, a proportional number of classes were chosen according to the year of study (third or fourth), city and programme type (vocational or gymnasium). Small discrepancies were corrected with poststratification weighting. Out of the total of 2,901 secondary-school students in VSC, 744 students comprised the initial sample. Afterwards, only 681 students who expressed the intention to continue their studies within the higher education system were included. The number of missing values was very low, slightly exceeding 1 per cent only in the case of 1 variable. The data were collected via a group survey during the classes, using the paper-and-pencil technique. In Table 1, the detailed sample structure is shown.

Table 1. Sample structure

Variable	N	Share (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	320	46.99
Female	360	52.86
Other	1	0.15
<i>Place of living</i>		
Urban	331	44.91
Rural	335	52.63
No answer	15	2.45
<i>School type</i>		
Gymnasium	216	31.72
Vocational and technical school	465	68.28
<i>GPA</i>		
Less than 2.50	5	0.73
2.50–3.49	141	20.70
3.50–4.49	367	53.89
4.50 and over	163	23.94
No answer	5	0.73

Two questions were used to determine the migration and educational plans of young people. First, respondents were asked where they would like to spend the majority of their lives after completing their education. Six options were offered from which respondents could choose, namely to live in the current place of residence, in VSC, in another place in Croatia outside VSC, in another European Union country, in a European country outside the European Union or in a non-European country. In order to simplify the analysis and, given that almost 70 per cent of all outside migration choices were directed towards European countries, the respondents' answers were re-coded and three groups of respondents were distinguished: those who would like to spend the majority of their lives in VSC, those who would like to live in Croatia but not in VSC and those who would like to live abroad.

The preferred place of education was investigated with the question: 'If the opportunity arose, where would you like to continue your education after having finished high school?' The same 6 options were offered, which were subsequently split into 3 groups – namely, students who would like to study in VSC, those who would like to study somewhere else in Croatia and those who would like to study abroad. As already indicated, the students who did not plan to continue their education were not taken into account in the subsequent analyses.

Based on the literature review, three groups of predictor variables were used to test the differences between the different groups of students concerning their life plans. The first group was called *basic demographic characteristics* and included gender (male, female, other), school type (gymnasium or vocational school), GPA, place of living (urban or rural), life satisfaction (from 1 to 5) and the perception of the standard of living in their household compared to the Croatian average (from 1 to 5). Due to the lower frequencies (less than 5 per cent), some of the categories were merged in the subsequent analyses.

The second group, *the perception of the local community*, was operationalised through 3 dimensions that tried to capture (a) place attachment, i.e. the emotional relationship of the respondents towards the place of residence, (b) the assessment of social cohesion in the local community and (c) the perception of career development opportunities.

To measure place attachment, we used a part of the so-called Urban-Identity Scale constructed by Lalli (1992). More precisely, his general instrument of urban identity consisted of 5 dimensions and, in our research, the dimension called General Attachment was used. This dimension consisted of 4 items/statements and the degree of rated agreement ranged from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). In relation to the original instrument, small wording changes were made, given that some items included measurement of the connection with a specific geographic place (in our version of the scale – VSC). The items used in this study are as follows: 'I have got native feelings for my community', 'I see myself as a member of my community', 'I feel really at home at my community' and 'This community is like a part of myself'. In the current study, the value of Cronbach's α was 0.92.

The perception of local neighbourhood social cohesion is also a factor that indicates the current state of the local community – and may also indicate its development capabilities. In the case of the perception of local social cohesion, the instrument created by Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls (1997) was previously used and validated in a research study in Croatia (Miletić, Krnić and Majetić 2016). The instrument consists of 5 parts that investigate how respondents evaluate their neighbourhood in terms of solidarity, connectedness, homogeneity, harmony and trust. The following items comprised this scale: 'People around here are willing to help their neighbours', 'This is a close-knit neighbourhood', 'People in this neighbourhood can be trusted', 'People in this neighbourhood generally get along each other', and 'People in this neighbourhood share the same values'. Agreement with the offered statements was measured on a 5-point scale: from *I do not agree at all* (1) to *I completely agree* (5). In the current study, the value of Cronbach's α was 0.88.

