

Brain Drain? Student Mobility in Higher Education

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Overview

- Ongoing project to understand student mobility in Higher Education
- How does student mobility in NI compare to other UK regions?
 - Does NI have a brain drain?
- What are some of the factors influencing university choice?
- Research Bulletin published in December 2024

Research Bulletin – Headline Figures

Location of Domicile	% Enrolled at HEI Within Domicile	% Enrolled at HEI Outside Domicile	Total Enrolments
England	95%	5%	1,807,295
Scotland	94%	6%	194,170
Northern Ireland	75%	25%	66,095
Wales	68%	32%	110,360

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the academic year 2022/23.

Regional Breakdown

Location of Domicile	% Enrolled at HEI Within Domicile	% Enrolled at HEI Outside Domicile	Total Enrolments
East of England	27%	73%	185,110
East Midlands	40%	60%	137,515
South East	42%	58%	289,525
South West	43%	57%	153,520
London	48%	52%	402,955
West Midlands	49%	51%	191,645
Yorkshire and The Humber	52%	48%	150,935
North West	57%	43%	220,220
North East	62%	38%	70,685
Wales	68%	32%	108,165
Northern Ireland	76%	24%	64,045
Scotland	94%	6%	184,760
England	95%	5%	1,812,200

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the academic year 2021/22.

Overall Brain Flow

Location	Brain Drain	Brain Gain	Net Outflow
England	80,930	57,150	23,780
Scotland	11,145	35,440	-24,295
Wales	35,400	48,795	-13,395
Northern Ireland	16,790	2,880	13,910

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the academic year 21/22.

Cross Border Student Mobility

	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
Leaving NI for ROI	1,305	430	1,735
Entering NI from ROI	1,420	880	2,300
Net Inflow to NI	+115	+450	+565

Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) for the academic year 2021/22.

Summary so far

- When comparing the four constituent countries of the UK, NI appears to have a large “brain drain”
- A more appropriate comparison is looking at a regional breakdown
 - NI performs much more favourably here
- The problem is more a lack of “brain gain” rather than a “brain drain”
- NI has some net inflow from ROI, but the overall numbers are small
 - Smyth & Darmody (2023) examined this issue and found this to be for a variety of reasons, some of which recent policy change has targeted e.g. changes to points needed for Uni applications, change to Irish language requirements.

Our Research Questions

1. Does Northern Ireland have a 'brain drain' and if so to what extent? And perhaps more importantly, does NI benefit from 'brain gain' and how does this compare to other regions?
2. How are the enrolment flows to and from NI changing over time?
3. Who is leaving NI for education? Sociodemographics, school attended, HE aspirations and subject choice will all be considered.
4. Why are they leaving? Updating and adding to previous work on reluctant leavers and determined leavers.
5. Who is coming to NI for education? Sociodemographics, school attended, HE aspirations and subject choice will all be considered. Again, consideration as to whether NI was their first choice or a reluctant decision.
6. How do the current brain drain/brain gain align with skills and education need in the NI labour market? Particularly important given the low levels of unemployment and reported labour/skills shortages being faced by businesses.
7. How are student and graduate flows related to the Department for Economy's 4 economic priorities: good jobs, decarbonisation, regional balance and productivity?

