

TRENDS

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Graduate Retention: Who Stays, Who Leaves, and Why?

Introduction

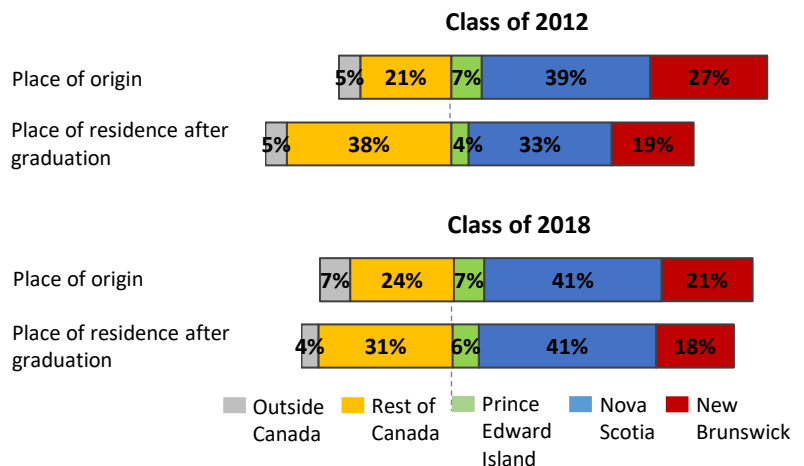
Maritime universities produce highly qualified and skilled graduates who are vital to the region’s socio-economic development. There is therefore considerable interest in where they choose to live and work after graduation. This report examines the retention patterns of Maritime university first-degree holders (FDH) from the Classes of 2012 and 2018, surveyed six years after graduation. It includes analyses by province of graduation and place of origin. For the Class of 2018, the report further examines the reasons FDH provided for staying in or leaving their province of graduation.

Highlights

- The percentage of Maritime university FDH living in the Maritimes six years after graduation increased from 56% for the Class of 2012 to 65% for the Class of 2018. Retention in the Maritimes was strongly associated with graduates’ place of origin: 83% of Class of 2018 FDH who were originally from the Maritimes were living in the region six years after graduation, compared with 22% of graduates from the rest of Canada and 40% of those from outside Canada.
- Retention in the province of graduation also increased among FDH from the Class of 2018 compared with the Class of 2012, rising from 51% to 60% in New Brunswick, from 47% to 53% in Nova Scotia, and from 53% to 68% in Prince Edward Island.
- Class of 2018 FDH were asked why they had stayed in or left their province of graduation. Graduates’ decisions to stay or leave were shaped by a combination of personal, employment-related, educational, and financial factors. The top reasons for staying were being closer to family and friends (69%) and having obtained employment (54%). Among those who left, the top reasons included obtaining employment (35%), being closer to family and friends (34%), and seeking more potential employment opportunities (33%).
- Place of origin and ties to family and friends played an important role in graduate retention. Among FDH who were originally from the Maritimes, 75% remained in their province of graduation to be closer to family and friends, while among FDH from outside the Maritimes, 43% left their province of graduation for the same reason.

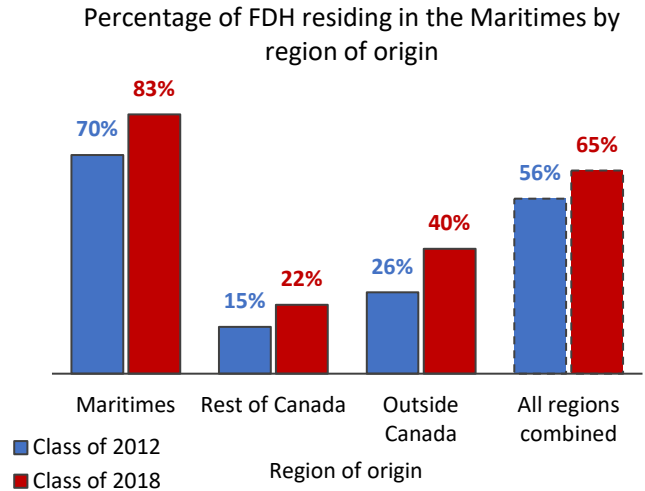
Distribution of FDH by place of origin and place of residence after graduation

Among Class of 2018 FDH, 69% were living in the Maritimes during the 12 months prior to enrolling in their program, while 24% resided elsewhere in Canada and 7% lived outside Canada. Six years after graduation, in 2024, 65% were living in the Maritimes, 31% in the rest of Canada, and 4% outside the country. Compared with the Class of 2012, graduates from the Class of 2018 were less likely to move to the rest of Canada or to reside outside the country six years after graduation.



