

## Article

# Learning to Leave and to Return: Mobility, Place, and Sense of Belonging amongst Young People Growing up in Border and Rural Regions of Mainland Portugal

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**Abstract:** This article examines how mobility is incorporated into the lives of young people growing up in rural border regions of continental Portugal. It also explores how municipalities are dealing with the contemporary imperative of mobility and its consequences. Young people from these regions are affected by decisions to leave to continue studying in higher education, or to find a job. Combined, these lead to an outward migration trend and thus loss of human capital. This paper is based on a multi-method research project carried out in the border regions and involves young people and other stakeholders from 38 municipalities. The data were selected from a questionnaire completed by young people (9th–12th grade;  $n = 3968$ ), 38 semi-structured interviews with local policymakers, 50 biographical interviews, and 5 focus groups with young people. Results indicate that although most young people aspire to further education and do not fear leaving their region, they nonetheless tend to integrate the necessity to be mobile into their biographies. Hence, they do not associate it with displacement or as being tantamount to abandoning their region, and to which some of them want to return. We consider that in parallel with learning to leave local sentiments, policies, and actions are emerging towards coalescing a trend of learning to stay and returning. We propose an interpretation of this tendency as indicative of new understandings around these peripheral territories and which are shaped by young people's experience of reconciling a sense of belonging to place and any associated mobilities.

**Keywords:** rural regions; border regions; young people; mobility; sense of belonging



**Citation:** Silva, S.M.d.; Silva, A.M.; Cortés-González, P.; Brazienė, R. Learning to Leave and to Return: Mobility, Place, and Sense of Belonging amongst Young People Growing up in Border and Rural Regions of Mainland Portugal. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 9432. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13169432>

Academic Editors: Slaven Gasparovic and Òscar Prieto-Flores

Received: 28 July 2021

Accepted: 17 August 2021

Published: 23 August 2021

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## 1. Introduction

Border regions in Portugal are commonly regarded as places with structural and historical disparities in terms of regional economic growth, concentration of unemployment, high internal migration, lower local mobility, and scarcity of available resources. This scarcity can include social and educational opportunities, which are considered vital for objectively measuring positive development and quality of life. These regions have been affected by this situation; it has impacted upon spatial distribution of population settlements, decisions to leave [1], and created repercussions in sustainability and development and thus the overall cohesion of those regions.

However, although efforts have been undertaken by different levels of governance to redress inequalities and disadvantages, the material effects of space are nonetheless manifested in interlocking disadvantages [2]. In particular, these affect young people's current experiences and future scenarios. Hence, securing quality and successful educational and social pathways for young people has become one of the main goals of policies from different levels of governance. Although we may consider that transitions into adulthood have been non-linear, de-standardised, and with uncertainty for some time [3], young

people from rural contexts have additional constraints related to structural inequalities that primarily affect such regions.

We already know from previous research what drives young people to leave peripheral regions [4–9]. We also know the social, economic, and cultural consequences of mobilities and of immobility. Several contributions have shown how education translates into mobility in a different sense for young people growing up in peripheral areas in contrast to their urban-dwelling peers [1,7,10]. A survey with young adults from 11 European countries conducted by Weiss, Ferrante, and Soler-Porta [11] indicated that those living in rural areas are more willing to move to find a job than those living in urban areas. The study was based on the dataset, “Cultural Pathways to Economic Self-Sufficiency and Entrepreneurship”, collected in 2019 [12]. However, we know less about what makes young people stay and return, and the role of communities in these mobility dynamics.

In this context, this paper has the following aims: to further understand young people’s relationships with their regions, their sense of belonging and attachment to them; to better interpret the place of mobility in their lives and within regional social practices; and to explore how the impact of mobility influences policies in helping youth to stay or return in rural and border areas.

Young people represent more diverse, less fixed, and more porous positions. This tells us that it is relevant to examine how interior, rural, border, and peripheral experiences are lived out (performed) [13,14]. This exercise is important, for example, in order to show that regions are not stagnant but also to avoid falling into a romanticised notion of them. Young people construct their own representations of their life contexts from their perceptions, experiences, and discourses, and these exist beyond a social construction of the idea of the interior, rural settings [14].

This article may contribute to resisting the metro-centric analysis of phenomena in peripheral contexts [15] as well as the analytical models that emerge from metropolitan culture [16]. It will do this by exploring different levels of resistance to the trapped narrative(s), the discourse of decline, and the stereotypical portraits that are socially and historically constructed in rural/border regions and which exert power over local meanings. Those living in those regions suffer the “consequences of the discursive dominance of certain narratives over others” [17] (p. 1593). As Farrugia emphasises, the “valorisation of cosmopolitanism raises questions about established modes of local place attachment experienced by young people beyond the global city” [8] (p. 239).

We expect that understandings about how young people from peripheral geographies combine the sense of belonging to place; awareness of lack of opportunities, mobilities, and intentions; and willingness to stay or return may shed light on new youth cultures. Additionally, it may illuminate new visions about marginal places that might contribute to systemic changes and regional development.

This article proceeds as follows. Firstly, we begin by outlining the theoretical framework, and this is followed by an explanation of how the study was developed. Results will showcase views concerning a range of topics including the advantages and disadvantages of growing up in rural border regions; perceptions about existing opportunities in education, employment, or local support for young people; expectations about staying or leaving their regions for further education or work; feelings around returning; discourses from municipalities about “walk-the-line” actions to motivate and compensate for the geographical determination of social and economic disadvantage; and the promotion or, in some cases, the amplification of young people’s sense of belonging and ties, as a form of social capital.

## 2. Theoretical Background

How a place is experienced [18] may indicate how individuals give meaning to their conditions and how they define expectations and design future pathways according to perceived possibilities and “objective limits” [19]. The materiality of place also shapes individuals’ possibilities; however, narratives and discourses also impact upon the production

of understandings associated with people and social life in general [20]. Moreover, they may develop what Cairns and colleagues have designated as “spatial reflexivity” [21,22], namely, the ability to think spatially about life choices and to map decisions in a stratified space based upon different resources and images [17].

Individual perceptions about a space (in this case border regions, mainly rural and located in the inlands, with limitations but also with opportunities) affect their sense of belonging to this space. Young people from peripheral regions have a multi-dimensional relationship with their home regions that are “equally meaningful and contribute to place attachment” [23] (p. 684). Hence, they influence how they experience place attachment.

Research has demonstrated how young people from rural regions develop negative discourses about their regions in contrast to urban places considered as being more interesting from a young person’s perspective [24,25]. Places are associated with structural and historical meanings that influence how they are associated with privilege, or reduced opportunity and disadvantage. Furthermore, socially shared concepts such as youth, a successful person, a citizen, opportunities, development, or innovation are urban-centred constructs that establish a hierarchy of values and distinctions. In turn, these normalise the cultural imperatives associated with cosmopolitanism [8] (p. 7). A place that occupies a specific position in the hierarchy of value influences the position of identities associated with that place. As Wiborg [26] mentions, “Society and identity, including the meaning of places, have in this way a mutual relationship, because the signs and symbols people use to express their own and interpret others’ identities are related to cultural norms and values” (p. 417).