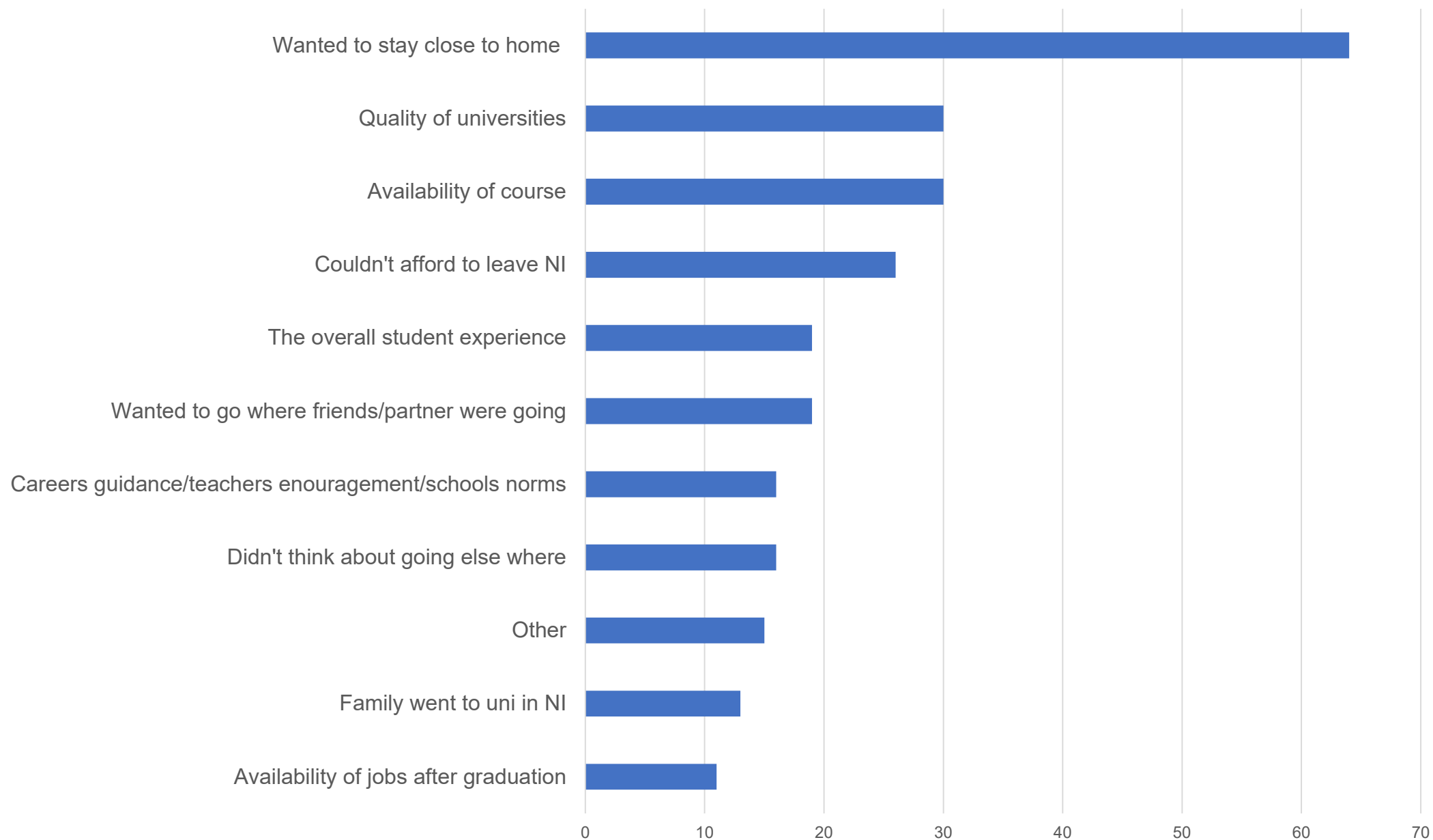
Some of our data sources

- Understanding Society Data
- UCAS Data
- HESA Data
- Survey of current university students
- Stakeholder engagement meetings

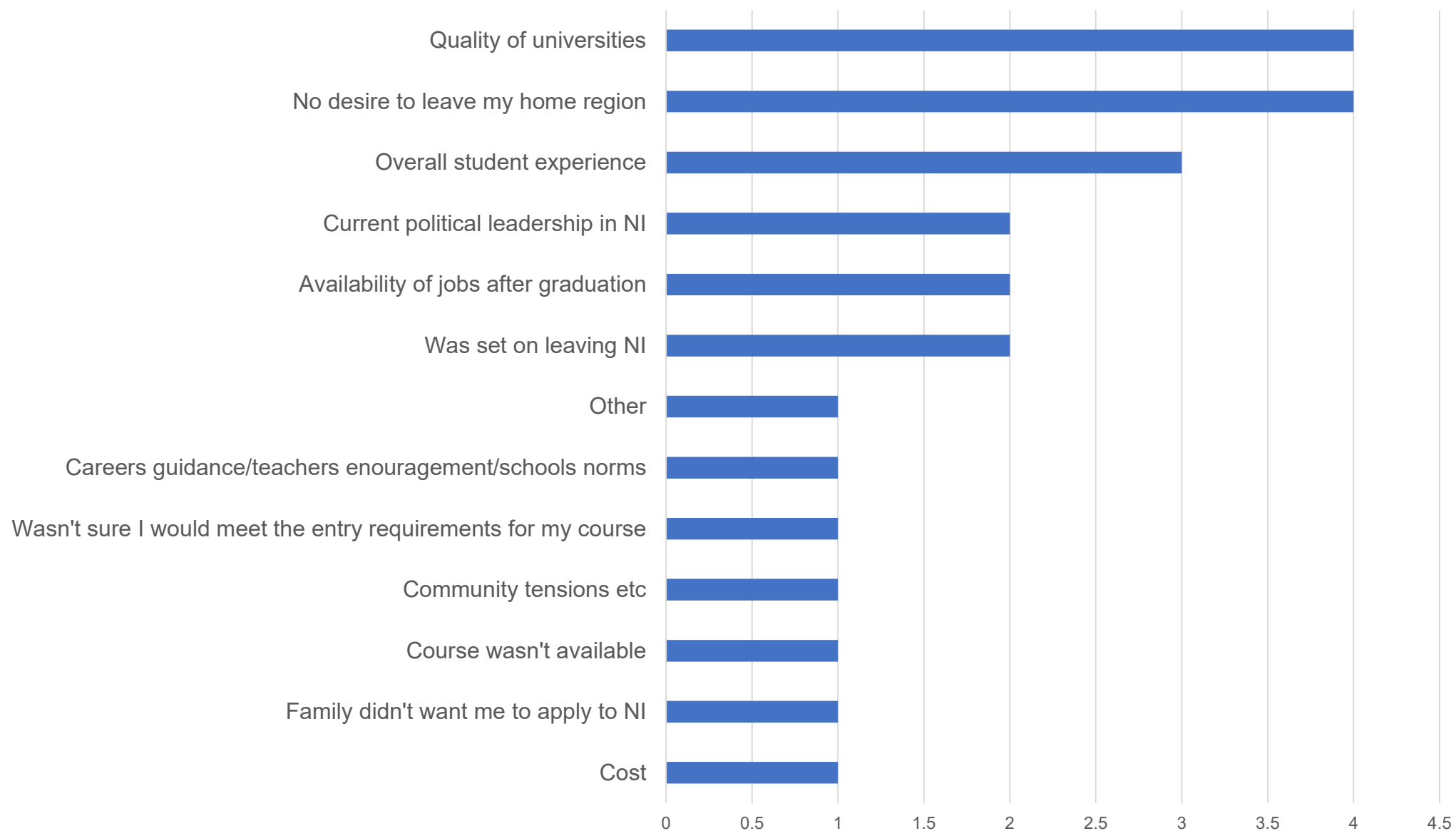
Survey insights so far...