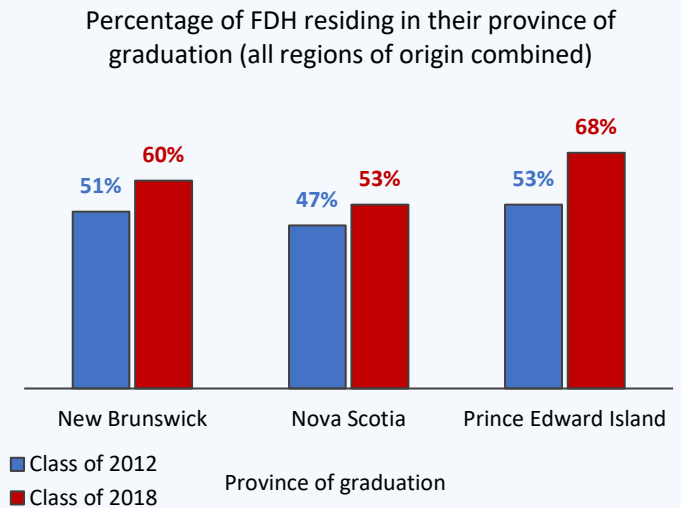
Retention of FDH in the Maritimes by region of origin

Six years after graduation, 65% of Class of 2018 FDH were living in the Maritimes, compared with 56% of FDH from the Class of 2012. Retention in the Maritimes was strongly associated with graduates' region of origin: 83% of graduates originally from the Maritimes were living in the region, compared with 22% of those from the rest of Canada and 40% of those from outside Canada. Across all origin groups, retention was higher for the Class of 2018 than for the Class of 2012.



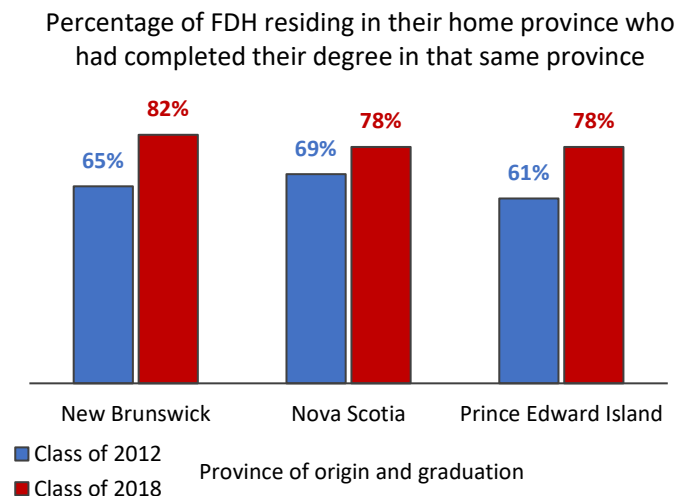
Retention of FDH in their province of graduation

Between the Classes of 2012 and 2018, retention of FDH in their province of graduation, regardless of region of origin, increased across all three provinces, rising from 51% to 60% in New Brunswick, from 47% to 53% in Nova Scotia, and from 53% to 68% in Prince Edward Island. Prince Edward Island's higher retention rate may be partly explained by the larger share of graduates originally from the province (79% for the Class of 2018, compared with 66% in New Brunswick and 55% in Nova Scotia).