The perception of employment opportunities and career development was measured by employing a multi-item instrument that was created for this research study. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they are satisfied with the possibility of finding employment in the county, as well as with the transparency of employment, the availability of well-paid and diverse jobs and the availability of jobs that enable the advancement of more ambitious employees. The value of Cronbach's α was 0.86.

When investigating *value orientations*, as the third group of predictors, an instrument previously used in several research studies on young people in Croatia was used (Ilišin and Gvozdanović 2016; Radin 2007). The instrument contained items that describe tendencies towards various types of success, the desire for leisure and entertainment at will, the high value put on the time spent with the family, etc. Respondents expressed their desirability on a scale of 5 degrees: from *extremely undesirable* (1) to *extremely desirable* (5). A factor analysis revealed a 3-factor structure, the same structure as in a recent study that used the same instrument (Ilišin and Gvozdanović 2016). The following value orientations were thus determined: social success (comprising 4 statements with a value of Cronbach's α of 0.76), traditionalism (3 statements; Cronbach's α was 0.56) and individual autonomy (2 statements; Cronbach's α was 0.64). Somewhat lower values on the reliability test can be connected to the small number of items included in the scales (Vaske, Beaman and Sponarski 2017).

To strengthen the interpretation of the survey results, 12 interviews were conducted with randomly selected third- and fourth-grade students, until the saturation point was reached. The sample size is consistent with the conclusions of a systematic study conducted by Hennink and Kaiser (2022), who concluded that the saturation point is usually reached after between 9 and 17 interviews. The students were asked to describe their educational and migration plans and the various factors that determine them. Bearing in mind the purpose of this part of the study, we introduce the illustrative statements of the students obtained in the interviews in the discussion of the survey results in order to strengthen the interpretation of the results.

Given that the survey and interviews included minor students, informed written consent from the parents and schools and an informed verbal consent from the students were obtained before the data collection. All participants were guaranteed full anonymity and were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The research study was approved by the Ethical committee of the Institute for Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (decision no. 11-73/18-2805).

Results

The results of the research showed that young people from VSC expressed high migration aspirations (see Table 2). They revealed that only 35.76 per cent of respondents would like to remain in VSC, 32.26 per cent would like to live somewhere else in Croatia and 31.17 per cent would like to live somewhere abroad. When it comes to the preferred place for continuing education, 67.18 per cent of the secondary-school students would like to study in Croatia, although outside VSC, 18.75 per cent of the students would like to study abroad, while 14.07 per cent would like to study in VSC.

We note that young people are predominantly satisfied with their lives, given that 70.78 per cent of the respondents indicated that they are satisfied or very satisfied. When it comes to self-assessment of the household standard of living, the largest number of respondents (57.84 per cent), rated their situation as approximately average compared to the rest of the people in their community.

Table 2. Descriptive results (categorical variables)

Variable	N	%
<i>Preferred place of university study</i>		
Vukovar-Srijem County	94	13.88
Croatia	458	67.65
Abroad	125	18.46
<i>Preferred place of living in the future</i>		
Vukovar-Srijem County	239	35.76
Croatia	215	32.26
Abroad	208	31.17
No answer	5	0.81
<i>Life satisfaction</i>		
Non-satisfied	62	9.32
Somewhat satisfied	124	18.58
Satisfied	357	53.50
Very satisfied	115	17.28
No answer	9	1.32
<i>Standard of living</i>		
Below average	77	11.54
Average	386	57.84
Above average	201	30.04
No response	4	0.58

When it comes to other variables measured on the quantitative (interval) scale, from Table 3 we can note that the young people in this area are very dissatisfied with the possibility of employment in the local community, given that the mean on a 5–25 scale amounted to 10.29. In all 5 investigated areas of the satisfaction with the employment in the local community, there is a greater number of young people who express dissatisfaction compared to those who are satisfied with the possibility of employment. In contrast, young people showed a relatively high place attachment. For instance, 76.7 per cent of the respondents agreed with the statement *I feel that I am home in the settlement where I live*, while 64.5 per cent agreed with the statement *The settlement where I live means a lot to me*.

Young people also expressed a slight satisfaction with the social cohesion in the neighbourhood; however, there are significant differences between the responses to specific scale items. Young people agreed to the greatest extent with the statement that people in the neighbourhood are ready to help each other (64.1 per cent of respondents agreed with this statement), while they agreed to the least extent with the statement that people in their neighbourhood share the same values (47.9 per cent of respondents agreeing with the statement).

