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MIGRANTS AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

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and Eileen Hogan**

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Foreword



During the last decade, Ireland experienced a steady inflow of non-Irish workers to meet the demands of an expanding labour market. The new arrivals are a diverse group whose needs are not widely understood. If they are to achieve the desired levels of integration, it is clear that they should be afforded the same access to education, employment and enterprise as Irish citizens.

This group of potential learners face additional barriers in their efforts to access higher learning. This sub-strand of the *Education in Employment* (EIE) project had the objective of assembling and collating information on migrant workers and their experiences in accessing or attempting to access higher education in Ireland.

Led by Cork Institute of Technology, the working group established to address this issue comprised members from University College Cork, Institute of Technology Sligo, Dublin Institute of Technology, Athlone Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, and Dundalk Institute of Technology.

This report brings together the work conducted through an extensive series of focus group studies and interviews. It is intended that the findings and conclusions presented here will inform national policy as well as facilitating higher education institutions to more effectively address the needs of this diverse group of learners, and to raise the levels of staff awareness and sensitivity to the issues involved in so doing.

This report focuses on the educational needs of migrants in the workforce, as one of the four themes addressed by the CIT-led *Education in Employment* project which is funded through the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund. While net inward migration and an expanding labour market were current at the time of project initiation the changed economic circumstances and negative growth projections at the present time brings the issue of integration, education and upskilling of the 'new Irish' into even sharper focus.

I would like on my own behalf and on behalf of the overall EIE project steering group to thank the authors and all of the working group members as well as the participants in the focus groups and interviewees for their contributions to this study. A collaborative project such as this represents a significant challenge for all involved and I wish to acknowledge the important role of the chair of the working group in ensuring that the work of the group was always effective and focused.

A stylized, dotted-line signature of Michael Delaney.

Michael Delaney,
Head of Development,
Cork Institute of Technology.



Executive Summary

In the mid-1990s, Ireland changed from its long established tradition of a country with net emigration to a country with net immigration. Over the last five years (2003 – 2008), migrant workers and their families have formed the largest single group of new residents in Ireland. More than 420,000 people now living in Ireland were born outside the country. The majority of migrants have come to Ireland for economic reasons.

Contemporary Ireland became highly dependent on migrants and the many benefits they brought, particularly since the considerable growth in the Irish economy from the early 1990s. That expansion was greatly helped by the contribution of migrant labour. This research supports the findings of many studies which show that, without migrant labour, certain sections of the Irish economy would not have functioned successfully over the past number of years (NESC 2006; Forfás, 2005). In addition to providing labour and intellectual assets, migrants contribute to Irish society through direct and indirect taxation and to the social and cultural diversity of the country.

The economic and social benefits of immigration can be properly realised only if a greater degree of successful integration of migrants can be achieved. Education and employment play an important role in the integration and social inclusion of migrants. Research evidence suggests that higher education increases local and national economic development and leads to increased workforce quality. Increasing the proportion of third-level college graduates in the local population will have significant economic benefits for local economies. Access to third-level education and employment for migrants provides many benefits, including better levels of income, improved social standing, and a means for making social connections and learning about Irish society. Education and employment are, therefore, central to integration and social inclusion. The integration of all migrants is fundamental to Ireland's success in becoming a country of immigration rather than emigration.

In 2006, the Government introduced a Strategic Innovation Fund, through which €510m was allocated for spending, between 2006 and 2013, in higher education institutions for projects to enhance collaboration in the sector; to improve teaching and learning; to support institutional reform; to promote access and lifelong learning; and to support the development of fourth-level education. Through the Strategic Innovation Fund, the development of new strategic alliances creates new synergies and potential for higher education systems. Through its range of initiatives, the Strategic Innovation Fund is providing new impetus to the development of system-wide quality. The Strategic Innovation Fund is driving reform of structures and systems within and across institutions to cater for growing student numbers at all levels; for greater teaching and learning quality; to ensuring graduates are equipped for a lifetime of innovation and change in the workplace; and to enhance research and innovation capacity.

The *Education in Employment* project is one of the initiatives funded under the first cycle of the Strategic Innovation Fund. The *Education in Employment* consortium is led by Cork Institute of Technology, which co-ordinates the work contributed by the other members of the consortium: Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Sligo, University College Cork, and National University of Ireland Galway. *Education in Employment* focuses on the learning needs of those already *in* the workforce, and includes lifelong learning as a central aim by placing significant emphasis on continual professional development and upskilling in the workforce.

This report is based on the activities of one of the four linked sub-strands in the Education in Employment project. For this report, staff from the collaborating third-level colleges conducted research into barriers of access to higher education that are faced by migrants who are in employment and by migrants who are attempting to gain employment in Ireland. The findings included in this report are based on interviews with:

- (i) One hundred and sixty migrants from twenty-one different countries of origin,
- (ii) Access Officers and Admissions Officers in third-level colleges who are partners in the Education in Employment project,
- (iii) Employers, employer bodies, and other key stakeholders.

The focus group interviews and one-to-one in-depth interviews with staff and key stakeholders were conducted between February and October 2008. Quotations from the transcribed interviews are included in the report to illustrate the findings and to give voice to the participants.

One of the main aims of this report is to identify barriers faced by migrants when attempting to access third-level education in Ireland. The research findings discuss four main barriers to third-level education, which emerged from the study. These barriers were similar in all regions of Ireland where focus group interviews were conducted.

The first barrier identified was the lack of clear, consistent, and relevant information for potential third-level migrant students on entry requirements and educational rights and entitlements.

Second, low levels of English language competence were identified by all three sets of interviewees as a major barrier to third-level education. All interviewees identified English language proficiency as essential for accessing third-level education and for social inclusion and integration to Irish society.

Third, the lack of recognition of international qualifications and of prior learning were key issues faced by migrants in their attempts to access third-level education. Potential students received varying responses from third-level colleges in relation to capturing their prior learning and having their international qualifications properly recognised.

Fourth, inconsistent and confusing information regarding fees and fee structures, together with very high fees charged to non-European Union citizens were identified as significant barriers. The residency status of non-European Union migrants and lack of clarity regarding who has the right to education in Ireland proved to be confusing and problematic.

The findings of this report are based on the perceptions of those interviewed in geographical regions of collaborating third-level colleges, but are sufficiently robust to be generalised throughout Ireland. A further aim of the report is to open a debate with policy makers to enable them to address the barriers which have been identified. Denying access to education and employment allows for the marginalisation and isolation of migrants and has serious implications for both migrant and receiving societies. Third-level education is a powerful and life-changing instrument in the process of social integration.