Theories concerning place-making [17,27,28] have highlighted how “place” is constructed and reconstructed through discursive processes. Specifically in relation to young people, Waite [27] considers the relevance of being attentive to how they produce regional places but also the combination in those processes of the construction of global flows, mobilities that influence social practices, and individuals’ relationships with place. He argues:

*Place-making mechanisms that serve to constantly (re)construct localities are demonstrated in a range of recurrent discursive practices narrating collective understandings of place and alluding to those felt sensations “beneath” articulated expression. Dominant discursive understandings about place, regionality, and stigmatised place reputation play a role in young people’s place-making practice. [27] (p. 279)*

Regional rural places are usually side-lined. The dominant economic model concentrates on growth and development in global cities, thus leaving regional contexts behind. In rural regions, this translates into unemployment, and more prominently, youth unemployment. To that end, mobility studies have been accounting for flows and networks of people and social practices that translate into regimes of mobility and its social consequences [29–31].

Research on youth mobility has made substantial contributions to our understanding of young people’s relationships with place, decisions regarding their future and leaving, staying, or returning to their home regions [7,8,32–34]. Concepts such as mobility capacity [22], mobility imperative [35], or mobility requirement [36] have been developed in order to account for mobility patterns and drivers. Regarding youth from rural areas, the work of Farrugia [7,8], among others, has contributed to understanding how rural young people’s lives are influenced by the “mobility imperative” to have access to new experiences and, simultaneously, by place attachment. In those regions, mobility has been associated with positive values and status (predominantly a symbolic dimension) but more specifically with the condition of having better opportunities that are scarce in each place and thus, eventually, social mobility [22].

Youth studies, namely those focusing on youth transitions, have investigated how educational choices and employment opportunities have influenced young people’s mobilities [37–39]. Mobility as an “entanglement of physical movement, representations, and practices” [40] (p. 18) has been part of how their relationship with place and the future is

determined. Mobility has been associated with personal development and is fundamental in transitions either to other school levels or to work [37]. It is through mobility, understood as a form of capital, that cultural and social distinctions are created [35,41]. However, many authors have already explored the problems with drawing a correlation between geographic mobility and social mobility [42,43].

The educational journey for young people from these peripheral regions is dependent on income; visible social disadvantages of access from low-income families are observed [44]. Being a “resource which is differentially accessed” [40] (p. 21), mobility may provide some young people with new life opportunities, but it will also make more visible those who are excluded from that movement and are immobile [45,46]. As considered by Cresswell [40], “analysing mobilities involves examining many consequences for different peoples and places located in what we might call the fast and slow lanes of social life” (p. 213). Likewise, Sheller [47] considers that mobilities are always located and materialised.

The right to mobility that the EU often celebrates, connected to the concept of a Western citizen [48], cannot be easily labelled as resistance, freedom, or transgression [49]. There are specificities, namely structural conditions of inequalities, to consider when studying mobilities, since they affect how the populations living in peripheral regions respond to the imperative of mobility as well as the cultural imperatives associated with cosmopolitan subjectivities [7,8]. However, regardless of the imperatives, place attachment and a sense of belonging to the region are relevant dimensions when it comes to understanding young people’s lives in peripheral regions in tandem with structures of inequality that affect their decisions [8]. Hence, as has been argued by Sheller and Urry [50], mobility and fluidity exist in parallel with territorialisation and materiality of movement vis-à-vis territorial engagement. Moreover, a sense of belonging to place is an integral part of communities’ biographies. In fact, our theoretical hypothesis is that movement, flows, and mobilities are in relation to place and not contrary to it. To that end, Bærenholdt and Granås [51] consider that “place is not the static and fixed contrast to mobility” (p. 2) being constructed and negotiated through spatial practices. The new mobilities paradigm [40,50] considers that it is dangerous to consider that the immobile and associated notions such as borders, territories, or place are consigned the past.

Regional places are often associated with decline, stagnation, disadvantage, lower status, and other negative views associated therein (with cosmopolitanism being class distinctive) [8]. However, late changes regarding rural and regional places versus urban locations may have brought specificities that influence positive visions/associations, or at least make them worthy of attention.

Regional investment in local innovation has been considered crucial to returning youth. Additionally, motives for returning are also associated with affect and the sense of belonging to a place. Previous research has demonstrated that some young people growing up in rural contexts develop a place engagement that cements in their perspective that those places are closer to nature and also cultivate community bonds [8,20,52,53]. Thus, positive narratives around regions are growing when one accounts for emotional geographies [54]. The growing value associated with local networks, cultural heritages, or collective ties may be capitalized by young people, families, and communities. Place attachment and sense of belonging may be used as social capital [55–57] for instrumental or expressive returns [58].

There are signs of negotiations around the value of the local and its meaning; specifically, mobility plays a crucial role in understanding how place is constructed and experienced. Mobilities are, in part, challenging traditional views of place and generating new territorial arrangements and circuits of belonging [59]. Indeed, recent studies are pointing towards returning movements to rural regions [60,61]. This demands closer attention since it may contribute to rethinking the place or countryside regions in the geopolitical and economic space and, therefore, to enable grounding of sustainable settlement policies. This trend seems to depend on the existence of support in areas such as employment, and this has been supported by Baylina and colleagues [60] and Baylina and Rodó-de-Zárate [61].

Their studies seem to indicate that women were more likely to return to rural areas when they had professional projects associated with those regions, or when they were involved in political movements and activism [61].

### 3. The Study

The study was conducted in thirty-eight municipalities located in the borderlands of continental Portugal. Most of those regions are considered predominantly rural (less than 2000 inhabitants, with more than 50% of the population living in rural grid cells) and are, in general, considered peripheral zones. This geographic condition creates differentiated positioning from wherein individuals shape their social practices and understand available opportunities as well as constraints. Young people are amongst those more affected by reduced opportunities and diversity of offers in education and employment. Often, local organisations such as municipalities and schools work to guarantee rural young people extra support to be able to continue studying in HE after compulsory education (up to 12th grade, 18 years old). Simultaneously, they understand that that may result in never having those youngsters return.

A Eurostat projection (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210520-1>, accessed on 4 August 2021) to 2050 regarding population trends in EU countries shows that Portugal is one of the countries projected to experience a 21–27% decline, with a higher loss (–20%) in seven Nut-3 regions located in rural border regions. This confirms that the decline will be greatest in predominantly rural areas (around –19%). In order to reverse this decline, stronger linkages are proposed between the provision of vocational training programs, higher education, and housing programs.

Recently, national level policies have tried to overcome this challenge [62]. For example, The Youth National Plan (2018–2021) contains measures to increase the attractiveness of rural areas and create new employment opportunities. The National Program for Territorial Cohesion (2016–2022), developed by the Mission Unit for the Valorisation of the Inlands, prioritises the promotion of settlement of young people whilst considering the need for additional support that entails. The plan includes measures aimed at promoting employment and addressing the unequal distribution of educational opportunities. To make rural areas more attractive, the State of the Rural Young Entrepreneur (Translated from Portuguese: *Estado do Jovem Empresário Rural*) was created in 2019 in order to promote entrepreneurship in rural areas and increase employment opportunities [63]. It also includes specific benefits for those who settle in rural areas and develop a business, especially in agriculture [64].