Retention of FDH in their home province

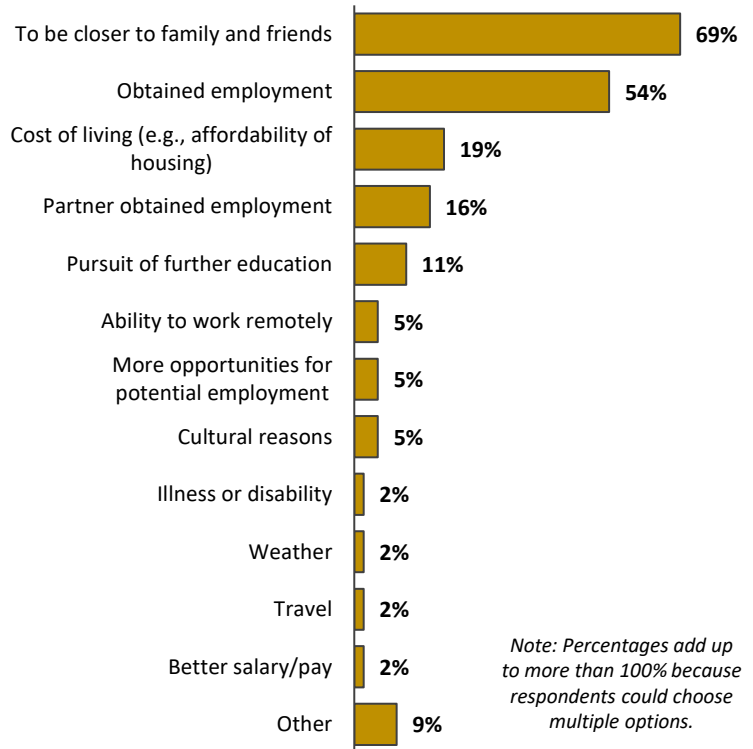
Most FDH who studied in the province where they had lived prior to enrolling in their program remained there six years after graduation. Among FDH from the Class of 2018, 82% of those who had lived in New Brunswick before enrolling in a New Brunswick university were still living in the province, compared with 78% of FDH in Nova Scotia and a similar proportion in Prince Edward Island. Compared with the Class of 2012, retention in the home province increased across all three provinces.



Reasons for staying in the province of graduation

Class of 2018 FDH who were living in their province of graduation six years after completing their degree most often cited being closer to family and friends as a reason for staying (69%), followed by obtaining employment (54%). Other commonly reported reasons included cost of living (e.g., affordability of housing) (19%), partner-related employment (16%), and the pursuit of further education (11%). Overall, family and social ties, employment opportunities, and affordability considerations were important factors in graduates' decisions to remain in their province of graduation.

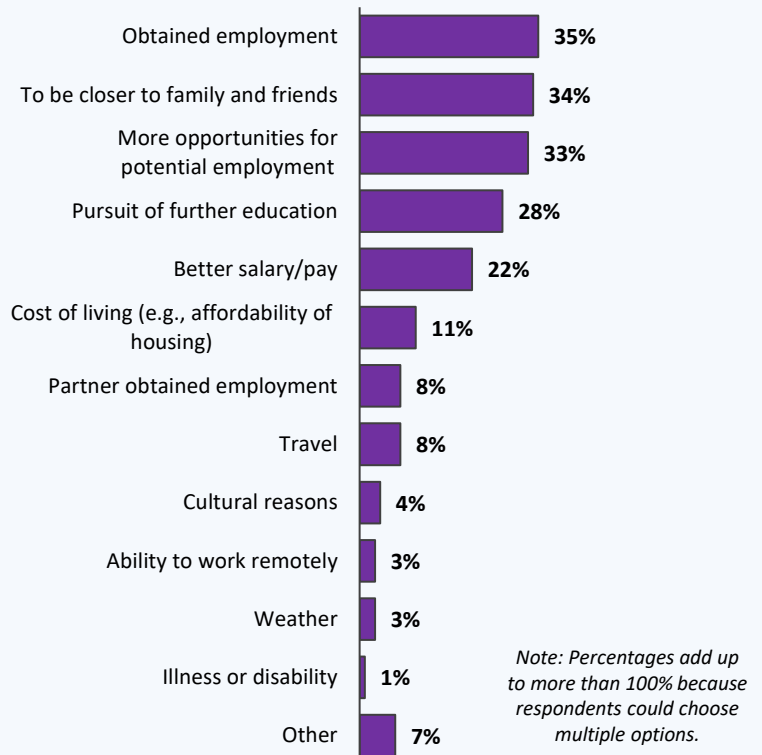
Percentage of FDH reporting reasons for staying in the province of graduation (Class of 2018)



Reasons for leaving the province of graduation

Class of 2018 FDH who were living outside their province of graduation six years after completing their degree most often cited obtaining employment as a reason for leaving (35%), followed by being closer to family and friends (34%) and seeking more potential employment opportunities (33%). Other commonly reported reasons included the pursuit of further education (28%) and the prospect of a better salary or higher pay (22%). Overall, employment-related factors, including access to employment opportunities and higher salaries, as well as educational opportunities and family and social ties outside the province, played a central role in shaping graduates' decisions to leave their province of graduation.