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1.0 Background

Since 1995, Ireland has moved from traditionally being a country of net emigration to a country of net immigration. Immigration has only recently become a significant issue in Ireland. Large numbers of immigrants, however, have arrived in Ireland over the past decade and, as a consequence, the population of Ireland is more ethnically diverse than at any previous time (Watt and McGaughey, 2006). In some ways, this reflects wider European patterns, but in Ireland this experience has been significant at a level beyond the experiences of many of its European counterparts. Immigration to Ireland continued its strong growth in 2006, when long-term migration of foreign nationals was approximately 89,000. This represents an increase of more than one third over 2005, which until then held the highest immigration on record. Preliminary figures for 2007 show, however, a stagnation at this high level (OECD, 2008). Coakley and Mac Éinrí (2007) suggest that the onset of mass immigration constitutes the single most significant axis of socio-cultural change that has occurred since the advent of mass industrialisation and urbanisation in the middle of the twentieth century. Historical migratory movements have shown that, regardless of the intentions of individuals, a significant proportion of migrants will remain in the receiving country, settling, and forming a community.

In Ireland, as in other 'new migration countries' in the European Union, this challenge is complicated since the integration of immigrant groups is occurring in a society that was previously a region of emigration. Such societies typically lack the legal and policy infrastructures, funding, service provision, and migrant activism found in more mature immigration societies. Furthermore, Coakley and Mac Éinrí (2007) suggest that, because immigration is such a recent and dramatic phenomenon, it could also be argued that Ireland lacks the cultural and experiential background needed to best address the challenges posed by the presence of a multiethnic and multicultural society in this country.

Immigration refers to a process by which people move into a country for the purpose of settlement. An immigrant is an all-encompassing term usually taken to mean someone who leaves their native land and goes to another country as a permanent resident (as distinct from a holidaymaker). Barrett *et al.* (2006) identify immigrants to Ireland as "people who describe their nationality as being other than Irish, were not born in Ireland, and have lived here for under ten years" (2006: 3). The term encompasses economic migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. The term migrant, however, is usually understood to cover all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned for reasons of 'personal convenience' and without intervention of a compelling factor. This term therefore applies to persons and family members moving to another country or region to better their material or social conditions and to improve prospects for themselves or their family (Forfás, 2007).


An economic migrant is an individual who leaves their country of origin in order to improve their quality of life, usually by seeking employment in another country. The term labour migrant can also be applied to an individual who moves countries for the purpose of employment. An asylum seeker is described by the UN as someone who has made a claim that he or she is seeking refuge for safety reasons and is awaiting the determination of his or her status as an applicant for residency. The term contains no presumption either way; it simply describes

the fact that someone has lodged the claim. Some asylum seekers will be judged refugees and others will not. An individual can be considered a refugee if they are a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; have a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or hold a particular political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution (Forfás, 2007).

Ireland's population currently stands at approximately 4.24 million people. This figure consists of 420,000 people born outside Ireland. It has been estimated that by 2030 this number may exceed one million (CSO, 2006). Between 1996 and 2006, Ireland's population increased at an annual average rate of 1.6%. One of the main reasons for the increase in the immigrant population has been the enlargement of the European Union. One-third of immigrants coming to Ireland were non-EU15 during the period 1992-1995. Since 2000, however, immigrants from outside the EU15 have accounted for more than half of all non-Irish immigrants arriving in Ireland (Ruhs, 2005). In relative terms, Ireland attracted the highest number of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe after the ten Accession States joined the EU in May 2004. To date, Ireland is unique in its approach in relation to immigration policy as the government chose not to impose restrictions on the free movement of labour from the ten EU accession states. This means that a population of 456 million Europeans have the right to arrive, study, work, and live in Ireland without restriction. In light of the significant inflows following the 2004 EU enlargement, the Irish government subsequently decided not to give free access to nationals of Romania and Bulgaria following accession of these countries in January 2007. Immigration now poses new challenges which must be addressed by policymakers and society.

For the first time in a decade, Ireland is experiencing an economic downturn that will have a direct impact on many of those who have opted to come and live in Ireland. The general assumption is that many of them will return home or move elsewhere for employment. This may be true for a section of casual workers, but with CSO data showing that almost 42% of the non-Irish population is married, a significant number of them are probably settled and raising families here. Lucy Gaffney, Chair of the National Action Plan Against Racism, (2008) reported that — for those involved in the immigration, multiculturalism and integration sector — the initial challenge of accommodating new arrivals to the country has evolved into ensuring that the diversity which has been achieved is maintained and developed for the long-term benefit of Ireland's economy and society. Gaffney added that the challenge also was to ensure that the situation which has emerged in many other European countries in recent years can be avoided, whereby the frustrations of the local population in less prosperous times are vented against immigrant communities.

This report specifically focuses on issues relating to third-level education and employment for non-Irish nationals who are currently employed in Ireland. This does not include international students who are normally resident outside Ireland but come to Ireland on student visas to study on a fee-paying basis. The results of the research conducted for this report should aid third-level institutional policy makers in the provision of higher education for migrants, as well as adding to the limited knowledge in the field of migrant education. As noted by Dunbar *et al.* (2008: 10) "gauging precise levels of educational attainment among migrants is difficult due to a lacuna in this area of study". Dunbar *et al.* summarised the findings and recommendations of previous research in this area, and concluded that there are many issues in need of resolution regarding adult education and the



recognition of prior learning (RPL) for migrants in Ireland. Similarly, a report on education for immigrants in Ireland concluded that “there is no government body in charge of overseeing access to education among migrants in Ireland, and that problems in this area will be detrimental to the future development of Irish society and the economy” (Warner, 2006: 66). Following the appointment of the Minister of State for Integration in June 2007, however, an Integration Unit was set up in the Department of Education and Science. The Unit’s brief is to co-ordinate the response to the education needs of newcomers and to liaise with other sections in the Department and with external agencies and stakeholders.

1.1 Strategic Innovation Fund Aims and Objectives

The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) is awarded by the Department of Education and Science and is administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). SIF is a competitively driven resource stream which aims to implement organisational transformation. The fund is multi-annual, amounting to €510 million over the period 2006-2013. SIF aims to support innovation, and to foster collaboration between institutions competing for funding to:

- Incentivise and reward internal restructuring and reform efforts;
- Promote teaching and learning reforms, including enhanced teaching methods, programme restructuring at third and fourth level, modularisation and e-learning;
- Support quality improvement initiatives aimed at excellence;
- Promote access, transfer, and progression, and incentivise stronger inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes;
- Provide for improved performance management systems and meet staff-training and support requirements associated with the reform of structures and the implementation of new processes;
- Implement improved management information systems.

Through the collaborative nature of the projects, new strategic alliances have been developed and supported, providing new impetus for enhanced quality and effectiveness. The OECD Review of Higher Education in Ireland made a compelling case for reform of third- and fourth-level education in Ireland. While the sector is acknowledged as an engine for economic development, higher education institutions need to rise to the challenges of increasing their relevance, for example, through promoting access and participation by those already in the workforce. The Strategic Innovation Fund is an important element in the investment and reform of higher education institutions that should enable them to meet challenges presented by changing social and economic realities while building on their existing strengths. In this way, the projects funded through the Strategic Innovation Fund will help the partner institutions towards realising their potential while also improving the learning experience for a diverse range of learners at all levels.