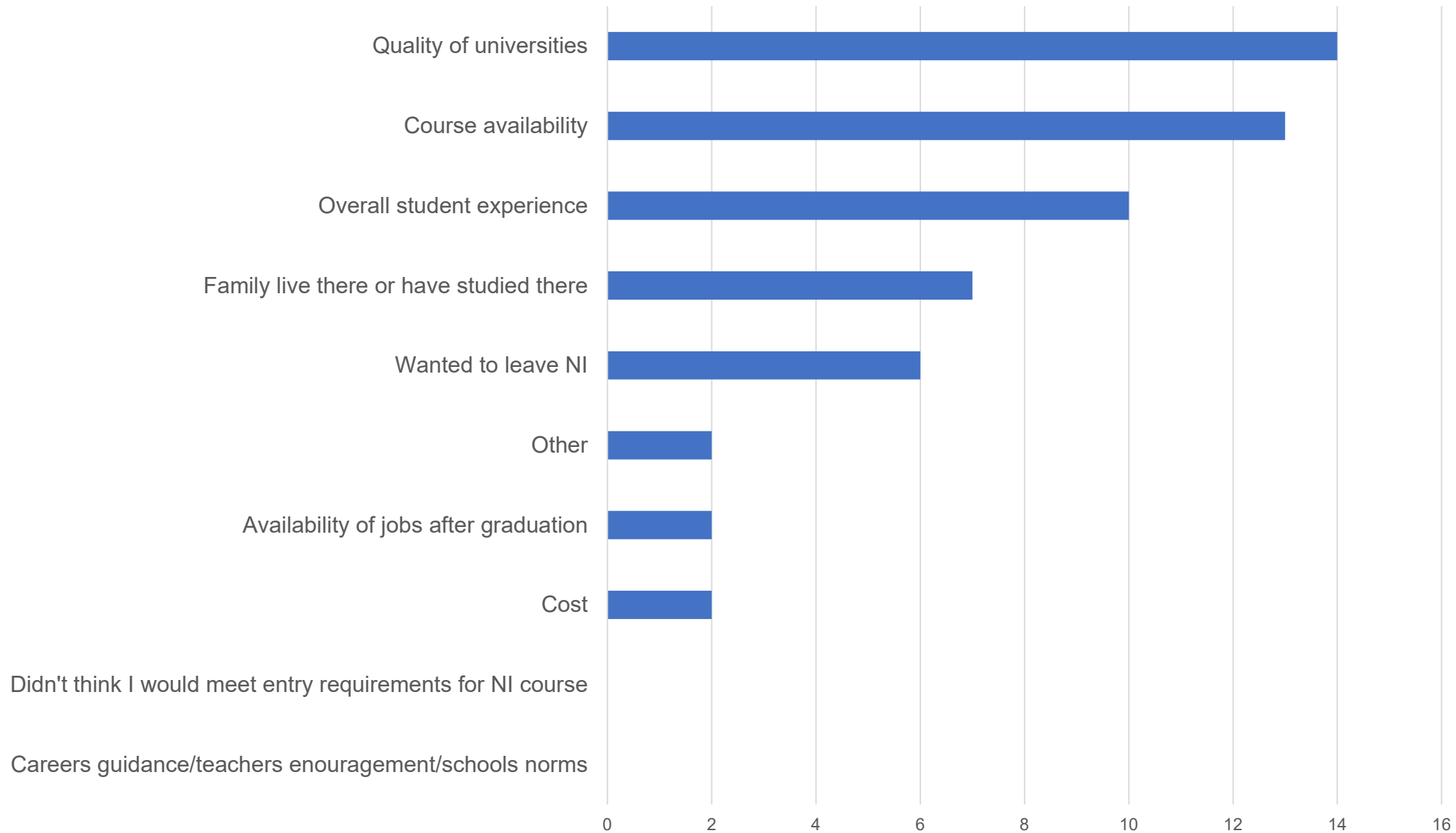
Why did you apply to NI universities?



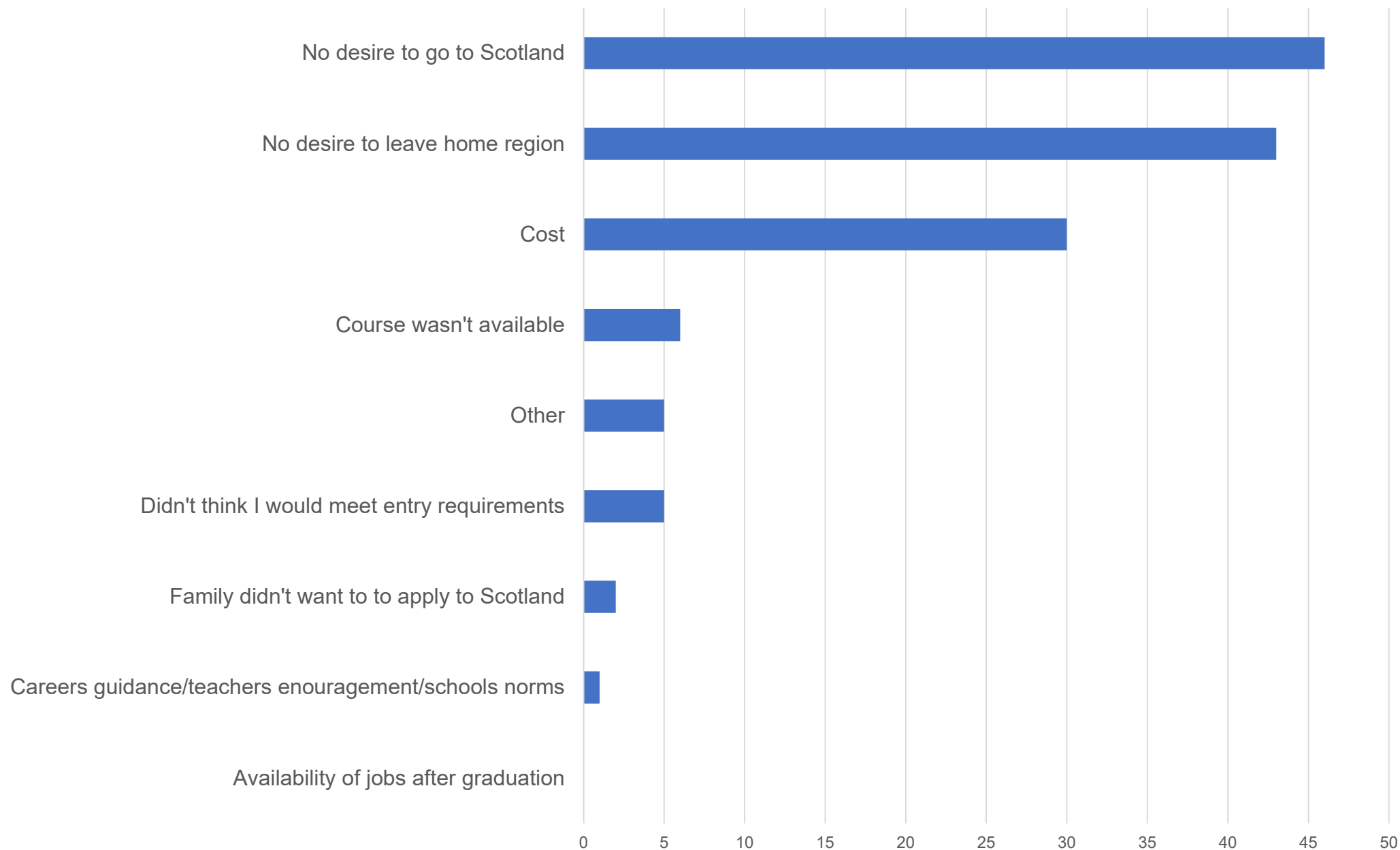
Why didn't you apply to NI universities?