When it comes to the answers to the items that investigated the value orientations of young people, it was shown that the most desirable life goals for young people are to *live peacefully in the family circle* (preferable for 80.5 per cent of respondents) and *to be your own boss and do what you want* (75.2 per cent). Average results for all 3 sub-scales (traditionalism, autonomy and success) are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive results (quantitative variables)

Variable	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard deviation
Employment opportunities	663	5	25	10.29	3.71
Place attachment	662	5	25	17.91	5.73
Local social cohesion	664	5	25	16.88	4.82
Traditionalism as a value	663	3	15	11.11	2.44
Autonomy as a value	661	2	10	7.47	1.90
Social success as a value	658	5	25	17.69	3.64

More about the descriptive results related to place attachment, social cohesion in the neighbourhood and value orientations of young people in this study can be found in Žanić, Miletić and Živić (2022).

As the first part of our analytical strategy, we conducted a 2-step SPSS 24 cluster analysis with 2 variables – the preferred place of living in the future (VSC, the rest of Croatia or abroad) and the preferred place of studying, with the same response categories. A 2-step cluster analysis is chosen because it can accommodate both large datasets and categorical variables (Kent, Jensen and Kongsted 2014). In the first iteration, with the maximum number of clusters allowed, 7 were extracted. However, 2 of the clusters were extremely small – i.e. they comprised only 4.6% and 3.1% of all cases, respectively. Therefore, in the second iteration, the number of extracted clusters was 5, with each of them being theoretically interpretable and comprising a significant number of cases (Table 4). The average silhouette measure of cohesion and separation amounted to 0.9, indicating a good fit to the data.

Table 4. Cluster structure

	Preferred place of future university education	Preferred place of living in the future
Cluster 1. Focus on Croatia (N=195) 29.0%	Croatia (100%)	Croatia (100%)
Cluster 2. Planned return to the VSC (N=154) 22.9%	Croatia (100%)	VSC (100%)
Cluster 3. Focus on VSC (N=117) 17.4%	VSC (74.4%)	VSC (73.5%)
Cluster 4. Gradual departure abroad (N=105) 15.6%	Croatia (100%)	Abroad (100%)
Cluster 5. Focus on abroad (N=102) 15.2%	Abroad (100%)	Abroad (100%)

As can be seen, the first cluster consists of those students who want to study in other areas of Croatia and want to continue their lives there after their studies. In the second cluster, we find students who want to finish their studies in other parts of Croatia but want to return to live in VSC. The third cluster comprises students who want to both study and continue their lives afterwards in VSC. The fourth cluster consists of students who want to finish their studies in Croatia but to continue their lives abroad. In the fifth cluster are students who want to finish their studies abroad and then live there after having finished their studies.

In the second part, we investigated the predictors of the cluster membership. Given the multilevel structural nature of the data – i.e. the fact that the students from one school might be more similar to each other compared to the students from the other schools, multilevel modeling with categorical outcomes was used as an analytical method to avoid clustering effects on sampling errors (Heck, Thomas and Tabata 2012). However, since in the empty random intercept model (with no predictors) the intercepts did not vary significantly between schools ($z=1.51$; $p=0.13$), we subsequently conducted a multinomial logistic regression analysis without multilevel structure using IBM SPSS 24. A sensitivity analysis confirmed that all substantive results obtained through this analysis were equivalent to those obtained using multilevel modelling. Additional sensitivity analysis related to post-stratification weights also showed that the substantive conclusions obtained from the analysis with and without the weights are the same.

Table 5. Multinomial logistic regression analysis with cluster membership as the criterion variable