In developing a project proposal for the Strategic Innovation Fund Cycle 1 deadline, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) endeavoured that the submission should build clearly on existing leadership and strengths and align with CIT’s strategic plan and those of partner institutions. The resulting ‘Education in Employment’ project focuses on the learning needs of those already in the workforce, through four distinct but linked strands. The initiative is a Cork Institute of Technology-led consortium comprising Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of

Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Sligo, National University of Ireland Galway, and University College Cork. The Ethnic Minorities group, one of the four strands of the Education in Employment project, has a duration of 18 months. The main aims and objectives of the ethnic minorities working group include:

- To conduct focus groups with migrants in relation to their access to third-level education and employment in Ireland within geographical proximity of each partner college,
- To conduct focus groups in each of the partner institutions with migrants who are already in the third-level education system in Ireland and are in employment;
- To conduct interviews with Admissions Officers and Access Officers in all of the partner institutions in relation to policies and procedures for migrants accessing third-level education;
- To produce a report containing the findings of the new empirical research;
- To present a seminar for staff in partner institutions on meeting the education needs of migrants in the workforce;
- To develop a set of frequently asked questions arising from the empirical research and provide answers to those questions to provide 'signposting' for migrant groups;
- To translate the frequently asked questions into six languages and ensure its widespread availability in both hard copy and electronically.


This report fulfils one of the main aims of the working group, and the other stated objectives above have also been achieved.

1.2 Methodology

This report is divided into six distinct chapters. The first chapter serves as a general introduction and provides a background for the report, including a brief outline of the aims and objectives of the Strategic Innovation Fund.

Chapter 2 introduces the concept of integration, explores definitions of integration, and highlights approaches used to integrate immigrants in a number of European cities. The chapter also provides summary findings from the extant literature on migrant education, and access to third-level education for migrants in Ireland. The recognition of foreign qualifications and the RPL are also explored. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of migrant employment in Ireland.

Chapter 3 presents the main findings of the research from focus group interviews conducted with migrants, which were carried out by working group members in their local regions. The rationale for choosing focus groups is discussed briefly and the research findings are arranged thematically. Direct quotations from the migrants who participated in the focus groups are included. The focus group interview guide is in Appendix B.



Chapter 4 presents the empirical data from one-to-one interviews with access and admissions officers which were carried out by each working group member in each partner institution. The findings from these interviews are arranged according to the main themes which emerged, and direct quotations are included. The interview guide is in Appendix C.

Chapter 5 presents the results of one-to-one interviews, conducted with selected stakeholders, regarding barriers to third-level education and employment faced by migrants in Ireland. The interview guide is in Appendix D.

Chapter 6 outlines some of the challenges facing third-level education providers and employers in relation to migrants. Based on the research findings, the chapter also presents some recommendations regarding access to education for migrants in third-level institutions and industrial organisations. Finally, a conclusion to the report is presented.



2.0 Integration

There are many different views and ongoing debates on what constitutes 'integration'. Research literature on the subject recognises integration as a process, which is multi-dimensional, extends over several generations, and is bi-directional in that it equally affects the majority population. The term integration is widely used in a policy context at National and European level, and is understood to be a "two-way process that places duties and obligations on cultural and ethnic minorities and the State to create a more inclusive society" (National Action Plan Against Racism 2005-2008). The Interdepartmental Working Group on the Integration of Refugees in Ireland suggested that "Integration means the ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all of the major components of society, without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity" (1999: 9). More recently, a report by The National Economic and Social Council (2006) defined integration as the adjustments that result from interactions between immigrants and mainstream Irish society. Integration, therefore, can be seen as a process of mutual accommodation, but is also considered as an essential factor in realising the full benefits of immigration (Ejorh, 2006). For many people, however, the idea of integration can be fraught. It may be interpreted to mean cultural assimilation or absorption into a society. This concept has connotations of loss of identity and of incorporation into the dominant host group. It is a limited approach, with notions of 'common' or 'shared' values or identities left unquestioned. In many instances, such approaches have been shown to fuel racial tension (Hegarty, 2008).

The integration process is shaped by many factors such as the skills, abilities, religion, and other characteristics of the migrant population and the economic, social, cultural, and political characteristics of society. A report conducted by an interdepartmental working group on the integration of refugees in Ireland (1999) suggested that the emphasis of integration policy should be on supporting initiatives which enable the preservation of the ethnic, cultural, and religious identity of the individual, which remove the barriers affecting access to mainstream services, and which raise awareness among all cultural groups. Later research conducted by the Enterprise Strategy Group (2004) also recommended that Ireland should aim to be seen as an attractive place to live and work, with a welcoming attitude to immigrants and a vibrant, diverse cultural life. The Enterprise Strategy Group further suggested that there is need for a planned and coherent immigration policy that is carefully managed and regulated and consistent with the skills requirements of the economy.

Research by Harrison *et al.* for EUMC (2005) found that, if integration is to be achieved, four dimensions must be addressed:

- **Culturation** (= socialisation) transmission to and the acquisition of knowledge, cultural standards and competences necessary for successfully interacting in a given society;
- **Structural participation** (= placement) refers to an individual's acquisition and occupation of relevant positions in society, e.g., in education and economic systems, in the labour market, in occupational hierarchies, and as a citizen;
- **Interaction** refers to the formation of networks and social relations, e.g., the establishment of friendships, of love or marriage relations across group boundaries;
- **Identification** whereby persons see themselves as an element of a collective body. Identification has cognitive and emotional sides and results in a "we-feeling" towards a group or collective.

A recent Oireachtas report states that conditions for many immigrants are clearly less than ideal, not only in terms of their material well-being but also of their integration into Irish society. The Oireachtas Joint Committee suggested that what is required is a “fundamental shift in attitudes, structures and services. It is not simply a matter of making public services more user-friendly for migrants but of the nature of the relationship between the migrants and Irish society in general and the nature of governance” (Oireachtas Joint Committee, 2007: 5).

According to Lucy Gaffney, Chair of the National Plan Against Racism, Ireland must face up to the challenges of integration in today's slower economic conditions. She suggested that “education is the strongest weapon in the Government's arsenal to prevent racism and promote integration. More people – whether of Irish or non-Irish birth – will become vulnerable as the economy shrinks and competition for jobs grows. Education alone can play a crucial part in preventing intolerance, jealousy and hatred in a harsher economic and social climate” (www.diversityireland.ie).

Research conducted by Cork City Partnership during 2007 and 2008, to inform the Cork City Integration Strategy, found that there is a need for more information on how the education system operates in Ireland and, in particular, a need to focus on cultural and ethnic diversity in the curriculum. The research also highlighted a demand for enhanced English language classes to be provided at weekends or evenings at a low cost to help immigrants to integrate.

One of the key findings of existing international research on the social impact of immigration on host countries is that issues of integration cannot be tackled quickly. The consequences of immigration are felt over several generations and, therefore, policies encouraging integration must extend over the long term. The integration process itself is determined by a myriad of factors, notably language, culture, and religion, as well as the economic characteristics of the migrant community.