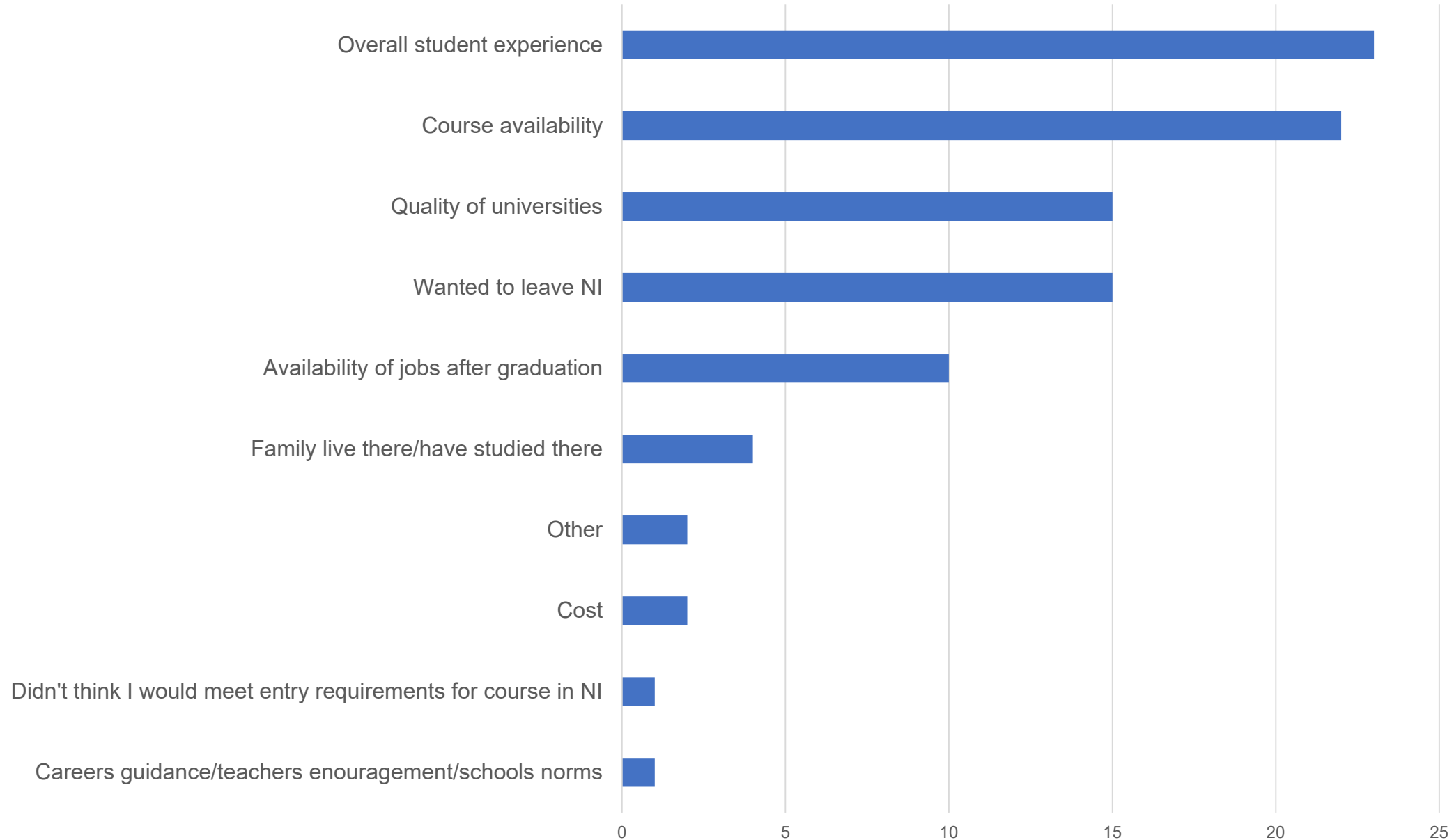
Why did you apply to Scottish universities?



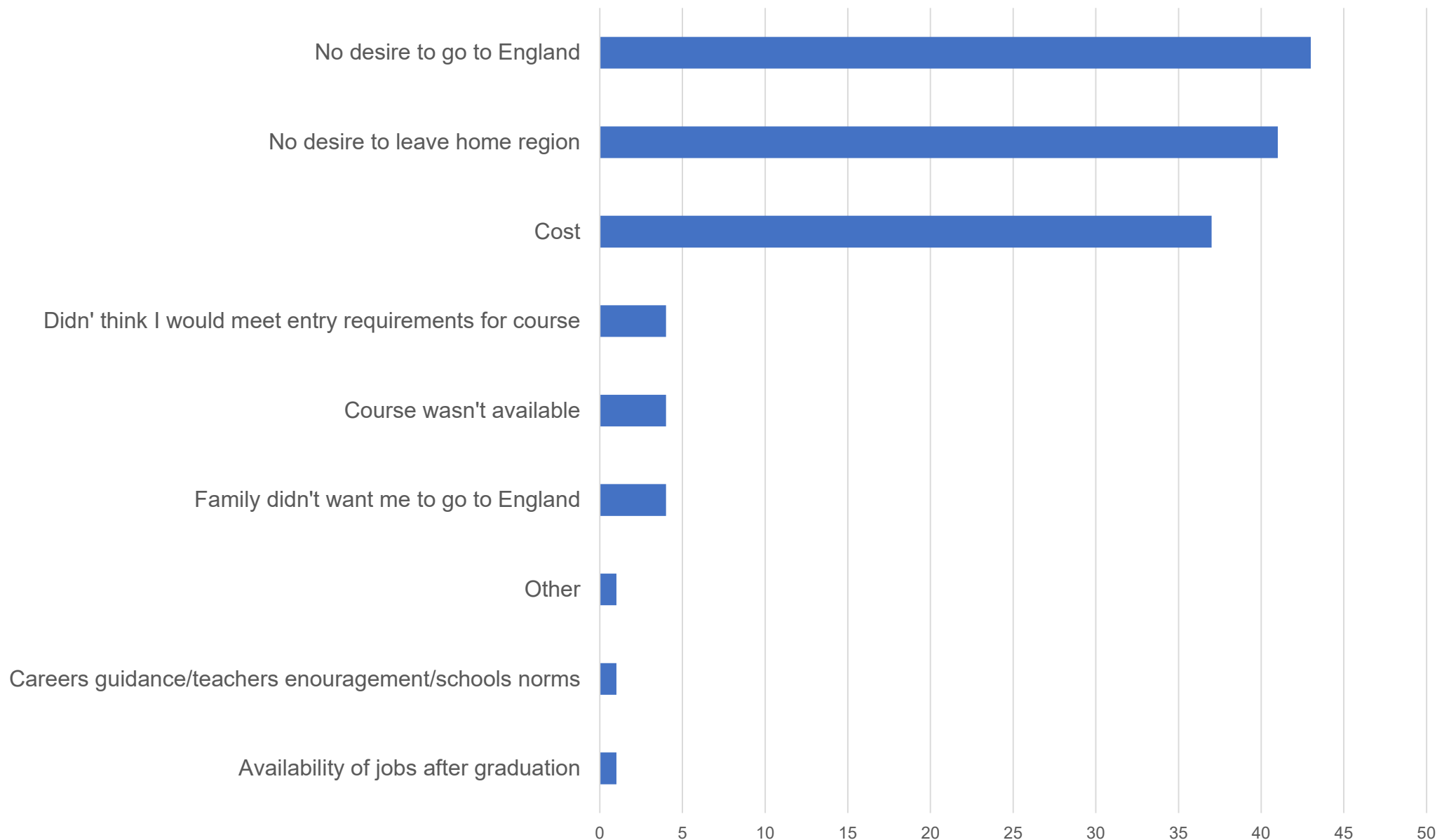
Why did you not apply for Scottish universities?



