

Is Belfast's startup scene the answer to Northern Ireland's 'Brain Drain?'

A report published by Pivotal last month found that Northern Ireland's 'Brain Drain,' or the number of young people travelling abroad for employment or education, is still increasing. 17,500 students from Northern Ireland are registered in universities in England, Scotland and Wales, two thirds of which are unlikely to return after they graduate.

The number of young people flocking out of Northern Ireland threatens to draw an invaluable talent pool out of the region and stagnate economic development. But in the last number of years, Belfast has become home to a growing number of startups, particularly in the sectors of technology, cyber security and health. Innovative developments and businesses are aided by and attracted to the lower operating costs, corporation tax and renting prices in the capital city.

At the cross section of health and technology, *Liopa*, founded in 2015, combines research into software design and technologies in image processing in order to help those who cannot speak as a result of trauma or health reasons. The software is being trialled on NHS patients across the UK.

Founded on the research of *Queen's University Belfast* and the Centre for

Secure Information and Technologies, the startup will attract a new generation of graduates as a result of the diversity of its projects which require a host of flexible skills and expertise. In one recent project, the company aims to trial a silent communicator function on apps such as Snap Chat, in order to improve the experience of those, predominantly young people, who use these platforms.

As one of Europe's youngest workforces, with 55% of workers under the age of 40, the growing talent pool of young people is likely to filter into Northern Ireland's developing network of startups. As a result of the booming tech and cyberspace industry, over 1000 additional STEM placements and postgraduate programs in Smart Grids and Cyber Security have been created at Northern Ireland's top two universities.

It's not just in STEM subjects and skills that startups are carving out space. 29-year-old James Scullion, Founder and Creative Director of *Rapid Agency*, a digital marketing and web design company based in Belfast, has taken advantage of the space in Northern Ireland for creative-led businesses. Founded only 5 years ago, Scullion remains the oldest member of its workforce. The youngest is just 22 years old.

Of the space for creative graduates in Northern Ireland, Scullion said, "Starting a business as a 25-year-old was daunting at first but quickly, Rapid Agency began to attract new customers through our sense of creativity and enthusiasm. We have always embraced an approach to recruitment that focuses on youth, talent and an eye for creativity. we thoroughly believe that Belfast is a great place to work, grow and recruit."

The success of Scullion's startup in only 5 years is testament to the market for creative-led industries in Northern Ireland, and the opportunities which lie ahead of graduates of these skillsets.

"It has been easy to recruit young talent in Belfast as both Queen's and the University of Ulster have a full suite of creative-led Degrees," Scullion said.

The space for startups in Northern Ireland is only beginning to grow. As it does, more opportunities will be created which are both appealing and within reach of a new cohort of graduates with a diverse set of skills.