The newly constituted Office of the Minister for Integration, established in June 2007, currently has a budget allocation of €9 million. The most recent official statement on integration policy, *Migration Nation*, was issued in May 2008 and set out the key principles to inform and underpin State policy regarding integration:

- A partnership approach between the Government and non-government organisations, as well as civil society bodies, to deepen and enhance opportunities for integration;
- A strong link between integration policy and wider state social inclusion measures, strategies, and initiatives;
- A clear public policy focus that avoids the creation of parallel societies, communities, and urban ghettos, i.e., a mainstream approach to service delivery to migrants;
- A commitment to effective local delivery mechanisms that align services to migrants with those for indigenous communities (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2008).

Migration Nation put the case that the Irish government and Irish people must help migrants from very different cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religion backgrounds to successfully integrate to Irish society to become the new Irish citizens of the twenty-first century.

2.1 Summary of Approaches to Integration in Selected European Cities

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Affairs has examined best practices in a number of European countries that are experienced in integrating immigrants. The Joint Committee noted that a feature common to the countries examined is the prominence given to language teaching, and the necessity for well-structured consultation processes to promote a continuous dialogue between immigrant organisations and national, regional, and local authorities. They also found that despite contextual, historical, and regulatory differences, local authorities are supporting:

- Forums for dialogue, consultation, and decision-making, involving new communities to achieve integration;
- Allocating responsibility for integration, both internally in their own administrative areas of responsibility and among other organisations providing services in the city;
- Involving all stakeholders in integration work, through the provision of support for individual organisation and collaborative projects;
- Preparing integration and equality plans with stakeholders, allocating budgets for their implementation, and monitoring and reviewing outcomes publicly (Oireachtas Joint Committee, 2007).

A recent report focusing on local integration strategies in fourteen European cities confirms that municipal policy is not only embedded in specific national demographic and historical contexts, but is also strongly influenced by philosophical concepts of integration, national legislation, policies and plans, and by specific city and local development plans, policies, and legal contexts. The report, however, highlights that there is no consciously planned systematic and goal-oriented national integration strategy in the European Union. After examining 'interesting' approaches among the fourteen cities, the report concluded by stressing that these varied approaches were, however, not 'best practice' (European Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, 2006). Brief outlines of some of the features of these activities in a selected number of these cities are presented in the following summaries.

Amsterdam

Amsterdam has a city 'Diversity Department', that is responsible for the planning and supervision of its equality policy, supporting Departments to achieve intercultural mainstreaming, and achieving the 20% employment quota for people from ethnic minorities. Other institutions are charged with special integration measures and with special consultative bodies which function as a link between the city government and the foreign population.

Birmingham

In Birmingham, there is an Equality Division, and a Race Relations Unit, the biggest institution of its kind in Britain, employing its own equality officers. Consultation is achieved through the Birmingham Race Action Partnership, which draws together representatives from social services, departments of the city administration, and migrant associations. The city administration has reached a target of 20% employment rate for migrants, but continues with positive action focused on promotions and specific underrepresented groups.



Bologna

The city of Bologna has established a centre dedicated to migration issues, which draws together consultancy and information services. They also provide a service for cultural mediation with all other services and departments in the city area.

Frankfurt

In Frankfurt, the city parliament established an Office for Multicultural Affairs with a remit to promote the constructive coexistence of groups with different national, social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The body undertakes counselling, mediation, and conflict management tasks for service providers and in local neighbourhoods.

Madrid

In Madrid, the city council launched a strategic plan to elaborate a 'city for everybody', appointing mutual responsibilities for both migrants and natives that is coordinated by the city's General-Directorate for Immigration, Cooperation for Development, and Community Service.

Paris

In Paris, a town councillor was given responsibility for migrant inclusion and integration policy and was allocated €7 million per year for three areas of activity: anti-discrimination; citizenship and access to rights; and valuing cultures of origin. The distribution of multilingual documents and information sheets and a council for foreign citizens are two interesting activities, indicating a move away from the assimilation model that has been prevalent in France.

Nuremburg

In 2004, the city of Nuremburg unanimously adopted Integration Guidelines, committing the city to municipal integration policies consisting of four elements: linguistic integration, social integration, professional integration, social counselling, and support. Language support is considered an essential but not a sufficient tool for integration policies.

Stockholm

In Stockholm the city integration service, employing 60 people, is responsible for planning and communication of new integration measures, consulting and intercultural training for civil servants, and the evaluation of integration programmes. An executive committee monitors the city's Plan for Equality, Integration and Diversity. The city has also introduced a legal instrument that requires all public contracts, concluded by any contractors with the city for the delivery of goods and services, shall have an anti-discrimination clause. Stockholm also grants 'integration awards' for exemplary achievements of integration measures, organises celebrations for new citizens, and ensures that cultural institutions such as libraries adapt their agenda to the ethnic heterogeneity of the city.

Stuttgart

In Stuttgart, the Department of Integration supports the city's 'Pact for Integration' involves all stakeholders aiming to achieve eight milestones addressing: education, economic growth, equal rights and opportunities, political and social participation, pluralism and cultural diversity, a spirit of mutual respect and solidarity, participatory communication, and international cooperation.

In summary, it is clear that the challenge of integration is not to be underestimated. Integration is a dynamic two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of European Union member states. Inward migration and the growing multicultural nature of societies pose a challenge for everybody involved.

2.2 Migrant Education in Ireland

Ireland's first White Paper on Adult Education was published in 2000. The Paper set out the Government's policies and priorities for the future development of the adult education sector. The Paper recommended that adult education should be underpinned by principles promoting:

- (a) equality of access, participation, and outcome for participants in adult education, with proactive strategies to counteract barriers arising from differences of socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity and disability. A key priority in promoting an inclusive society is to target investment towards those most at risk;
- (b) interculturalism – the need to frame education policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population as opposed to a uniform one, and the development of curricula, materials, training and modes of assessment and delivery methods which accept such diversity as the norm.

The White Paper notes that, with regard to Adult Education, the challenges of interculturalism include:

- The recognition that many immigrants, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, can have specific urgent requirements, including the need for basic information or for language training;
- The issue of many refugees and asylum seekers not having the requisite job market skills or having difficulty in achieving recognition for their qualifications;
- The need to develop mechanisms to support different groups in ways which are empathic to and which respect their own heritage and cultural diversity;
- The need to provide specific tailored programmes and basic literacy and language education for all immigrants as an elementary part of education provision;
- The acknowledgement that the indigenous population also needs educational support as it adapts to an intercultural context;
- Recognition of awards and qualifications achieved in other countries;
- The need to provide mechanisms whereby all minority and marginalised groups have the possibility to influence policy and to shape interventions concerning them (Department of Education and Science, 2000).



The White Paper acknowledges that Ireland is rapidly evolving as a multi-racial society. Recognising the importance of this issue for the future direction of Irish society — aiming to maximise the gains of multiculturalism, and pre-empting the threat of racism in Ireland — interculturalism will be the third underpinning principle of Government policy on Adult Education. Accordingly, all programmes supported or publicly funded will be required to demonstrate their openness and contribution to Ireland's development as an intercultural society (Department of Education and Science, 2000).