Notwithstanding the compensatory intentions underlying these measures, they do not, however, seem to be accompanied by an understanding of young people's differing capacities to respond to affordances their regions or the country provide. Moreover, they are far from having effective results that would be locally thought of as concrete opportunities. For these reasons, the imperative of mobility is still a dominant narrative and practice.

There are various practices of mobility; however, we will consider those that are long-term: mobility to study or work; mobility to return; and, mobility opportunities that young people undertake (or that are promoted by municipalities to foster bonds and intended to impact upon the future return of young people). This study also pays attention to indicators of social practices and expectations to stay or return.

In this article, mobility is understood as a phenomenon that is integrated in young people biographies and as a relevant factor that organises present and future expectations and social practices, and one that is also crucial to ground new opportunities for young people in rural border regions.

### 4. Method

The analysis presented in this article draws on data and findings of the research project named GROW.UP—Grow up in border regions in continental Portugal: young people, educational pathways, and agendas (2018–2022). This research project aims to investigate how structural inequalities from rural border regions, particularly related to a combination



of social, educational, low mobility/remoteness, and economic inequalities, are impacting upon young people's lives and driving local educational and youth policies/practices that aim to support young people. Not only does the project aim to study resilient approaches from schools and municipalities, but it also attempts to understand the sense of belonging to the regions, investigating young people's present lives, pathways, and expectations. Mobility has emerged as a factor intertwined in their prospects and is associated with how they live their lives in the region, and also how they interpret constraints and possibilities whilst designing their futures. Local governance sees mobility as inevitable, with associated consequences to regional sustainability and development.

This is a qualitative and quantitative study. The data upon which the present analysis is based includes items of a questionnaire completed by young people from the 9th to 12th grade ( $n = 3968$ ). This number represents around 30% of the population. Official data (DGE—General-Directory of Education and Science Statistics) for 2018 indicate that around 13,400 students attended 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades in public schools of the 38 municipalities included in our study. In 31 contexts, we delivered the questionnaire in the unique School Cluster with secondary education that existed or in the School Cluster with basic school education (the option for School Clusters with basic education only happened when the Municipality did not offer secondary education, which is mandatory education in Portugal). In the other 7 cases, with more than one School Cluster with secondary education, we selected one randomly. In each School Cluster, the School Principal introduced us to the schools' classes in which we delivered the questionnaire. Therefore, the selection of young people was done locally by the schools' representatives, specifically, 38 semi-structured interviews with local policy makers, 50 biographical interviews with young people, and 5 focus group discussion also with young people. The questionnaire ("School population survey: Young people, education and border regions") [65] was approved by the Ministry of Education. It was applied in person in all borderland municipalities of mainland Portugal, geographically organised into three major regions: North (16 municipalities); Centre (6 municipalities); and South (16 municipalities). From this instrument we selected 13 closed items (5-point Likert-type items to assess agreement from low [1] to high agreement [5]) and two open questions amongst nine groups of questions on young people growing up in border regions. The selected items are related to perspectives towards the future, relationship(s) with the locale and communities, as well as views on mobility on going out and returning. Thus, we comprehensively addressed the main goal of this article.

Focus group discussions (FGD) and biographic interviews (BI) were conducted with young people from the 11th grade. Both FGD and BI were conducted in 5 case studies, selected from the results of the questionnaire. We conducted 1 FGD and 10 BI with young people per case study. Young people were selected by the school according to the following criteria: being part of 11th grade classes; even number of boys and girls; living in different parishes of the municipality. For this paper, we focused only upon the topics regarding their future and their relationship with their home regions (including intentions to stay or return). After each extract of empirical data, we used the initials of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Biographic Interviews (BI) to distinguish the data source.

The experiences told by young people (and interpreted whilst interacting with the interviewer) revealed how they construct their relationship with the regions; in most cases, this relationship was one of attachment even whilst placing attention on their future decisions of going to study or work in another region. Young people's answers allowed us to understand the various meanings attached to place.

Interviews with local youth policy makers from municipalities were focused upon youth and educational policies, and for the purpose of this paper we selected topics related to their approach to depopulation and losing young people to metropolitan areas as well as on strategies to promote returning and/or settlement.

### Data Analysis

To analyse quantitative data (Appendix A), descriptive statistical and correlation analysis was performed with the support of SPSS 27 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Our aim was to collect young people's perspectives by describing and analysing their positions in descriptive terms (namely mean values, standard deviation, frequency, and percent). We also focused on relations between items as made apparent via correlations (Pearson's Correlation) [66].

The responses to the open question on advantages and disadvantages of living in their regions were analysed via content analysis, firstly, via a deductive thematic analysis and, later, via a frequency of occurrence examination of records in each category. Answers to the open question on higher education institutions (HEIs) young people aspire to attend in the future were analysed through a frequency occurrence of records. For the purposes of this paper, we considered for each municipality the three most referred HEIs.

Regarding qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions with young people and interviews with local policy makers, we conducted a thematic content analysis organised into several categories. This enabled us to understand young people's relationship with their regions, opportunities and constraints to thereby understand the mobility imperative, decisions to leave or return, and local government views and actions used to support young people. Prominent themes were found in the data: expectations about staying or leaving their regions for further education or work, and feelings about returning; discourses from municipalities about "walk-the-line" actions to motivate and compensate for the geographical determination of social and economic disadvantage; and, concomitantly, their usage in promoting young people's sense of belonging and ties. The results were triangulated in consideration of the theoretical framework that sustained the analysis to provide reliable interpretations.

## 5. Results

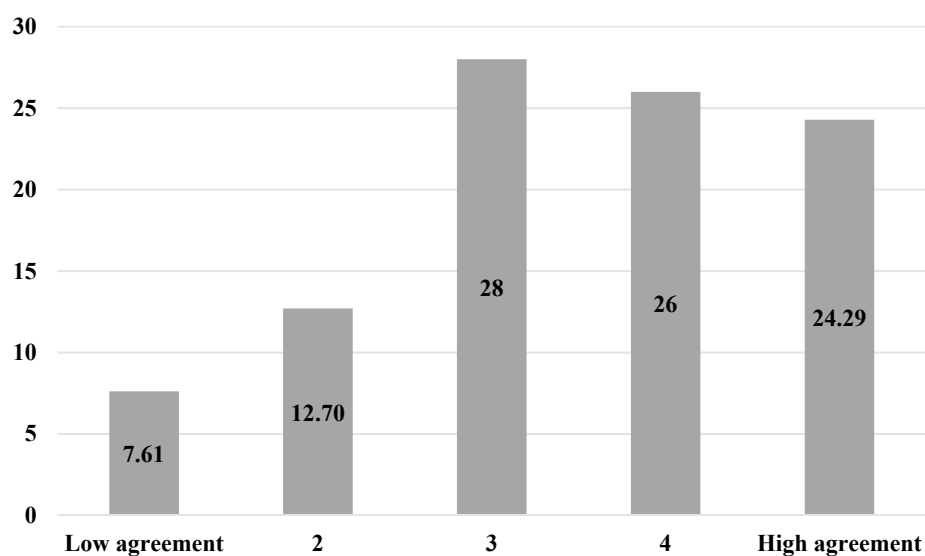
### 5.1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Growing up in Rural Border Regions: The Perspectives of Young People