	Cluster 1 Focus on Croatia		Cluster 2 Planned return to the VSC		Cluster 3 Focus on VSC		Cluster 4 Gradual departure abroad	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Gender (ref.=male)	0.52	1.68	-0.24	0.79	-0.26	0.77	0.03	1.03
School type (ref.=vocational school)	0.04	1.04	0.32	1.38	0.06	1.06	0.63	1.88
GPA (ref.=4.50 and over)								
Less than 3.50	-1.03*	0.36	-1.41**	0.25	-0.34	0.71	-1.11*	0.33
3.50–4.49	-0.51	0.60	-0.09	0.92	0.30	1.35	-0.23	0.80
Place of living (ref.=urban)	-0.23	0.79	-0.29	0.75	-0.02	0.99	-0.06	0.94
Life satisfaction (ref.=very satisfied)								
Non-satisfied	-0.48	0.62	-0.45	0.64	0.56	1.75	-1.12	0.88
Somewhat satisfied	-0.65	0.52	0.20	1.22	0.02	1.02	-0.25	0.78
Satisfied	0.11	1.11	-0.09	0.91	0.26	1.30	-0.13	0.88
Standard of living (ref.=above average)								
Below average	-0.64	0.53	-0.68	0.51	-0.30	0.74	0.28	1.32
Average	0.07	1.07	0.00	1.00	0.15	1.16	-0.22	0.81
Employment opportunities	0.09*	1.10	0.14**	1.15	0.09*	1.10	0.01	1.01
Place attachment	0.06*	1.06	0.24**	1.27	0.18**	1.20	0.00	1.00
Local social cohesion	0.02	1.02	-0.01	0.99	-0.02	0.98	0.02	1.02
Traditionalism	0.09	1.10	0.17*	1.19	0.11	1.11	-0.03	0.97
Autonomy	-0.13	0.88	-0.27**	0.76	-0.20*	0.82	-0.13	0.88
Social success	0.01	1.01	-0.03	0.97	-0.03	0.97	0.02	1.02

Reference category = those who plan to study and live abroad. Chi-square = 249.17, $p < 0.00$; Cox and Snell = 0.34; Nagelkerke = 0.35; McFadden = 0.13; * $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$

The results of the analysis are shown in Table 5, where the reference category was a cluster of students who were focused on moving abroad, which means that they want to go and study abroad and then stay there to live. Note, too, that all 3 clusters of students who plan to live in Croatia (either in VSC or in other parts of the country), after controlling for other predictors, express a higher degree of belief in the possibility of finding satisfactory employment in VSC, with an odds ratio amounting to 1.10 in the case of the first and third clusters and 1.15 for the second cluster. Likewise, the members of these 3 clusters expressed a higher level of place attachment (odds ratios are 1.06, 1.27 and 1.20). In comparison to the students who want to study and live abroad, higher traditionalism can be detected only among the students who want to return to VSC after having completed their studies (odds ratio equals 1.19), while a lower preference for personal autonomy can be observed among both groups of students who prefer to stay in VSC (odds ratios are 0.76 and 0.82). The perception of local social cohesion and social success as the value preference were not statistically significant predictors. When it comes to basic demographic characteristics, gender, school type, place of living, life satisfaction and the perceived standard of living were not statistically significant predictors. On the other hand, the students with a GPA lower than 3.50 were less likely to belong to all 3 clusters of students who expressed a preference to continue university education in Croatia (odds ratios between 0.25 and 0.36).

Discussion

We believe that the current study contributes to the scholarship by connecting the two topics that have been insufficiently clearly integrated – namely, educational aspirations and long-term migration choices. Several research studies thus far have dealt with generally defined migration aspirations, with some of the studies focused on studying abroad while, in others, education was cited as only one of the motives for migrating (van Mol 2016). The analysis carried out here connected the educational choices of the young people related to the different geographical areas (local, national and international), with their preferred life paths after completing their education. Cluster analysis identified 5 groups of young people who combine their educational choices and migration plans in different ways. Overall, the determinants related to the perception of the local community, with the exception of local social cohesion; personal value orientations proved to be more important than basic demographic characteristics when predicting cluster membership.

The results of the study point to the conclusion that place attachment significantly influences young people's plans for the future. Young people oriented towards going abroad show a significantly lower level of attachment to the local community than those who imagine their future there. Such orientations might be rational, since homesickness can contribute to the accumulation of stress and even international students usually face several challenges and barriers in their attempts to adjust to the new social and cultural environment (Bilecen, Diekmann and Faist 2023; Diehl, Jansen, Ishchanova and Hilger-Kolb 2018; Poyrazli and Grahame 2007; Tavakoli, Lumley, Hijazi, Slavin-Spenny and Parris 2009). On the other hand, personal autonomy can be strengthened when studying abroad, given that international students achieve an increased sense of mastery, personal growth and accomplishment when adjusting to new environments (Prazeres 2017; Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong and Pace 2014; Terrazas-Carrillo, Hong, McWhirter, Robbins and Pace 2017).