In 2002, the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), an independent expert body set up by the government to focus on issues of racism and interculturalism, conducted research on education in Ireland for the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia. Their research noted that there is very limited official education data, due to the limited disaggregation of information on ethnic grounds. The study also observed that data, in relation to black and minority ethnic groups and education in Ireland, is very limited from a number of perspectives, including the system of categorisation, the accessibility of existing data, and the lack of data (beyond data merely relating to enrolment numbers). Similarly, later research conducted by Hughes and Quinn (2004), analysing existing data on migrants in relation to the impact of immigration on Europe's societies, confirmed the limited nature of information on countries of origin, where such data were summarily aggregated under narrow headings, such as: EU, UK, US, and 'rest of the world'. The report, nevertheless, presents an education profile of migrants in the labour force during the 1990s, including a section on highly qualified immigrants. On the issue of racism, the Irish Human Rights Commission believes that racism is a "very serious concern in contemporary Irish society" (Irish Human Rights Commission, 2003: 13). The Commission believes that there are worrying signs that racism is on the increase in Ireland, particularly among groups such as refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers.

Recent research conducted by Dunbar *et al.* (2008) illustrates that migrants arrive in Ireland with a wide spectrum of curricular and service needs — ranging across literacy, language learning, further education, vocational training, third-level education, and qualifications recognition. Barrett *et al.* (2006) established that immigrants in Ireland have notably higher levels of education than the domestic population. Their research suggests that while this might have been the result of Ireland being an attractive destination for highly educated people, it might also have been the result of an information effect, whereby better educated people were the first to know about improving economic conditions in Ireland. Recent immigrants to Ireland are more highly educated than their Irish counterparts, with over 54% of immigrants having a third-level qualification, in comparison to 27% of the native population (Barrett *et al.*, 2006). This contrasts with the experience, for example, in the United States where immigrants are generally less skilled than the native population. Despite these high standards of educational attainment among new arrivals to Ireland, evidence exists which suggests that highly qualified immigrants are not being employed at a level reflecting their educational status (Forfás, 2005). Barrett *et al.* (2006), however, caution that, while Ireland has benefited from a high-skilled inflow in recent times, there is no guarantee that the inflow will continue to be high skilled. Their research concludes by recommending that Ireland should aim to promote the inflow of high-skilled people.

There is a variety of reasons why economic migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers arriving in Ireland might wish to gain access to further education and training. There are some factors, however, which limit their access to

higher education. These factors have been explored as part of the empirical research conducted for this report and will be presented and analysed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

This report specifically addresses migrants:

- (i) who are in employment or looking for employment in Ireland; and
- (ii) who are studying at third-level colleges or wish to enrol in third-level education.

2.3 Access to Third-level Education for Migrants in Ireland

As a modern democracy, Ireland aspires to having an equitable education system that provides opportunities to learners throughout their lives to reach their full potential as individuals and as members of a society and of an economy. Achieving equity of access to higher education is central to realising this goal, and the higher education sector occupies a key position of leadership in addressing this task. The education needs of minority ethnic groups and of people within ethnic groups can vary considerably. Where poverty, racism, and failure to accommodate ethnicity or other forms of diversity are combined, social exclusion in the education system tends to be exacerbated. A report by the National Action Plan Against Racism Steering Group (2003) suggested that this is particularly evident in respect of women from minority ethnic groups.

In Ireland, to date, there have been mixed results in efforts to eliminate social exclusion and inequity, particularly in the education system. Participation in education has grown significantly over the past forty years but has not been shared equally by all members of society. People with a disability, socio-economically disadvantaged students, members of the Traveller community, ethnic minorities, and mature students remain under-represented in higher education (HEA, 2004). In 2005, Integrating Ireland published research into access to further education and recognition of professional qualifications. The report concluded that lack of access to education for skilled migrants was a major obstacle to integration and social inclusion, and that there was an element of institutional racism at play. Research into barriers to access to further and higher education for non-EU nationals conducted by Pobal (2006) found that incidents of discrimination and racism occur in education institutions at all levels and that strategies to combat this are inadequate. Additionally, the Pobal research found that, as well as individual racism, there is a need to acknowledge and combat institutional racism in the education sector in Ireland. An earlier study found that 73% of international students cited at least one such instance of discrimination (Irish Council for International Students, 1998).

According to the HEA (2008), Ireland has reached a point in its national education development where the achievement of further growth in higher education will require continuing progress in relation to widening access. This means that the achievement of national objectives for upskilling the population will require further progress in extending higher education opportunities to groups that have traditionally been under-represented in higher education. The upskilling objectives are widely shared across all developed countries, thus all countries struggle with the challenges of inequality in education. Despite the enormous potential of education for counteracting inequality and poverty, education systems tend towards a reproduction of existing inequalities in the wider society. The inequalities that exist in education are most apparent in higher education.



At present, over 55% of the Leaving Certificate age cohort go on to higher education, up from 44% a decade ago, but the Government has set a target that would see participation rates over 70% by 2020. In July 2008, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education launched a new access plan to higher education in Ireland setting a national target of 72% entry to higher education by 2020. The plan was developed by the National Access Office of the HEA, in partnership with the Department of Education and Science and in close liaison with higher education institutions and other stakeholders in the education sector. It outlines the current challenge in terms of low rates of participation in higher education by certain socio-economic groups, and sets clear targets to be met over the next five years to address this problem. Based on the principle that no group should have participation rates in higher education that are less than three-quarters of the national average, the plan sets a target that all socio-economic groups will have entry rates of at least 54% by 2020 (HEA, 2008).

In 2001, the Department of Education and Science set up a task force to examine issues of access to third-level education. The terms of reference for this task force included target groups of students with disabilities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and mature second-chance students. There was no specific mention of ethnic minorities. The HEA commissioned five major surveys of access to higher education institutions at regular intervals between 1980 and 2003. None of these surveys treat ethnic minorities as separate groups, instead, the surveys categorise by socio-economic background (Thornhill, 2004).

Studies conducted with migrants indicate the problem of a lack of easily available information on the requirements for access to education (Keogh and Whyte, 2003; Integrating Ireland, 2005). Migrants interviewed by Keogh and Whyte (2003) were not always aware of the implications of their legal status on entitlements to access higher education, fee levels, grant and social welfare entitlements. They said that they had gathered information in an ad hoc way, as the need arose, and that sometimes they accessed the information belatedly. Interestingly, the above research by Keogh and Whyte and by Integrating Ireland highlighted that where potential students thought they had the correct information this was very often not the case. Additionally, guidance counsellors interviewed for Keogh and Whyte's study also complained of a lack of information about the higher education entitlements of migrants. Later research conducted by Warner (2006) confirms these previous studies and notes that information provision on access entitlements and financial assistance for third-level education, however, has proven difficult for migrants, and in some cases incorrect information was provided. A particular barrier to access for many migrants in Ireland related to the fees charged to non-EU nationals in universities and institutes of technology. Fee policies vary among institutions of higher education, but there is an inherent tension between the obligation of institutions to subsidise education for Irish students with fees from non-EU students and the requirement to promote equity of access (Warner, 2006). O'Byrne (2004) noted that, for migrant students (for example refugees) who may be eligible for financial assistance, the current system is "an administrative quagmire" which is wasteful, full of duplication, and demeaning to the student. O'Byrne notes that these problems are experienced by all students trying to access grants for further and higher education, but may impact in particular upon those students who have problems with language, with access to information, and who are unfamiliar with the Irish education system. O'Byrne calls for one central agency to process student funding, which should be adequate to fully support students, and flexible enough to accommodate different student needs as they progress through the system.