Percentage of FDH reporting reasons for leaving the province of graduation (Class of 2018)



Influence of FDH's origin on reasons to stay or leave

Among FDH from the Maritimes, decisions to remain in the province of graduation were largely driven by family and social ties (75%) and obtaining employment (53%), while decisions to leave were more often linked to the pursuit of further education (32%) and employment-related factors, including obtaining employment (37%) and seeking more potential employment opportunities (28%).

Among FDH from outside the Maritimes, decisions to remain in the province of graduation were less strongly influenced by family and social ties (31%) and more closely associated with education, employment, and financial considerations, particularly obtaining employment (55%), partner-related employment (21%), the pursuit of further education (21%), and cost of living (21%). Decisions to leave were most often driven by family and social ties outside the province and broader labour market prospects, with graduates citing the desire to be closer to family and friends elsewhere (43%), seeking more potential employment opportunities (38%), and obtaining employment (34%) as the main reasons for leaving.

Percentage of FDH reporting reasons for staying in or leaving their province of graduation, by region of origin (Class of 2018)

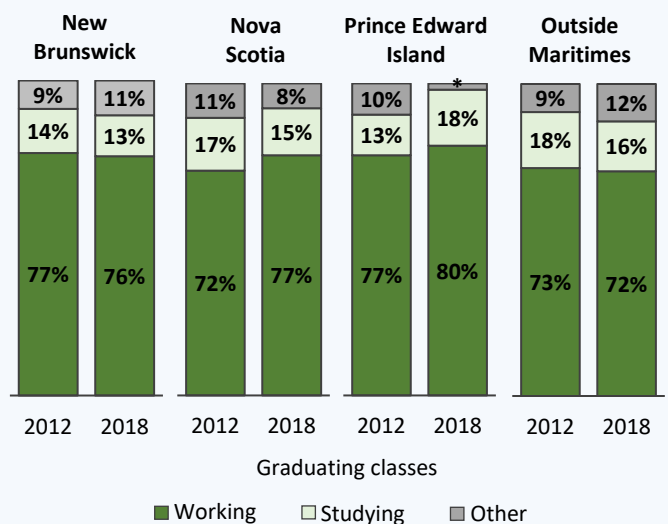
	Reasons for staying		Reasons for leaving	
	Maritimes	Outside Maritimes	Maritimes	Outside Maritimes
To be closer to family and friends	75%	31%	24%	43%
Obtained employment	53%	55%	37%	34%
Cost of living	19%	21%	13%	9%
Partner obtained employment	15%	21%	13%	4%
Pursuit of further education	9%	21%	32%	24%
Ability to work remotely	6%	5%	3%	2%
More opportunities for potential employment	4%	11%	28%	38%
Cultural reasons	4%	10%	4%	3%
Illness or disability	2%	*	*	*
Weather	1%	8%	3%	3%
Travel	1%	*	10%	6%
Better salary/pay	2%	*	20%	24%
Other	8%	14%	6%	8%

* Data suppressed due to small cell size (Unweighted n < 5)

Main activity of FDH six years after graduation

The main activity of FDH six years after graduation was working. The share of Class of 2018 FDH living in the Maritimes who were working ranged from 76% to 80%, while 72% of FDH living outside the Maritimes were also working. Between 13% and 18% of graduates were pursuing further education. Overall, the distribution of graduates' main activities remained largely consistent between the Classes of 2012 and 2018, with only modest variation by region of residence.

Percentage of FDH by main activity and region of residence six years after graduation



* Data suppressed due to small cell size (Unweighted n < 5)

Summary and Implications

There was a notable increase in the proportion of FDH living in the Maritimes six years after graduation, from 56% for the Class of 2012, surveyed in 2018, to 65% for the Class of 2018, surveyed in 2024. Retention in the province of graduation also increased across all three provinces between the Classes of 2012 and 2018. The growth in graduate retention occurred despite an increase in the percentage of FDH coming from elsewhere in Canada or from outside Canada to study at Maritime universities. The increase in the retention of FDH in the Maritimes parallels the growth in the general population observed in the region, fueled by interprovincial migration and international immigration. Between 2018 and 2024, the number of 25- to 29-year-olds increased by 56% in Prince Edward Island, 29% in Nova Scotia, and 21% in New Brunswick¹.