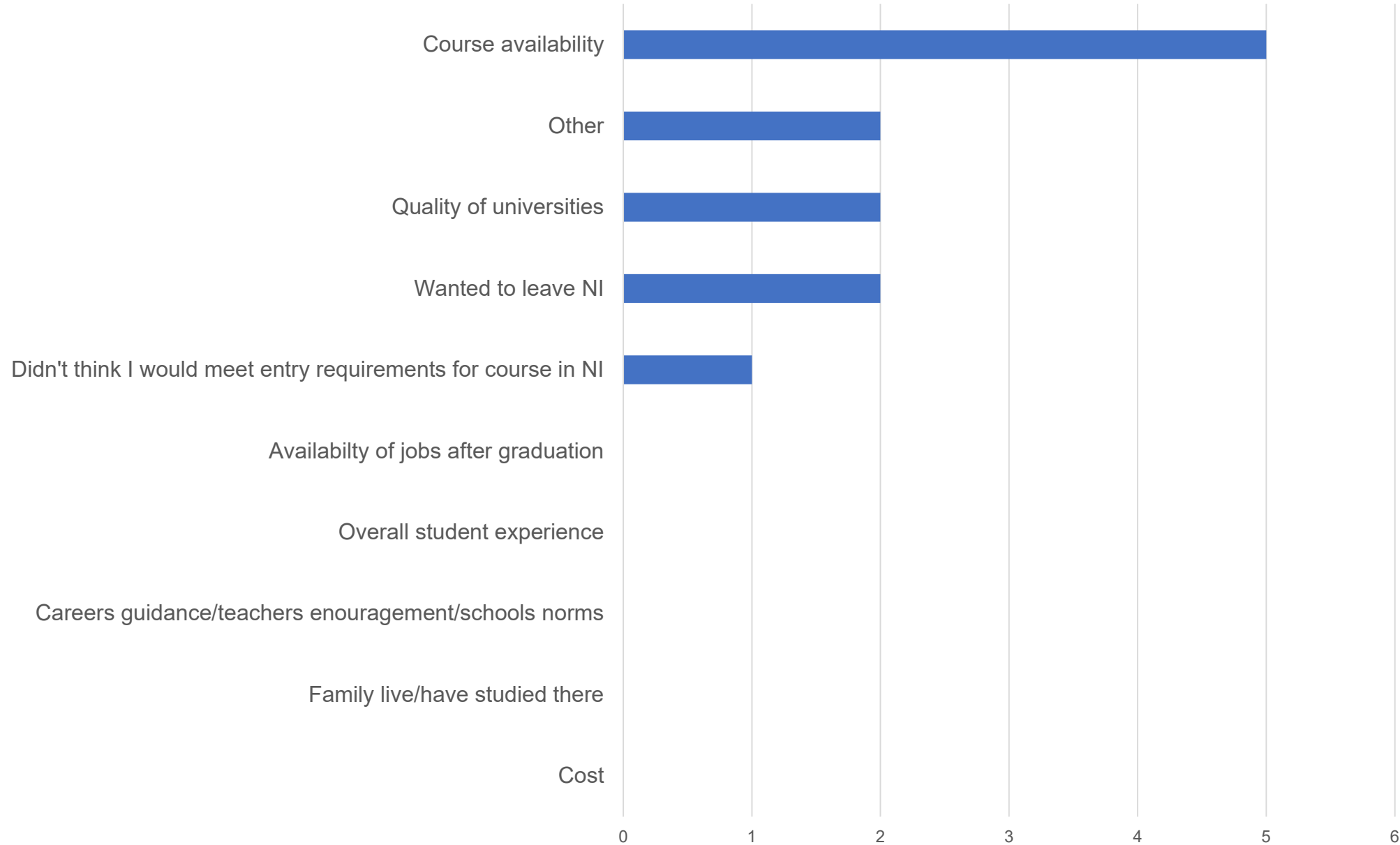
Why did you apply for English universities?