Students' life plans are also linked to the evaluation of the developmental possibilities offered by the local community and its overall quality of life. A lack of local opportunities for career development in the future significantly affects the desire to live abroad. Several interviewed students confirmed the crucial importance of career opportunities for migration intentions.

The first thing for me is the security of employment, that I actually find some kind of job right after college; after that, it's the same financially, whether the salary is good. It doesn't have to be a spectacular salary but to cover all needs and to be able to live a normal life in addition to that, so that I don't have to look at actually making ends meet, that's the only thing (Participant 4, female).

Well, they would have to open, like, some factories or something that would create jobs for people and whether they would get the opportunity to be employed there at all because that's why young people move, they don't have work and money. Small salaries and so... (Participant 5, female).

Naturally, this is not a surprising finding since the large number of young people from Croatia cited the improvement in living standards, better employment opportunities and higher wages as the key reasons for wanting to migrate (Adamović and Potočnik 2022). However, apart from the weak opportunities for career development, two other shortcomings of this region have a negative impact on the willingness of young people to stay in the community. First of all, young people stated that there are not enough opportunities in the county for them to continue their education after finishing high school – the current opportunities are the local polytechnic and several study programmes offered by universities and polytechnics from other parts of Croatia, which can be attended locally. This probably leads to the negative migration balance of VSC within Croatia.

First of all, this is a very small community, so some institutions are missing in the beginning. For example, higher education is also the main cause of leaving (Participant 3, male).

There are no jobs and almost no colleges, so everyone either goes to work after high school – which means they go somewhere else because there is nothing to do here and if they do go to college, they also go to college elsewhere because there are almost none here (Participant 7, male).

Well, I would primarily leave because of my choice of college. We have a polytechnic here and anyone can go to Osijek or Zagreb or Zadar or anywhere and I think that, if someone finished college there, he/she would stay in that city (Participant 1, female).

On the other hand, the differences between the detected clusters suggest that the desire to study abroad largely represents an attempt to escape from the peripheral environment, which is motivated primarily by the desire for autonomy but also by a more negative assessment of the region's economic perspective and employment opportunities, as well as a low attachment to the local environment. It should be noted here that it is more about an imaginary than a real escape attempt, bearing in mind the very low proportion of Croatian high-school students who study abroad – i.e. the gap between the desire to study abroad and the realisation of such a desire (Matković *et al.* 2023). The marked absence of a large cluster of students who would like to study abroad and return to Croatia shows that studying abroad as a mechanism for avoiding downward social mobility probably does not exist as a significant mechanism in such a peripheral area. The question that arises is whether this mechanism of family-inherited cultural and financial privileges, which was detected in earlier research in Croatia (Puzić *et al.* 2020), is possibly present to a greater extent in larger and more developed cities with more well-to-do young people than in peripheral areas. It is also very important to point out here that the cluster of students who want to study abroad and stay there and those who want to study in Croatia and then go abroad differ only in that the latter case comprises more successful secondary-school students. This finding also

probably implies an element of escapism and imagination, bearing in mind that students who want to study abroad do not want to do so because of the better quality of foreign higher education institutions but because they have not achieved success in the Croatian education system. The fact that better students chose to study in other parts of Croatia and not in VSC or abroad, also points to the conclusion that the lack of local higher education programmes contributed to the negative migration balance of VSC within Croatia – i.e., the reasons for moving abroad probably cannot be found there.

In addition, it is pointed out that certain facilities are lacking, especially entertainment spaces for young people.

No, there is not enough entertainment content for young people. Starting, for example, with clubs, disco clubs and perhaps sports clubs (Participant 3, male).

I think that we have enough physical spaces but these spaces are mostly either closed or not working, so there's not much fun there (Participant 6, male).

It would be great, for example, if there was a special room that would be, say, for us young people. Let's say, something like a youth association, something like that. And now we come up with an idea to come up with something, no matter what, any activity. That would be great. Or that we have some kind of space to hang out in the winter, because in the summer we're all outside anyway (Participant 11, female).

It is interesting that the perception of social cohesion in the neighbourhood was not a significant predictor of future life plans, which points to its declining importance for young people, even in relatively traditional areas such as VSC. This should be explored in more depth in future research – an excerpt from one interview hints at such a possibility.

