The issue of this project is brain drain and brain gain in peripheral European regions. It focuses on the design, implementation and evaluation of actions to reduce brain drain and foster so-called brain gain. The action areas are the Twente region in the Netherlands; the Central Switzerland Cantons Lucerne and Uri and the West Palatine region in Germany. What these peripheral regions have in common is that they contain institutes for higher education where graduates often leave the region for more central or metropolitan areas.

Brain drain is the loss of highly educated persons to other regions.

Brain gain is the positive feedback effects that highly educated emigrants generate by return migration or other forms of contact that transfers money, technology and knowledge back to the home regions.

Why is brain drain a problem?

Our analysis of the consequences of a net migration of highly educated persons in the study regions shows that there are very different subjective interpretations and angles to brain drain as a problem.

Loss of the potential effects of regional based higher education
All three regions contain institutes for higher education. These institutes were set up to stimulate regional economy.

• The net migration of people with higher education funded and facilitated by the original region can be seen as a problem. Although in other regions in the world, such as Boston, educating people that leave afterwards is seen as a commercial activity itself.
• If the net migration of highly educated people means that there is (1) a shortage of highly educated people in the region or (2) that the regional institutes for higher education don’t have the intended positive effects on regional economy then brain drain can be seen as a problem.

Negative social and environmental effects of a low regional percentage of highly educated people
A low percentage of highly educated people in a region will also have other consequences:

• It affects social capital, highly educated people often play an important role in social life.
• Brings in less tax revenues and therefore leads to regional inequality.
• The structure of the business activities in the region will be based on a relative low skilled workforce. 

Job and job fulfilment

• Brain drain is a problem if it is already difficult to get jobs fulfilled which need higher education.
• Regions that already have difficulties filling jobs requiring higher education will have even more difficulties as the number of highly educated young people goes down because of the aging of the population. These regions run the risk of becoming ‘grey belts’ in their country were young people and economic growth activities are absent.
• Literature and research show a direct correlation between the number of jobs for highly educated people and the number of jobs for less educated people.
• If people with high education can’t find a job in their own region and commute to other regions this is better for social capital and tax revenues but commuting is environmentally negative.

Next posters

Brain drain could be seen as asset of related social, economic and even environmental problems. Factors that cause brain drain have similar roots but can also be very different between regions. The acknowledgement of the subjective interpretation of different side of the problem by different regional stakeholders will lead to different suggestions for solutions.