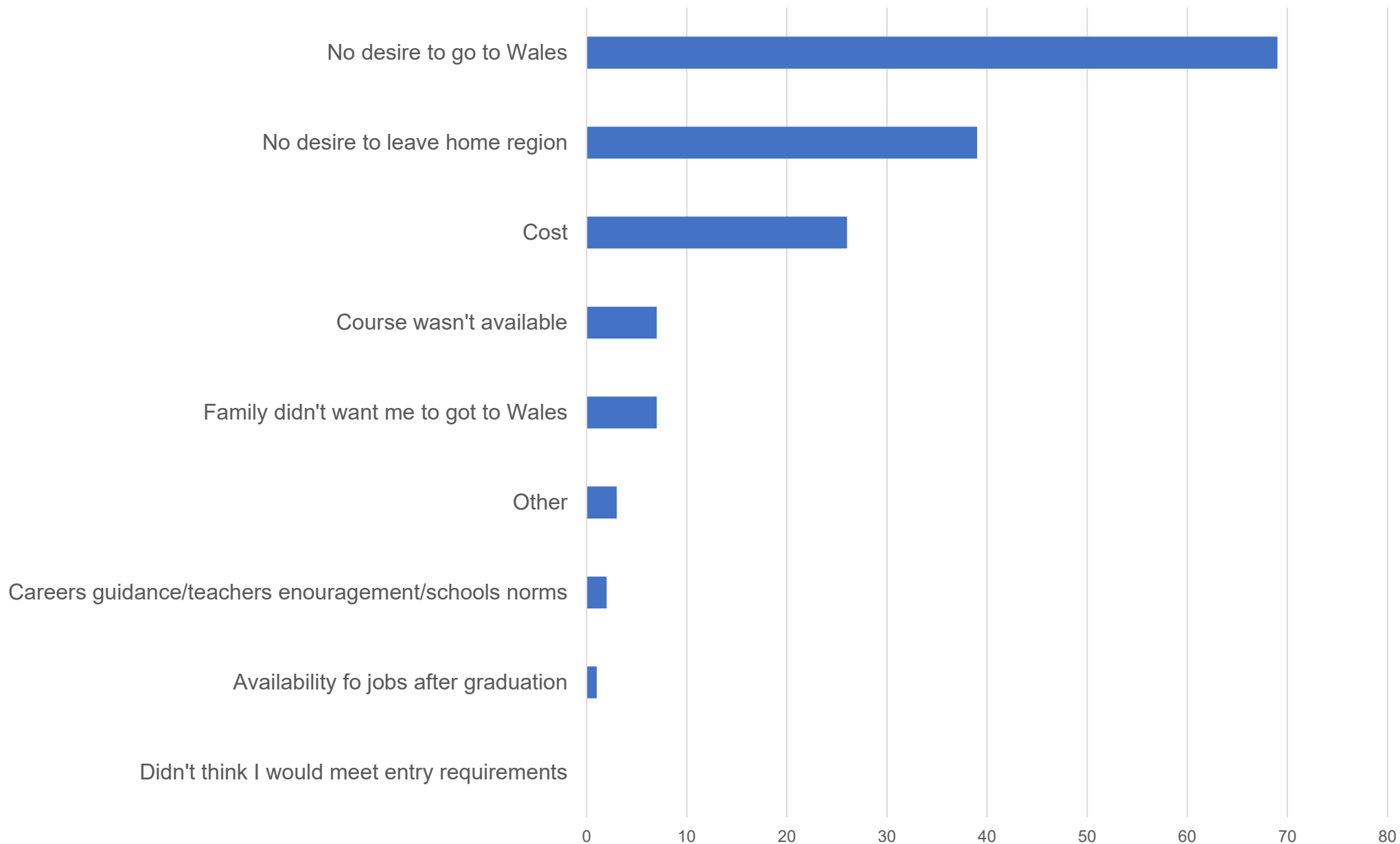
Why did you not apply for English universities?



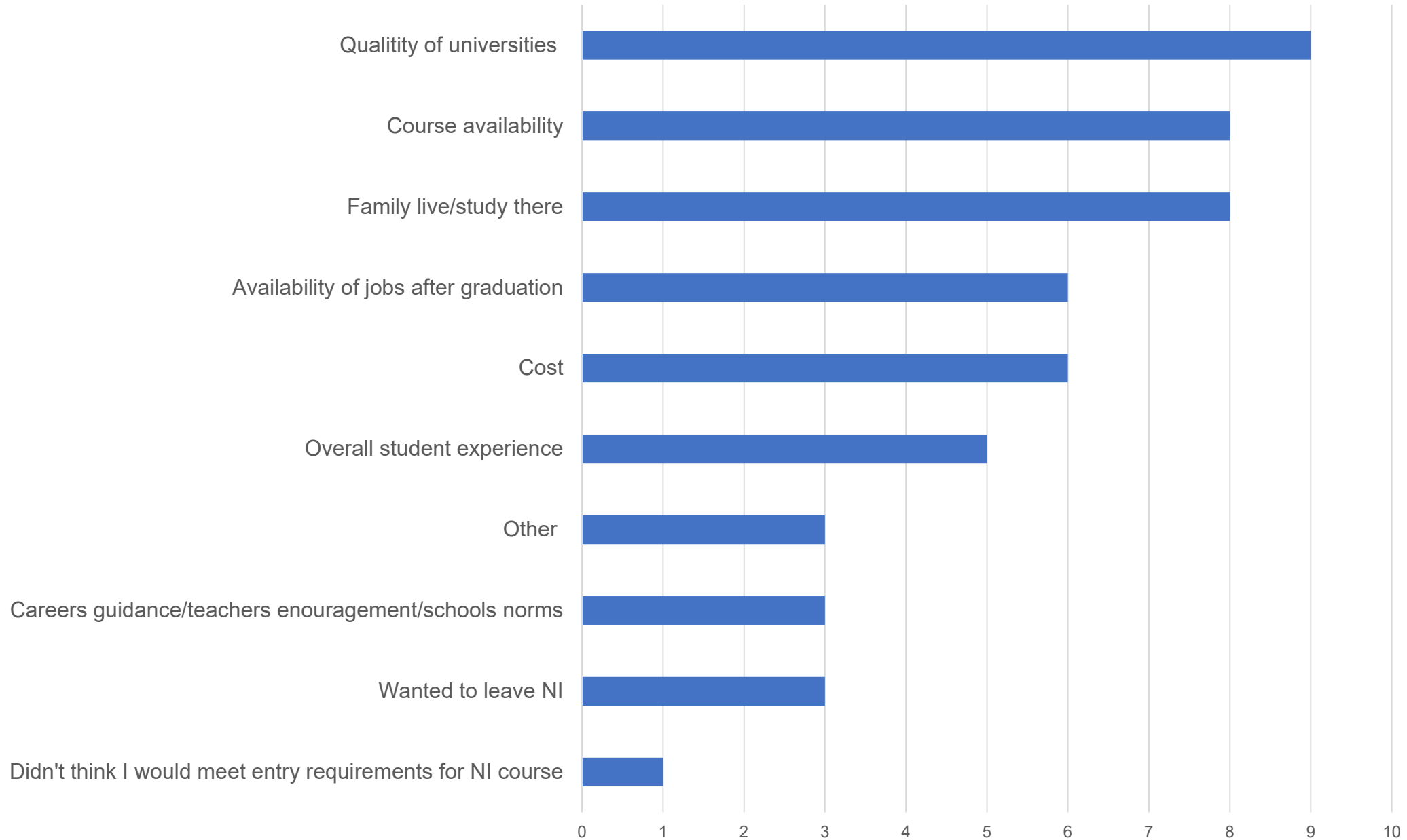
Why did you apply to Welsh universities?