Young people growing up in rural and other peripheral areas are more profoundly affected by fewer sources of employment but also fewer available opportunities in education and training. This affects transitions into adulthood, leaving young people in vulnerable positions. These regions are often seen as limiting young people's opportunities and prospects. However, the relationship that young people develop with their home regions is paradoxical. The following results (see Figures 1 and 2) indicate high levels of agreement with two possible antithetical ideas. They agree that their region limits their life opportunities ( $M = 3.47$ ;  $SD = 1.21$ ; 50.25% of respondents show high or moderate agreement (values 4 and 5)). At the same time, they also agree that there are advantages to living in the inlands ( $M = 3.45$ ;  $SD = 1.10$ ; 45.59% of young people show high agreement (values 4 and 5), and 37.90% show moderate agreement (value 3)).

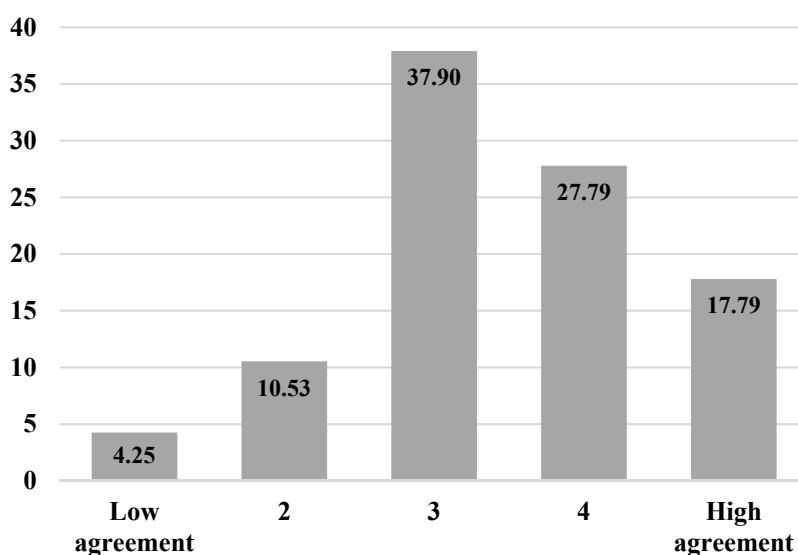
The awareness about the limits associated with the regions is not an obstacle. A moderate correlation exists showing that those who more strongly consider that their region limits their life opportunities are those who also imagine that they will have to leave their region in the future ( $r = 0.38$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ). Additionally, those who agree with the idea of returning are those who see advantages in their regions and feel that they have responsibilities towards their region ( $r = 0.41$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ).

A moderate correlation exists between those who more strongly consider that their region limits their life opportunities are those who also imagine that in the future they will have to leave their region. Additionally, those who agree with the idea of returning are those who see advantages in their regions and feel that they have future responsibilities towards their region.

Results from the following open question of the questionnaire (Table 1) indicate references to multiple, diverse factors that we categorised into two types of advantages and disadvantages.



**Figure 1.** Percent values of agreement with the item, “This region limits my life opportunities” ( $n = 3910$ ; missing values = 58).



**Figure 2.** Percent values of agreement with the item, “There are advantages in living in the inlands” ( $n = 3910$ ; missing values = 58).

**Table 1.** Types of advantages and disadvantages mentioned by young people regarding their regions.

Valid Answers			Boys	Girls	Total
Advantages	1610	Related to quality of life (nature, less traffic, less stress)	631	359	990
		Related to culture and community interactions (significant relationships, shared heritage and history)	252	168	620
Disadvantages	1377	Disadvantages related to local specificities (lack of privacy, distance from urban centres)	270	399	669
		Disadvantages regarding lack of opportunities (education, employment, etc.)	283	425	708
Total	2750				



When asked to indicate the advantages and disadvantages of growing up in border regions, boys and girls focused upon the disadvantages regarding lack of opportunities in the job market and education.

This result is aligned with the results from quantitative data. Although they tend to recognise that in their regions there is a strong investment in education ( $M = 3.04$ ;  $SD = 1.01$ ; mean value higher than 3), young people tend to disagree regarding the existence of youth support services ( $M = 2.77$ ;  $SD = 0.99$ ; mean value lower than 3). Moreover, to the item, “in my region exist a lot of employment opportunities”, the average in the Likert scale of 5 points was 2.5 ( $DP = 1.01$ ; mean value lower than 3).

The higher reference to these types of disadvantages (education and jobs) may be associated with the imperative of leaving the region and with long term mobilities. In this sense, mobility means education and new opportunities.

The disadvantages related to local specificities are related to helping with domestic work (for girls) and agriculture activities (for boys); lack of privacy; gender issues; LGBTI discrimination; low mobility (in the region); and a lack of transportation.

If these are reasons to leave, young people refer to advantages that can be considered as motives to stay (or to return) and that influence their process of belonging. Latterly, this is confirmed by the interview data. The quality-of-life dimension includes references to peaceful and safe places, fresh air, contact with nature, and a clean environment. These same attributes were also found in some young people’s narratives from rural areas in Farrugia’s 2020 study in Australia, or Wiborg’s 2004 study in rural areas of Norway. Additionally, freedom and advantages regarding culture and communities’ interactions include aspects such as stronger friendships, more interactions, contact with Spain, culture, and feeling more protected.

## 5.2. Young People’s Expectations and Feelings about Leaving and Returning

Embedded in these regions’ collective representations about mobility and movement are specific patterns of movement and ways of practicing movement that are specific to these places and that are part of local discourses and positioning [40]. In this sense, mobility means investment in a better education, and thus means a viable, alternative future.

One of the reasons to leave is related to entering higher education. Results indicate a strong agreement with the intention of investing in further education. Table 2 demonstrates that most young people expect to pursue studies in higher education ( $M = 4.13$ ;  $SD = 1.31$ ).

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) on young people’s intentions to study in HE, or to work after 12th grade, by gender.