In 2005, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education published a document on funding for third-level education. The National Access Office suggested that there is a need to reform the financial support systems for students, and that students should no longer have to navigate a maze of different funds, but should be provided with adequate information. The financial support system should be adequate to their needs and should cover all kinds of study, including part-time courses. With regard to the needs of migrants in this area, however, the only relevant reference in the report acknowledges that “we still have a significant way to go in opening doors for socio-economically disadvantaged students, including the Traveller community and the emerging new groups of refugees, migrant workers and their children.”

More recent research by the National Access Office (2008) noted that the general funding environment presents challenges because the overall level of investments in higher education is modest by international standards. This underfunding impacts on the effectiveness of financial support for students endeavouring to overcome financial barriers to education. The National Access Office also observed that, in relation to institutional funding promoting access, many institutions find that the demand for access-related services is growing faster than their resources allow.

Dunbar *et al.* (2008) identified that one of the primary barriers to education for migrants is the effect their residency status has on their educational entitlement. Asylum seekers are prohibited from applying for full-time third-level courses unless they can pay their own fees. Asylum seekers, however, would have to pay international fees which are generally three times greater than those for EU citizens. Migrants who have been granted leave to remain on the basis of parenting an Irish-born child are not subject to the same rights as a person who was granted refugee status. A migrant who is the parent of an Irish-born child has no right to subsidised education.

Recent research conducted by Coakley and Mac Éinrí (2007) with African immigrants in Ireland reported that the cost of education at third level to be prohibitive. The African interviewees reported that they “encountered difficulties at every level” (2007: 55). Some of the barriers to education which they encountered included accessing either introductory education or English language training because adequate information about entry levels and requirements were not accessible to them. The immigrants who succeeded in negotiating their way around the applications processes also encountered difficulties when seeking to demonstrate the worth of qualifications and learning they already held.

Under Irish law, education establishments may not discriminate against students on grounds of race. The Equal Status Act 2000 prohibits discrimination in admission to all education establishments on nine grounds, including race. The Universities Act 1997 obliges universities to promote equality of opportunity among students and employees, and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 mandates Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) to monitor institutes of technology and further education establishments for quality assurance purposes in access, transfer, and progression. This monitoring includes a section on equality.



In 2003, Ireland enacted the European Convention on Human Rights Act, giving effect to this Convention in Irish law. The Convention confers rights on all persons within the jurisdiction and not just citizens. The 2003 Act obliges every organ of the state to carry out its functions in a manner compatible with the state's obligations under this Convention, which means that whenever a public authority is exercising power, the question arises on whether there are Convention rights at issue and, if so, whether deviation from them is permissible, necessary, and proportionate. Protocol 1 Article 2 of this Convention states that "no person shall be denied the right to education".

Ireland is also a signatory to the Council of Europe / UNESCO Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region (The Lisbon Convention, 1997). This Convention states that holders of qualifications issued in one country shall have adequate access to an assessment of these qualifications in another country, and that recognition of qualifications in this way shall lead to access to further or higher education. No discrimination in this respect may be made on the grounds of race, colour, or national or ethnic origin. It further states that all countries shall develop procedures to assess whether refugees and displaced persons fulfil the relevant requirements for access to higher education, even in cases in which qualifications cannot be proven through documentary evidence.

Research conducted by Coghlan *et al.* (2005) suggested that some societal 'dangers' may result if migrants are not granted access to higher education. The research warned of dangers to social cohesion in Ireland if a large body of migrants felt discriminated against and if they were unable to integrate. Coghlan *et al.* concluded that this warning on the possible creation of a migrant educational underclass should be taken very seriously, in view of the importance placed by all of the studies on the need for migrant residents in Ireland to freely access education so that they might integrate fully into Irish society.



2.4 Recognition of International Qualifications

Recognition of international qualifications held by migrant workers is very important to preserve the efficiency and flexibility of the Irish labour market. In order for migrants to be able to access the labour market effectively, Irish employers must be able to recognise and compare the migrants' qualifications, whether academic, professional or vocational. Recently, the Minister for Integration, Conor Lenihan, TD, said: "It is critical for migrants coming to Ireland that their existing education and qualifications are recognised so that they can fully participate and integrate into Irish society" (www.nqai.ie/news_2008).

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) is an agency of the Department of Education and Science and of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and was set up in February 2001. The recognition of qualifications gained outside Ireland is one of the responsibilities of this authority. It now provides a one-stop-shop for the recognition of international qualifications (www.qualificationsrecognition.ie). The NQAI define recognition as a "formal acknowledgement by a competent authority of the value of a foreign education qualification with a view to access to education and/or employment activities". The Authority has also related the Irish National Framework of Qualifications to systems of qualifications in other countries and this helps in making comparisons. This has been done in consultation with HETAC, FETAC, and other stakeholders, and in the context of developing EU norms and standards. In 2006, it was estimated that the NQAI processed nearly 2,000 applications for advice on comparing international qualifications with Irish ones.

Attempts are currently being made to align and reference the National Framework with other national frameworks, such as that in Britain. Generally, however, for people with qualifications gained outside the EU or the European Economic Area (EEA), recognition has to be on an individual basis only. As outlined in the National Policy Approach to the Recognition of International Awards in Ireland (2005), the NQAI will first provide an individual applicant with information on any existing agreements and arrangements. If the candidate is seeking professional recognition within a regulated profession, they will be directed to the relevant designated authority of the profession in question. For those seeking recognition of academic qualifications or professional recognition for a non-regulated profession, the NQAI will issue an application form, which the applicant can submit to the NQAI with a required set of documents describing their qualifications. The NQAI then consults with a relevant awarding body that assesses the international award. Awarding bodies will use databases and publications of awards and their comparability, such as the United Kingdom National Recognition Information Centre (UK NARIC) system, to reach decisions, based on an examination of programmes undertaken leading to awards already granted to the applicants. As the NQAI (2005) document makes clear:

In general, it is the awarding bodies which have the power to recognise awards as being comparable to named awards that they set the standards for. Where more than one awarding body in Ireland makes the same or a similar award, as may well be the case with the operation of common award-types in the National Framework of Qualifications, it is a matter for each awarding body to recognise an award as being comparable to a named award that it sets the standard for and makes. Potentially, this could give rise to a situation where there is differing recognition within Ireland of a particular international award.

In Ireland, there are two types of classifications in relation to professions; both require a qualification relevant for the area of expertise. First, there is a regulated profession; the title of the profession is controlled through registration with a professional body. Second, there is a non-regulated profession, which means that accreditation by a professional body is not compulsory. For the non-regulated professions, while an endorsement of a professional body is not necessary, once it is verified that a person holds the relevant qualification, however, additional authorisation by one of the industry regulatory bodies is required.