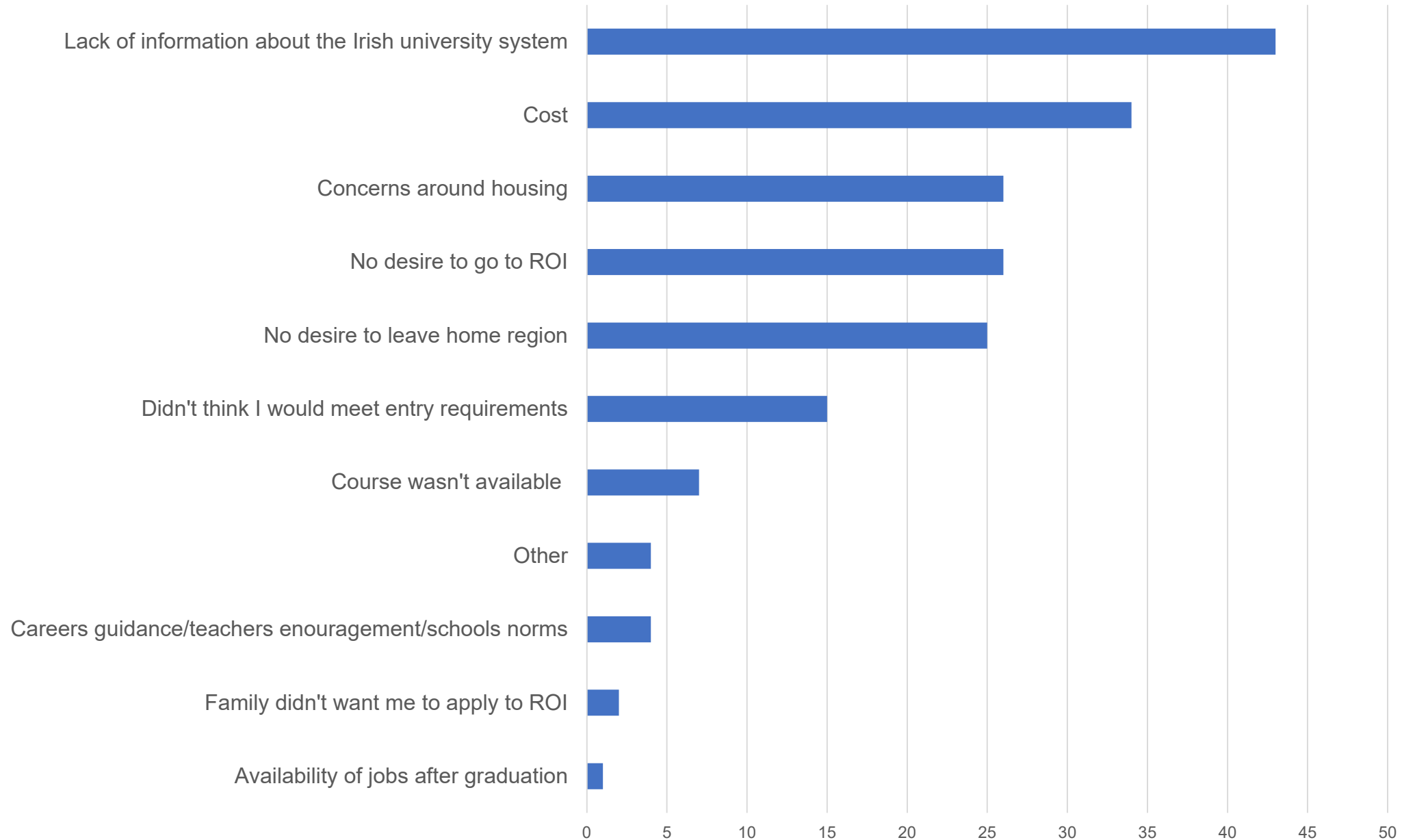
Why did you not apply to Welsh universities?



Why did you apply to ROI universities?



Why did you not apply for ROI universities?



Why would you consider yourself a determined leaver?



- *“I wanted to live away from home to gain independence and experience some cultural differences to aid my development as a person”*
- *“Wanted to leave Belfast as had grown up there and wanted to experience a new city”*
- *“Wanted to live away from home get the full uni experience”*
- *“I feel like there was more opportunities available in other countries and a more modern form of study for my course, all universities in Belfast were always commented to be very old book for my course”*
- *“Wanted to boost my career to the best it could be. Wanted to move away.”*
- *“Would not have continued study if my only option was to stay in NI”*

Why would you consider yourself a reluctant leaver?