Items	Female ( $n = 2141$ ) M(SD)	Male ( $n = 1824$ ) M(SD)	Total M(SD)
After the 12th grade I intend to go to higher education.	4.38(1.14)	3.84(1.43)	4.13(1.31)
After the 12th grade I intend to start work.	2.44(1.34)	2.75(1.43)	2.58(1.41)

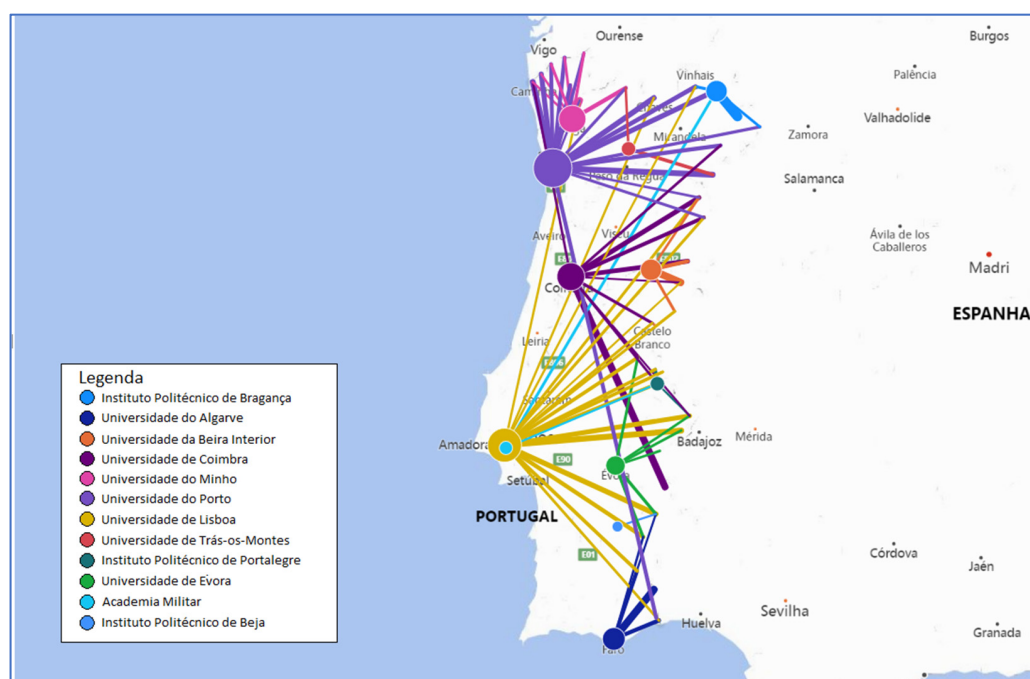
Associated with that intention are decisions about mobility and, therefore, about the need (but also the willingness) of leaving their region. As the following table indicates (Table 3), young people tend to agree with leaving their regions in the future since they aspire to the opportunity of experiencing other places.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) on young people’s intentions to study in HE, or to work after 12th grade, by gender.

Items	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
When I think about the future, I always think about studying or working in another region.	3.75	1.17
I wish I could continue my studies in this region.	2.64	1.34
I’m only thinking of going into higher education if it’s to an institution in this region.	1.63	0.94

Although it is the case that when they think about the future they always think about studying or working in another region, official data demonstrate that in border regions, young people end up in higher education institutions that are closer to (or located in) their region. In these cases, we still have mobilities for some, but it is a diminished mobility. In this sense, the geographical context not only influences young people's choices, but also how those choices are interpreted and experienced [26].

Young people expect to invest in further education, and this involves mobility, usually to a metropolitan area university. Figure 3 represents mobility to HEIs. If we consider the options, young people indicated those are concentrated in Porto and Lisbon with some variations if students are from the north, the centre, or the south of Portugal.



**Figure 3.** Expected mobility to HE institutions indicated by young people.

This map visualises the network of expected mobility to HE. This scale allows us to understand the impact that these flows may have on a territorial level. Although we may understand that this represents individualised mobility [44], it nonetheless translates into a collective movement or, as Cresswell [40] argues, into “‘constellations of mobility’, as historically and geographically specific formations of movements, narratives about mobility and mobile practices” (p. 17). These expected mobilities emphasise the immobility of those with fewer resources or power and those who desire alternative pathways. Nevertheless, the results show that they have a high awareness about their life conditions. Consider the following:

*I know that the best universities, and the best ones closest to here, are in Minho and Porto, in coastal regions, but despite being “close”, the closest ones end up being quite far, as it always ends up being 300 km. It’s a bit boring. (Girl-BI-North)*

When young people from rural border regions are planning their pathways after compulsory education, they must consider mobility differently from their urban counterparts. Thomson and Taylor [39] explore how young people negotiate (at the biographical level) different dimensions of mobility.

Young people’s awareness of opportunities and limitations of their home regions may have influence upon their future expectations and in how they design their future pathway(s). Consider the following:

*Because there are more job opportunities on the coast and also because I don't want that life here, I don't want my children, my close family, future living here because I think they can have more opportunities on the coast and in a more developed city.* (Boy-FGD-North)

*Most of them want to leave. ( . . . ) They think they have no life here, no quality of life, I don't know.*

*Interviewer: But do you have a different opinion?*

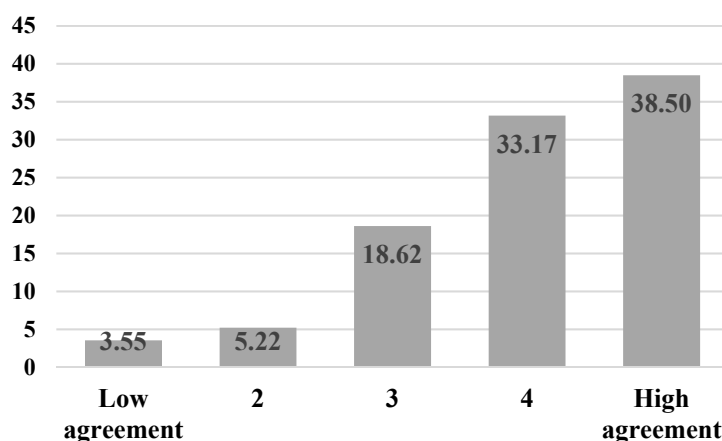
*I do, I prefer to live here.* (Gir-BI-North)

*The diversity of vocational programmes that are offered, at least in this school, is not very big. It's even a little limited, which ends up expelling many students from here. And then later, maybe, they'll find a job where they went to study and this increases the rural exodus, isn't it?* (Gir-BI-North)

These quotes reflect Farrugia's [8] perspective, namely that "mobility is something that all young people must imagine or contend with to some degree" and it is "compulsory to moving forward their lives" (p. 245).

In our study, the findings indicated that young people's sense of belonging to their region is very high in the overall sample with little variation amongst the 38 municipalities, even when they are aware of scarce opportunities and exhibit a high probability to leave the region. There is no contradiction between a strong sense of belonging and the certainty of leaving the region. The attachment to their region is associated with family and feeling responsible in relation to paying back their region.

According to the descriptive analyses, young people show that they retain a high sense of belonging to their community (Figure 4) ( $M = 3.99$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ ; 71.60% of young people show moderate and high levels of agreement (values 4 and 5)). However, as is noted above, they may intend to leave their region to study ( $M = 3.44$ ;  $SD = 1.19$ ) or consider that there is a lack of opportunities for their future in their regions ( $M = 3.47$ ;  $SD = 1.21$ ).



**Figure 4.** Percent values of agreement with the item, "I feel I belong to my community" ( $n = 3931$ ; missing values = 37).

Another interesting result emerged from correlations with the sense of belonging to the community; as more young people consider that they belong to their community, the more they want to return if one day they need to leave ( $r = 3.16$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ) and the more they consider that have a lot to give, as young person, to the region where they grew up ( $r = 0.33$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ).