It's a completely different story now, everyone lives for themselves, so no one is interested in other people's business and that's even more okay with me because there's no special interaction except 'Good day' but everything is more okay like this for me (Participant 4, female).

A significant finding from the current study is that the value orientations of secondary-school students are important for their desire to study abroad, which has not been previously researched. Namely, young people who are focused on studying and living abroad show a greater preference for personal autonomy, while young people who expressed an intention to return to their community expressed a stronger inclination toward traditionalist value orientation. Below are two statements; one illustrates a young person with a traditional value orientation and the second briefly describes someone who wants to leave a local community that seems limiting to her.

I am not planning to leave, I was born here, it's my homeland, I want to stay here. If everyone leaves, who will remain among us and how can we expect any progress, when we were the first to pick up and leave... I try to follow my religious faith in everything I do and that's it. I mean, I'm active in the parish and I go to church, so that's an important factor in my life (Participant 2, female).

I know one girl who said she wouldn't want to go back and that's totally fine with me. She is a person whom I can't even imagine living in this community because she's all so different; to me, she is like 'worldly' (Participant 4, female).

Peripheral areas are often marked with a more traditional way of life and the more traditional young people from a peripheral area covered in this study acknowledge this when making their life plans. Peripheral areas without the dynamism and multicultural environment of the large international urban centres do not represent stimulating environments for young people with such value orientations. In other words, peripheral areas are characterised by 'the low social density of events', which results in 'a relatively low level of total social energy' (Lay 1998: 15).

The differences in value orientations can be linked to research on lifestyles and suggest that future research on imagining the future should include this concept more significantly (Benson and Osbaldiston 2016). The concept of lifestyle migration can be particularly useful if it is taken into account in a somewhat broader sense compared to its initial use. In other words, it was primarily used to detect privileged migrations in which well-to-do individuals use their cultural and financial capital to move easily in the globalised world (McGarrigle 2022). At the same time, the focus was on migrations from the centre to the peripheries that offered certain benefits. However, there have been suggestions to expand this concept to include migration in the reverse direction, from peripheral areas to vibrant cities (King 2018). Precisely in this sense, we think that it can be fruitful to connect value aspirations and lifestyles with the migration of young people.

Conclusions, limitations and policy implications

In the modern process of growing up, young people plan their life paths to a large extent by combining local, national and global frames of reference. Research thus far has shown that young people from peripheral areas are in a complex situation, with a significant number of them expressing an 'escape narrative', meaning that, without completing higher education, they are unable to realise desirable professional careers. The analysis conducted in this paper offered some important insights and policy implications.

It was shown that the perception of developmental opportunities in the county, place attachment and value orientations influence the way in which young people imagine their preferred life paths. Imagining the future is thus influenced in different ways by a combination of the respondents' identity and their perception of certain shortcomings that are present in the local community. Therefore, policies aimed at young people in VSC should focus on solving the following three problems: facilitating the career development of young people, improving higher education possibilities and shaping new leisure time content for young people, especially places where young people can gather and socialise. Taking into account that migration aspirations are particularly prominent among students in the final grades of secondary school, the development of higher education study programmes can be considered a priority element of the local and state policy related to this area. We can assume that the establishment of such institutions and programmes would also facilitate the creation of different types of cultural and entertainment spaces for young people. Therefore, deprived and peripheral areas, such as VSC, might benefit from the more diverse higher education opportunities which, according to our study, would contribute towards the reduction of regional migration imbalances.

When it comes to the limitations of this research, it should first be noted that, although most of the measurement instruments used in the study have been used previously and have proven metric

characteristics, the reliability of some instruments with a smaller number of items was below the usual threshold of acceptability. Second, the analysis is limited to the local community level; future research in this area should therefore include a regional dimension to the analysis – that is, to explore possible differences between those young people who want to realise their educational and migration aspirations by going to a regional centre (in our case, Osijek) and those who want to go to other parts of Croatia or abroad. Finally, our analysis did not cover in full detail the socio-economic background of the students and its possible influence on migration and educational aspirations, especially when it comes to potential interaction effects.

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Conflict of interest statement


No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability

The data to support the study results are available at the data repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek: <https://repozitorij.ffos.hr/islandora/object/ffos:6691> (urn:nbn:hr:142:535670).

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