There are currently fifteen separate EU directives governing the area of free movement of qualified EU national professionals between member states. These directives apply only to EU nationals whose qualifications were gained wholly or partly in the EU or to third-country qualifications already recognised and practised in an EU member state for at least three years. There are no provisions within the current EU directives for third-country nationals who have not acquired qualifications and experience within the EU. Research conducted by Coghlan *et al.* (2005) found that there is a widespread feeling among highly skilled immigrants who need to register with a professional body in Ireland that these bodies lack flexibility and do not have a proactive approach to assisting non-EU nationals to register as easily and as quickly as possible. Some migrants who took part in research conducted by Coghlan *et al.* believed that there was “a need for professional bodies to embrace diversity and be more inclusive in their attitudes” (2005: 24). A report by Ní Mhurchú (2007) on the role of professional bodies suggested that there are two systems in Ireland, one for the ‘native’ people and one for those who are considered ‘foreigners’. Her report called for a national policy to be developed in consultation with employers, professional bodies, migrants, migrant organisations and the Irish government in relation to recognising foreign qualifications. Ní Mhurchú also believes that the existing consultation mechanisms between government departments, employers and professional bodies are inadequate for the purposes of coordinating their various approaches when dealing with the issue of overseas qualifications and work experience. Ní Mhurchú concluded that the system which is currently in place lacks transparency and consistency, both with regard to recognition of qualifications and with regard to procedures for registration and accreditation (2007: 34).

Recent research by Dunbar *et al.* (2008) reported that one of the principal barriers of access to education for skilled migrants is the dearth of recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland. Their research also suggests that “the record of the professional bodies in relation to foreign qualifications is below acceptable standards and some of the professional bodies act as barriers towards recognition” (2008: 33). The Irish Business Employers Confederation also suggested in relation to the recognition of foreign qualifications, that the current structures and set of rules are very complicated, with different agencies involved, jargon, and with processes that are not customer focused (IBEC, in Ní Mhurchú, 2007).

While there have been attempts to provide greater clarity for the recognition of foreign qualifications through the NQAI, Ní Mhurchú (2007) found that employers and migrant bodies have not been sufficiently informed about this initiative. Ní Mhurchú commented that very few employers were aware of the existence of NQAI, even though it was set up as early as 2001 as a national contact point for academic recognition and vocational education and training queries. Ní Mhurchú concluded that professional bodies have been ignored in discussions about national and international strategies for academic and experiential recognition, with the result that “there has been little opportunity for cross-collaboration between professional bodies to facilitate the sharing of decent and fair practices (2007: 25).


Coghlan *et al.* (2005) highlight the lack of relevant documentation as an additional difficulty for migrants in having their qualifications recognised. Refugees, in particular, can sometimes encounter a problem of securing documentation to prove their qualifications. Where degree certificates can be produced, institutions often ask for full transcriptions which are certified by the home university to be supplied, detailing all the courses taken in each year of study. Dunbar *et al.* confirm the Coghlan *et al.* observations, and add that difficulties in supplying this additional documentation “is another key issue which so far has not been sufficiently emphasised” (2008: 36). An additional difficulty also reported by Coghlan *et al.* relates to the translation of degrees and diploma certificates, and obtaining an understanding of the level of these courses. This lack of understanding often means that migrants have to begin their third-level education again at the first year of their new course.

The Coghlan *et al.* (2005) study emphasises the need for all third-level colleges to come up with a clear, transparent, fair, and consistent method of assessing prior learning and qualifications. A number of potential students interviewed for their research illustrate what they saw as the ‘patronising’ and ‘uninformed’ attitude of universities and colleges to their prior learning and qualifications. The research also illustrated inconsistency of approaches to recognition of qualifications by third-level colleges, and the degree to which decisions in this area seemed to be left to the discretion of individual third-level institutional departments. The research concluded that potential students were receiving different responses on the recognition of their qualifications from the different third-level colleges.

2.5 Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the generic term for systems such as Accreditation of Prior Learning or Accreditation of Advanced Academic Standing, which are used within higher education to describe the awarding of credits to students on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred prior to admission. The RPL particularly addresses the needs of disadvantaged groups, part-time students, and mature students and can have a positive impact on the retention of students. In addition, RPL grants opportunities to providers of education and awarding bodies to upskill individuals and to meet workforce needs at local and national levels. The philosophy underlying the RPL is to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, or recognising credit for what they already know from the course curriculum. The onus is on the student to demonstrate the prior learning, by preparing and submitting adequate evidence under the guidance and advice of the academic institution. This practice, however, can prove problematic for migrants as training practices in some countries do not traditionally lead to formal certification, despite the high levels of competencies they have achieved in trades-related work.

Migrants interviewed by Coghlan *et al.* (2005) believed very strongly that, to remove the barriers to RPL and barriers to access to higher education, it was not a question of changing a few rules or tweaking the existing system but rather a question of changing the mindset behind the system.



Three purposes of the RPL are set out in the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's Policies, *Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression* (2003):

- Entry to a programme leading to an award;
- Credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements;
- Eligibility for a full award.

The RPL in Ireland is closely associated with the promotion of lifelong learning and the full implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. For some decades, the RPL has been used in Ireland to facilitate broader access to education and training programmes, particularly by mature learners in further and in higher education and training, to meet workplace requirements and the personal needs/interests of learners. The number of learners who avail of the RPL has been and continues to be relatively small in comparison to the number who access education and training qualifications by formal routes. There is, however, a range of practice and experience in the RPL in many fields of education and training.

In 2005, the NQAI published *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning* in Further and Higher Education and Training. These guidelines reaffirm that, as well as formal learning, the RPL encompasses non-formal learning (e.g. workplace training, voluntary sector or community-based learning, etc.) that takes place alongside mainstream education and training, and informal learning that takes place through life and work experience. The NQAI calls on the independent awarding bodies such as the universities to consider the guidelines in the context of the development of their own procedures. FETAC and HETAC have indicated that they will follow the guidelines.

A recent OECD report (2007) on RPL suggests that, in Ireland, there is a need to examine more closely the role that RPL can play in achieving broad policy goals concerning education and training (e.g., widening access and participation in education) in relation to the workplace (e.g., upskilling in the workplace). The report found that there is a need for a more coherent, clear, and focused national approach to developing and implementing the RPL.



2.6 Migrant Employment in Ireland

Labour migration studies outline a number of motivations for one's choice of a destination country, including the economic status of the country of origin or of the destination country, and contextual effects such as the existence of a home-country subculture, family relations, or religious similarities (Van Tubergen *et al.*, 2004). Research by Niehoff and Maciocha (2008) concluded that "at present, little empirical evidence exists on the factors that influence cultural adaptation and job motivation of the immigrants into Ireland" (2008: 25). Ireland's economic prosperity and high labour demand, however, were two of the main reasons for the significant increase in the number of non-Irish nationals now living in Ireland. Cudden (2008) noted that, in Ireland, labour migration is considered to have had very positive economic effects and, according to one estimate, migrant workers have added two percentage points to Ireland's gross national product. Ireland has historically enjoyed a strong international reputation for the calibre of its education system and the generally high standards of education within the workforce. The rapid pace of technological development and the increasing sophistication of business processes and systems now demand higher levels of academic achievement and greater links between the education sector and enterprise than ever before.