The work of Cuervo and Wyn [53,67] demonstrates how young people keep their networks and attachments with their region, even when leaving to undertake study or work.

Although mobility caused changes in the role of place in identity construction, specifically bringing new forms of attachment into the mix [26], these new forms are not dissoci-

ated with the sense of belonging to a home region. Results indicate how mobilities are part of the social construction of place and the ways in which they are significant for young people to sustain connections and perform within a network society [51].

Bærenholdt and Granås [51] and other studies demonstrate how migration or mobility do not involve place detachment or loss of meaning [26]. Lahelma and Gordon [68] explain: “Young people may leave home for studies in other cities or for periods abroad, without necessarily thinking whether this moving away really means leaving their home region” (p. 379). The following quotes are indicative of this sentiment:

*I would also like to leave and study in Porto or Lisbon, but contrary to what they said, I would like to come back to live here, but I don't think it will be possible. (Girl-FGD-North)*

*I think that coming back here would be because of family, to be closer to them, but it's also a quiet place, not so stressful. So, it would also be a positive point, so I think that if I could do here what I like, I could still live here. (Girl-BI-North)*

*Because I don't intend to abandon. I intend to leave, but I don't intend to abandon. I mean, I intend to do things that make me evolve ( . . . ). But I don't intend to leave my homeland, and I intend to come here, bring things, that open the horizons, that give me more opportunities, even to those who stay . . . (Girl-BI-South)*

Considering the last girl, her home region would benefit from outside influences, benefiting from connectivity with other places [59]. These positions demonstrate that young people are not understanding their options of returning or staying as something lesser, but rather they are cultivating and creating their place in traditional marginal places. They integrate into their subjectivities the imperative for mobility [7] together with other imperatives that are no longer the only imperative of cosmopolitanism.

*The connection continues, also because of what I told you at the beginning which has to do with how the community interacts. I'm absolutely sure that everyone who leaves speaks with great pride about CV and we have an occasion that is almost mandatory to return to Castelo de Vide at is Easter. (Municipality-South)*

Unlike other cases amongst young people who develop a stronger attachment and a renewed appreciation of their home regions after a mobility experience [8], some young people from these regions already have this sense of belonging to place and appreciation before leaving. This could be worthy of attention since it sheds new light on the stigma associated with these regions and a possible indication of a cultural and mentality change, probably arising from changes in the idea of remoteness in relation to new forms of digital communication and transportation methods as well as new regimes of pendular mobility, which means that breaking up with your region is inevitable/necessary.

*I want to leave this region a little, because I can see myself in a few years coming back here, and to experience something new, so as not to be always in the same place, so that my life does not become so constant. (Girl-BI-North)*

This is aligned with perceptions expressed by local policy makers about staying or returning:

*The next question that you will ask me is a tricky question for me as a politician, which is, “And then, will young people come back?”. What we realised is that their wish was more the will to stay than to leave, but they felt that there was this need to leave to succeed in professional world. (Municipality-North)*

The imperative of mobility [7] is very clear in terms of its association with fragile opportunities for young people and how municipalities deal with young people's necessary outmigration. Consider the following:

*When young people leave, they wish to return, but they do not return because there is no job offer for what they want or because there is not much variety either. (Municipality-South)*

*There are many young people who would like to settle here, after starting a family here, but then there is no way . . . (Municipality-North)*

*Nowadays, they go to higher education, but I think there is one thing that is part of the home region culture, they want to come back. ( . . . ) they are in college, but they come to study for the library. ( . . . ) that didn't happen, in my time as a student, that didn't happen. Our children, our young people, at the weekends and in the exams period, make a point of returning to their home. (Municipality-North)*

*Our students, one way or the other, they return to their homeland. (Municipality-North)*

Farrugia [8] found amongst middle class young people that when they “were able to complete education and find professional work in their hometowns described themselves as contributing to progressive social change within their own localities” (p. 248).

*I'm going to my hometown because I know I can contribute to this, this and that . . . . And they are very much like that: to give their contribution, we have many young people volunteering, especially up to the 12th grade; we have many young people doing volunteer work, at various levels. (Municipality-North)*

There are ties that are cultivated to the region and these prevent young people returning to their homes on weekends. For example, mobility “forges social networks that defy logic as far as separation of rural and urban environments is concerned” [61] (p. 194). These routines produce specific formations of mobility that go beyond the larger movement, thereby indicating the relevance of mobility to keep young people engaged in activities that are relevant to regions' lives [61]. Municipalities explain the reasons why young people keep connections with their regions. These reasons are often related to a regional dynamic and the participation of young people in different types of experiences related to associations, cultural groups, and of belonging to local political life. This aspect was studied by Baylina and Rodó-de-Zárate [61], who analysed how politically engaged young people (from rural regions supported by mobility opportunities) may be agents in the construction and transformation of their communities. This “rooted mobility” [69] is confirmed by our data. Consider the following:

*Being rooted in associations and traditional music bands makes them say “I'm going to XX, I'll be there for the exam, but I'll also have the opportunity to go to the rehearsal, to participate in that activity that I know is scheduled for that day”. So, I think that's what pulls them, the fact that there is this youth associations' movement. I think is also a reason for them to come back and especially when they can, which is on the weekend, vacations. (Municipality-North)*

Young people's civic, political, and cultural engagements may influence the decision to stay or return to their regions, given that ties are cultivated and may contribute to future involvement in other activities, which in turn may promote regional development.

*But it is what I say, they go to work abroad, but they come back, even if only on weekends and this is already good for us, it is already a recognition of the territory, they are very rooted to the land and this is good, I saw this in my student days, “are you going home? Yes, I insist”, and I was also connected to an association at the time. And I see this exactly in my daughter and she is also in the music band and there is this connection. (Municipality-North)*

*I don't know if this is the reason, I'm probably speculating, but they are very close to Castelo de Vide. Many of them are studying abroad and are, for example, members of the municipal assembly here, which means that they want to actively participate in the life and political decisions of the development of the municipality. And so, they have that very strong connection, yes. (Municipality-South)*

These young people are not considered to be passive bystanders. There is an awareness of the ties that young people keep with their homelands by cultivating a network of relationships and meaningful connections. Pendular returning may mean that there is a



sense of belonging to place and a predictor of a future return. Young people are imprinting new understandings about operating in a place intersected by mobilities [51]. At another level, these habits may indicate that the more participation space a community gives to young people, the more they keep a connection to their home region.

Experiencing mobility is influenced by the compulsion associated with it, more specifically, how groups and individuals experience it, or in how a region represents structural flows of mobilities or is historically associated with in/out movement. Such considerations are fundamental to understanding the complexity and the heterogeneity of the phenomena observed in young people lives; indeed, they influence and are influenced by social, cultural, or economic relations.

### 5.3. “Walk-the-Line” Actions of Municipalities to Promote Young People Settlement

Municipalities from these regions try to motivate and compensate for the geographical determination of social and economic disadvantage, whilst also promoting young people’s sense of belonging to the region. Municipalities develop a politics of proximity to keep young people attached, and a politics of connectivity in the sense given by Amin [59] who considers that “the plural public sphere involved in the making of a region is spatially diffuse and geographically mobile” (p. 40).