The reasons for staying in or leaving the province of graduation differ between Maritimers and non-Maritimers. First-degree holders who were originally from the Maritimes were more likely to remain in their province of graduation. Seventy-five percent of FDH originally from the Maritimes who remained in their province of graduation reported that they stayed to be closer to family and friends. By contrast, 43% of FDH from outside the Maritimes reported leaving their province of graduation to be closer to family and friends. The cost of living (e.g., housing affordability) was cited more often as a reason for staying than for leaving the province of graduation among Maritimers (19% compared with 13%) and non-Maritimers (21% compared with 9%), suggesting that the relative affordability of the Maritime provinces plays a role in graduate retention. At the same time, higher salaries and better employment opportunities were reported more often as reasons for leaving the province of graduation among Maritimers and non-Maritimers alike. Evidence from the same graduating class indicates that graduates employed outside the Maritimes tend to earn more than those working within the region². The pursuit of further education was cited more frequently as a reason for leaving than for staying in the province of graduation. This finding is particularly relevant given that 61% of FDH pursued additional education after completing their first degree³. Nearly a third of Maritimers who left their province of graduation did so to pursue further studies.

This report showed that family ties and social connections, as well as securing employment, were the most important considerations for FDH when choosing where to live after graduation. Being close to family and friends was the most common reason for staying in the province of graduation and the second most common reason for leaving, while obtaining employment was identified as the main reason for leaving, and the second most frequently cited reason for staying.

References

1. Statistics Canada. Table 17-10-0005-01 Population estimates on July 1st, by age and gender. Release date: 2025-09-24. <https://doi.org/10.25318/1710000501-eng>
2. MPHEC. Employment profile of Maritime university first-degree holders two and six years after graduation. Fredericton, NB; March 2025.
3. MPHEC. Trends in Maritime Higher Education. The Class of 2018 six years on: Pursuing education after a first degree. Volume 22, Number 3, Fredericton, NB; June 2025.

Methodological Notes

The data used in this report were obtained from the MPHEC Graduate Outcomes (GO) Survey for the Classes of 2012 and 2018, both conducted six years after graduation, in 2018 and 2024, respectively. Detailed information about the GO Survey program, including survey instruments, is available at:

<https://www.mphec.ca/research/graduatefollowupsurveys.aspx>

The analyses presented in this report are limited to first-degree holders and include only graduates who provided information on their place of residence both 12 months prior to enrolling in their program and six years after graduation.

The Class of 2012 sample comprised 1,901 FDH, with a margin of error of ± 2.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The Class of 2018 sample included 1,603 FDH, with a margin of error of ± 1.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. All statistics presented in this report were generated from weighted data, with weights applied by university of graduation and gender. Non-response was excluded from the analyses. Percentages presented in charts and tables may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Definitions

First-degree holders (FDH): Bachelor's degree graduates who entered their program without a prior post-secondary credential.

Place of origin and place of residence after graduation: Graduates were asked to report their primary place of residence during the 12 months prior to enrolling in their program and their place of residence six years after completing their degree. For certain analyses, responses were grouped into the following regions:

- **Maritimes:** Graduates who were living in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, or Prince Edward Island.
- **Outside Maritimes:** Graduates who were living elsewhere in Canada (excluding the three Maritime provinces) or outside Canada.

Main activity of graduates: Graduates were classified into one of three categories based on their reported primary activity at the time of the survey:

- **Working:** Graduates who reported working full- or part-time, excluding those who were also enrolled in further education.
- **Studying:** Graduates who were pursuing further education after their first degree and were enrolled in a program. This category includes graduates who were also working while studying.
- **Other:** Graduates engaged in activities other than studying or working, such as looking for work, being on temporary layoff, taking maternity or paternity leave, or caring for family members.

Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission

Telephone: (506) 453-2844

Email: mphec@mphec.ca

www.mphec.ca