- *“I was a reluctant leaver due to the cost and family/friends aspect. I would not have had to pay for rent if I had stayed, and all my friends and family are here in Northern Ireland.”*
- *“Did not want to leave until I was 22”*

What were the factors that influenced your choice of where to study? (1)



- *“It just seemed easier to apply for Queen's and UU and they offered the course I wanted to do. The cost is probably the main reason for why I didn't look deeply into studying in the south or Britain alongside being able to live with friends in Belfast.”*
- *“Cost of accommodation”*
- *“Costs were primary but secondary to that was access to health care relating to learning difficulties- IE ADHD. greater risks to losing access to medication and treatment if I left the health care network in NI (could not afford to go private in Scotland, England, or Dublin)”*
- *“Wanted to be close enough that I could go home when I felt like it”*
- *“Wanting to experience university lifestyle with friends”*
- *“I live on border, same distance from Belfast and Dublin. The dividing factor between NI and ROI was that my course in NI was shorter hours allowing me to commute to my lectures, live at home and continue to work part time.”*
- *“My overall decision was mostly influenced by the fact I wanted to be close to my friends and family while studying and the uni's in NI are good for the course I wanted to study. I also plan to travel when I'm finished my course and so moving away now may have hindered that”*
- *“Primarily cost-related. It just doesn't make sense to pay almost £5,000 extra per year for a similar level of qualification.”*

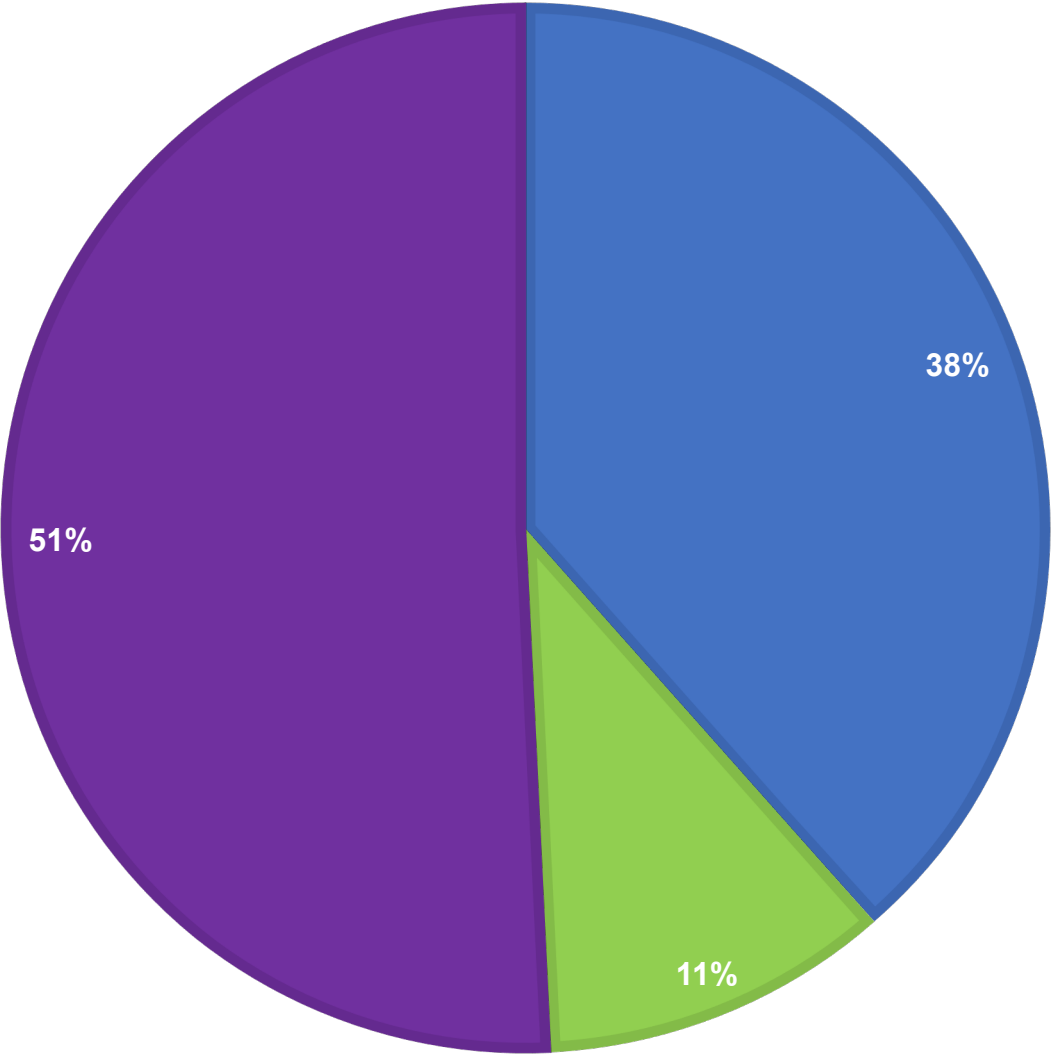
What were the factors that influenced your choice of where to study?



- *“Money, also unsure about other unis, didn’t know other cities and didn’t have the flexibility and funds to fly out for open days”*
- *“My family consistently encouraged me to look more at universities close to home- they wanted me close to home, and I had no real desire to apply to universities on the mainland/ROI. I also have autism, and thus this affected my judgement of how I would cope with possible/hypothetical difficulties so far away from home + familiar people.”*
- *“Easier to get into Northern Irish Universities and they are cheaper. Also able to travel home on weekends. If I could apply again I would apply to English Universities only as better opportunities and seemingly better support”*
- *“Wanted to continue playing Gaelic Football at a high level which I couldn’t do if I moved away.”*
- *“I would’ve considered studying in ROI but I didn’t even apply because universities of similar quality to QUB (e.g. UCD) have grades that in my opinion are far too high when using the CAO conversion system - eg you might have to get a*a*a at A Level to go to UCD say for example to study economics whereas you only need ABB for QUB”*
- *“I chose Liverpool as it seemed like a decent university in a nice enough city. It is also a very easy city to fly home from when needed. There is a large number of students from NI in Liverpool so it doesn’t feel so far from home as everywhere you walk there’s someone’s accent you recognise.”*
- *“Was encouraged to push my boundaries and “flee the nest””*
- *“Jobs which have become available within NI have increased rapidly so enticed me to stay close to home”*

DO YOU PLAN TO RETURN TO YOUR HOME REGION WITHIN 5 YEARS OF GRADUATING?

■ Yes ■ No ■ Maybe



Takeaways so far

- Still early stages – a lot of work to be done
- Cost coming through as a very important factor
- The problem appears to be more a lack of “brain gain” rather than “brain drain”
 - How do we make NI an appealing destination to study?
- Indication that a lot of students wish to return home after graduating
 - May not be a permanent “brain drain”

Survey QR code if you know
any university students!
Or contact
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