Young people represent a large share of outmigration, contributing to depopulation, depriving these regions from human capital, and, therefore, leading to challenges regarding regional sustainability. Promoting solid and quality educational offers is amongst the types of measures taken by municipalities to retain their youth. The following case indicates how walking the line measures are part of local policies implemented in order not to lose young people through the creation of conditions to overcome some obstacles, for example, concerning mobility. Investing in education (and particularly in HE) is combined with strategies to encourage them to return. Consider the following:

*We are here with plenty of future perspectives, both in terms of youth and educational policies, which I think allow people, even if they work in the large urban centres on the coast, to live here and have their children studying here as late as possible, despite working in the coastal areas. (Municipality North)*

*But we can’t just settle people through cultural offering. We have to have other reasons to make people think “Why not X?”, “Why X, X? Why X?” And we have, over time, made a strong bet on education. Because what did we think? Well, if we give the capacity for the new families, to have a good education, a public and free education, in our municipality, and the City Council, in parallel to what the State already assumes as its own responsibility, is good. (Municipality-North)*

*Then we have taken advantage of all the possibilities of project applications, whether for the financing of infrastructures or for the financing of the integrated plans to fight school failure. We try, as much as possible, to create these types of mechanisms. (Municipality-North)*

Connectivity and efficient and affordable public transportation are fundamental assets to enable mobilities routines and handling of associated distances. To enhance services in sectors such as transportation may contribute to high levels of accessibility with impacts in participation in education, culture, or job markets. Municipalities seem to understand the value of short mobilities to access to better opportunities and rights, such as education:

*When they extended compulsory education to the 12th grade, the legislation regarding transportation did not follow, that is, education was compulsory, but the municipality was not obliged to provide transportation. However, we decided that it was. We had to keep up. (Municipality-North)*

In general, municipalities assume the responsibility of working towards better opportunities to retain young people in their respective regions and thus avoid depopulation. Regional depopulation and youth outmigration have been preoccupations in regional

contexts; as such, they have been investigated in several contexts [70], and border rural regions in Portugal are no exception.

*Answering your question specifically, do the young people stay? I believe that those who have the opportunity and the possibility to stay here, stay. Are they as many as we would like? They are not. Is the day-to-day work that we do here to create these opportunities and create the necessary synergies for these people to stay here? Yes. We want our young people to stay, we don't want them to immigrate, to leave. (Municipality-North)*

Municipalities are aware of walk the line decisions, namely investing in young people, which may in fact motivate leaving, whilst at the same time investing in the regions' resources and available opportunities in order to demonstrate that there is also a future there.

*Our biggest concern is essentially, in the first place, to empower our young people; to make them aware of the instruments that they can use to be successful ( . . . ) essentially, what we seek is to take advantage of all the opportunities that governments give us to develop our region. Ok, essentially, we are very pragmatic. Let's say, we invest practically all of our budget in applications to bring more value to our municipality. (Municipality-North)*

*When people come here, they already have a little notion of what is waiting for them, ( . . . ) we have reduced rates or total exemption of IMI rates for young people, i.e., young couples or single people who want to buy a house are exempt from taxes, we have the rental with rent assistance. (Municipality-North)*

However, in many cases the municipalities face the usual constraints when it comes to providing good conditions that would attract young people. For instance,

*We see that people are trying and insisting. That is, there is no desire to leave and abandon the region, but the resources are not what we want. (Municipality-North)*

*Here in the City Council, we work to create conditions so that all people, and young people . . . , especially young people, identify with the territory, that they care about the population and their well-being; and invest in offering settlement options. But it is now obvious that city councils don't have the capacity to do this on their own. What we are trying to do is unblock some situations; talk to the responsible bodies, try to work together to make it possible to create other conditions here. But if there is not really a will for the common good of all the parties involved, it is difficult, because what we have seen lately is also the closure of public services in these territories. (Municipality-South)*

Strengthening local economy and employment opportunities are strategies that most municipalities consider as dependent on strong and focused partnerships and networks and from central government decisions that must be sensitive to regional needs.

Efforts to promote staying or returning are necessarily attached to a vision that seeks to understand trends and the changing contexts. Offering tax free settlement conditions for companies are among some of the measures that municipalities campaign on:

*This is intended, but of course the issue of employment is also very important, and the City Council has here, and the City Council has also invested a lot in trying to establish companies here and that create employment opportunities here. (Municipality-North)*

*That's why we will design a business plan, but we always wanted to work on these two poles, the issue of employability for students—we saw that many do not continue their studies—and to do work with local entrepreneurs. (Municipality-South)*

Cultivating a sense of belonging to place is often deployed as a strategy to retain the youth population. Place making mechanisms [17,27] construct a rationale and a relationship with place; this helps young people to conceive of their future life in their regions. This is recognised by a policy maker:

*And if you motivate the young people, as they feel this affection, this attention that they have for the region, for this kind of projects, it is a very good advantage. (Municipality-North)*

*It takes a lot of love to be able to stay; to insist on staying in the region, but those who stay, without any doubt, stay because of that love and end up really concluding that there is no place where you can have a better quality of life than here. (Municipality-North)*

*Place-making mechanisms encompass an active engagement demonstrated in talk concerning place. Simultaneously, place-making is a process that occurs beneath rational articulations demonstrated in verbally expressed interpretations of material place as sensed, emotive, and experiential. [27] (p. 277)*

“Walk-the-line” actions may indicate that regions are not considering that they are losing young people but investing in potential future returnees.

Regional youth policies are grounded on understanding what, amongst young people, motivates them wanting to return and the place of mobilities in their lives. Most municipalities know that there is a strong place attachment among young people, and they put it at the centre of the policies strategy to engender a sense of belonging, cultivating links to a collective network and shared values. Notwithstanding, municipalities demonstrate high levels of proactivity regarding education and training, encouraging young people to further their education, even if this may contribute to them leaving temporarily or permanently. In this matter, we did not find a strong narrative regarding “keeping youth at home”, as discussed by Michelle Gabriel [6] in her discourse analysis of Australian media. Municipalities seem to be more focused on marketing their regions to attract young people and engaging them by developing measures to create solid career opportunities, as community attachment is not enough to guarantee that they stay or return. Educational and job creation strategies are measures that are planned also considering those who stay, to whom the biographical consequence of staying may be difficult, since they are foreclosing educational and employment opportunities.

If government level programs are relevant to create conditions for young people to settle in peripheral areas such as rural border regions [63], municipalities, due to their accumulated knowledge about their population and their situated understanding about local and global aspects impacting in young people mobilities, are a fundamental level of governance to foster sustainable futures for those regions.

## 6. Conclusions

By studying multiple cases of young people growing up in rural border regions, we have shown that in understanding youth through the lens of spatiality it is possible to shed light into articulations and connections between competing forces in their biographies and pathways [71]. Although mobility is experienced as a value in order to achieve success and have access to better opportunities, very much aligned with the model of human capital, young people seem to integrate being mobile together with sense of belonging to their regions, place attachment, and also returning, which is more connected with the social capital approach. Young people make accurate analyses of their conditions, possibilities, and constraints, showing the existence of a trade-off relationship between the two forms of capital and, for that reason, different levels of investment in those forms of capital.

Qualitative and quantitative data suggested that mobility has multiple meanings. This may explain that whilst young people have a clear understanding of geographic constraints and disadvantages affecting their lives, the imperative to leave and have better chances and new experiences means that they don’t see leaving as abandonment or irreversibly nullifying prospects of putting down roots in their regions at some future juncture. Young people understand the value of being backed by the accumulated social capital of a collective [55]. Bonds with family, a strong appreciation for their home regions, quality of life factors, and cultural traditions are amongst the primary motives that young people refer to when considering staying or returning. These motives find echoes in policy makers’ decisions; such factors related to participation opportunities and better employment offers are deemed relevant in promoting settlement. The majority of young people aspire to further education, and local policies deal with the tension of accommodating quality educational pathways associated with leaving, and networking towards widening opportunities that

may conduct to future returning or staying. We consider that in parallel with learning to leave [1], given that educational or jobs opportunities are scarce in rural border regions, sentiments, policies, and actions are emerging towards learning to stay and returning. This investment at the local policy level indicates the relevance of strengthening and extending ties to motivate young people to commit to their regions [58]. Some young people do not consider staying or returning as a loss or a failure; indeed, they seem to conceive of their regions beyond either a trap or a romanticised narrative (as mostly constructed by some cases of rural gentrification and lifestyle-led factors) [72]. Therefore, if there is some imperative towards cosmopolitanism [8], it is less visible in relation to a denigration of discourse concerning their regions.

Young people are demonstrating ties and attachments by remaining involved in local activities that may foster their returning and their activity towards social transformation. There is a correlation between willingness to return and feelings of having responsibilities towards their region's development. New visions about youth, in general, may emerge from paying attention to these new forms of performing relationships with place, and this in turn brings to the fore other forms of being young beyond those commonly associated with global cities [73,74].

We propose an interpretation of this trend not as less prestigious, but rather as indicative of new understandings and possibilities around these peripheral territories. Whilst mobility is structurally integrated into the habitus of border regions, and whilst several generations have grown up with the symbolic value of leaving as a sign of prestige [10,19], mobility does not, however, seem to be understood only as a fatality or an imperative [7]. Indeed, the counter-proposals of young people and of their communities seem to integrate being mobile as an experience amongst other belongings, namely one that results from processes of negotiation in which global, local, and numerous mobilities are integrated [27]. Moreover, mobility can have the interesting effect of reproducing and intensifying local identities, as well as expanding and extending regional characteristics in combination with global identities of young people [75]. This impact of mobility may be interpreted as a sign of how social capital is employed [58] for young people's benefit as they are rearranging *glocal* cultures, by combining experiences from mobility to foster better educational opportunities with strong ties to local networks. This represents a process of capitalization of the inherited social capital that is mobilized and, although differently accessed [58], may promote, as Bourdieu [55] and Coleman [56] theorized, human capital. However, the mobilization of local ties, networks, and place attachment does not seem to be only for instrumental reasons, as some young people feel that they have the responsibility to contribute to local development and start to consider a life in their home regions. In fact, for some the investment in the promotion of human capital, by leaving their regions, seems to be also for that purpose.

Stakeholders seem to understand this and emphasise that mobility is compatible with a sense of belonging to place. Although mobility is incorporated into regional reality, it is not seen either as transgressive or rootless; rather, it is connected to a place, even contributing to the production of "place" as such [27].

The relationship between investment in formal education, the resulting mobility of young people, and the sustainability of rural border regions is a multi-faceted problem [1]. Understanding how young people are motivated to stay and return, but also how they and their communities build new relationships and investment around regional values and new perspectives on life, could be the basis for regional smart development policies that can counter depopulation. Rural and border areas are undergoing several changes. Recently, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, inland, rural, and border regions have received new attention. Given that they are seen as safer, more natural places and offer new opportunities for remote work, new indicators of regional value, growth, and sustainability and social cohesion are becoming increasingly visible.

Attention should be paid to young people's intentions of contributing to their regions' development in which mobility, as an indicator of development, plays a significant role.

Given the growing concern with territorial cohesion and rural development and investment, it could be relevant to provide clear and sustainable opportunities for those that are willing to stay or return. Specifically, this would involve investing in structural areas that may be integrated into young people's pathways. This could well have an impact upon how they assess the advantages of staying, but also spin-off debates on associated social transformations. Strong network strategies that bring together different levels of governance may provide a solid ground to foster rich opportunities. Paying attention to young people's engagement with their regions whilst they are away (either in cultural leisure activities or in civic and political participation) is necessary to better understand sustainable means of maintaining these regions' financial viability but also to enhance new economic, cultural, educational, and political developments.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, S.M.d.S.; methodology, S.M.d.S. and A.M.S.; formal analysis, S.M.d.S.; investigation, S.M.d.S. and A.M.S.; writing—S.M.d.S.; writing—review and editing, S.M.d.S., A.M.S., P.C.-G. and R.B.; project administration, S.M.d.S.; funding acquisition, S.M.d.S. and A.M.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This study was funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) through the Northern Regional Operational Programme (NORTH 2020) of PORTUGAL 2020, and the Science and Technology Foundation, IP (FCT) (reference: PTDC/CED-EDG/29943/2017); and by the Portuguese Government, through the FCT, under the CHIE-Centre for Research and Intervention in Education's multi-annual funding (grant nos.UID/CED/00167/2019, UIDB/00167/2020, and UIDP/00167/2020). This publication is based upon work from COST Action CA18213 Rural NEET Youth Network, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology); [www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, the Ethical Chart of the Portuguese Society of Educational Sciences and the survey was approved by the Portuguese Directorate-General for Education, through the System of Monitoring Research in Education Environments (MIME 0566300001).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available since the project is still in progress. Data will be publicly available in an institutional repository during 2022.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Items selected from the questionnaire means and standard deviation.

	Item	Mean (M)	SD (Standard Deviation)
1	This region limits my life opportunities.	3.47	1.21
2	There are advantages in living in the inlands.	3.45	1.04
3	In my region there is a strong investment in education.	3.04	1.01
4	In my region there exists a lot of employment opportunities.	2.50	1.01
5	In my region there are many youth support services.	2.77	0.99
6	My future will always imply leaving this region.	3.44	1.19
7	If I have to leave my region, I will always return.	3.29	1.29
8	When I think about the future, I always think about studying or working in another region.	3.75	1.17
9	I wish I could continue my studies in this region.	2.64	1.34
10	I'm only thinking of going into higher education if it's to an institution in this region.	1.63	0.94
11	I feel that I belong to my community.	3.99	1.05
12	As a young person. I have a lot to give to the region where I grew up.	3.25	1.12
13	After the 12th grade, I intend to go into higher education	4.13	1.31
14	After the 12th grade I intend to start work.	2.58	1.41



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