In 2006, Barrett *et al.* presented research findings that profiled the labour market characteristics of immigrants in Ireland. At that period, the unemployment rate for immigrants was 6.8% while the rate for natives was only 4.2%, indicating a relatively substantial divergence. This confirmed the finding of Frijters *et al.* (2003) who observed that higher unemployment among immigrants is not unusual. As migrants continue to join the Irish workforce, the National Action Plan Against Racism (NPAR 2006) identified an increase in agreement from 51% in 2003 to 55% to 2006 with the attitude that "non-Irish nationals are taking jobs from the Irish". The findings from a report by Mayo Intercultural Action (2006) also revealed that there was growing resentment against foreign workers, particularly when Irish students found it more difficult to find summer jobs. It was also reported that there was an upsurge of anti-foreigner sentiment from some people who were in long-term unemployment. Foreign workers were seen to be taking seasonal work from them and were seen to be favoured because of their more positive work ethic. Similarly, more recent research (Eurobarometer, 2007) found that 48% of respondents believed that the presence of people from outside Ireland increases unemployment in Ireland.

Research conducted by the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (2006) noted that a large number of migrant workers reported incidents of excessive overtime, lack of holiday pay, and unfair dismissals. The research also found that workplace exploitation is more likely to happen in certain situations, particularly in the more unregulated and often isolated sectors, such as, the private home or in the agri-food sector (for example mushroom farms). The Equality Authority Annual Report (2006) highlighted that the race issue remained the largest category of cases raised under the Employment Equality Acts, reflecting some particularly difficult experiences of migrant workers. Employees are legally protected against discrimination on the basis of race, skin colour, religion, nationality, and ethnic or national origin (Employment Equality Acts 1998-2004). Discrimination arises if a person is treated less favourably than another person would be treated, has been treated or is treated in a comparable situation. From the perspective of immigrants, research conducted by the Equality Authority (2008) found that the higher



likelihood of discrimination among non-Irish nationals persists in the work and service domains (housing, shops, pubs, restaurants, financial services, and transport), but is particularly pronounced in relation to job search, where immigrants are two and a half times more likely to report discrimination than Irish job seekers.

Mac Éinrí (2008) reports that surveys conducted with migrants in Ireland suggest relatively high levels of prejudice and discrimination in the workplace as well as in social settings. He suggests that there is evidence of various kinds of glass ceilings in the workplace, compounded by a type of differential racism which seems to privilege some migrants over others. Research findings by Conroy and Brennan (2003) highlighted that many migrant workers do not receive a written statement on the terms and conditions of their employment and these terms and conditions may change without their agreement. The highest rates of unemployment among migrants are to be found among those who have been granted refugee status or given leave to remain. More than half of west African people with full residency status or full leave to remain are unemployed (Mac Éinrí, 2008: 9-10).

Forfás (2005) suggests that the primary source of continuing skilled labour supply is, and will continue to be, achieved through skills development of the resident population. To supplement the skills resources of residents, it will, however, also be in the national interest to seek out and compete for highly skilled individuals from other countries and attract them to work in Ireland, whatever their nationality or original place of residence. For this reason, efficient and effective migration procedures are essential to ensure that Irish companies can compete successfully for the finite pool of highly skilled and mobile labour available internationally. More recent research by Forfás (2007) suggests that, because migrant labour has a high educational profile, a situation may develop where highly skilled migrants might be able to access skilled occupations while the low skilled resident population find it difficult to access employment. The Forfás report recommends that the ideal solution would be to continue to attract high skilled migrants and to upskill the resident population, rather than attracting low skilled migrants that would further undermine our skills profile and competitive position.


Up to recently, Ruhs (2005) noted that high vacancy rates were prevalent across most occupational and employment categories, in both skilled and low-skilled jobs. Employers, therefore, began to look abroad to recruit workers to alleviate labour shortages. Non-Irish nationals took up almost half of the newly created jobs between 2002 and 2006 while the unemployment rate remained low (CSO, 2007a). By the end of 2007, 16% of the workforce consisted of migrant workers, and they were working in almost every industry. More than a third of those employed in the hotel/catering sector were migrant workers, with the construction and manufacturing sectors employing the highest number of migrants (CSO, 2008). Research conducted by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (2003) found that in some Irish hospitals one third of the workforce was made up of non-European Economic Area workers, with almost one half of the non-consultant doctors coming from outside the European Economic Area. At the end of 2006, over half of the migrant workers in Ireland were nationals of the new EU accession states, with Poland accounting for two-thirds of these employees followed by Lithuania, Latvia, and Slovakia. According to the work permit statistics, the highest number of non-European Economic Area migrants came from countries such as the Ukraine, Romania, the Philippines, China, India, Malaysia, Brazil, South Africa, and the United States of America. Fifteen per cent of non-Irish national workers came from Britain, whereas the older EU countries outside of Britain and Ireland

provide around 9% of the migrant workforce (CSO, 2007b). The recent global recession, however, has already impacted on Ireland with many signals of a serious downturn, particularly in the construction sector which employs a large number of migrant workers. According to the *FÁS Quarterly Labour Market Commentary: Second Quarter 2008*, construction employment fell by 3.5% from its peak of 284,600 in quarter one of 2007 to 274,400 in quarter one 2008. The rise in the Live Register has been composed of increases in both Irish and migrant workers. Of particular note has been the increase in the number of EU12 nationals signing on since the beginning of 2007. Prior to 2007, the increase in the number of EU12 migrants signing onto the Live Register was fairly modest, reaching just 3,000 by the end of 2006. Since then, the number of EU12 nationals signing on has increased to over 15,000 (figure published on 20 June 2008). This provides evidence that not all those who are being made redundant in the construction sector are returning to their home countries.

Migrant workers are entitled to the same working rights as Irish nationals. These rights and entitlements are set out in legislative instruments and special agreements that have a statutory basis. Conditions of employment relating to working time, rest periods, leave entitlements, and minimum pay rates are regulated by these instruments and agreements. Employees are protected against discrimination on the basis of race, skin colour, religion, nationality and ethnic or national origin (see Employment Equality Acts, 1998-2004). Despite this legislation, Barrett and McCarthy (2006) reported that, on average, a migrant employee earns 18% less than an Irish employee. Similarly, research conducted by FÁS suggests that EU accession-state nationals earn substantially less than Irish employees. Acknowledging these variations in earnings, the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland commented that there seems to be a danger of creating a segregated labour market for migrant workers (MRCI, 2007). Migrants are a diverse group and they can face a range of issues in employment and non-employment areas that make them vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. Work-based exploitation, lack of access to social protection, and the existence of racism and discrimination all constitute significant factors that push vulnerable migrants into poverty and contribute to their exclusion within society.

The 2006 census and other studies highlighted that many migrant workers are employed beneath their skill level. Barrett *et al.* (2006) examined the impact that this under-utilisation of migrant labour has on overall levels of national income. Their findings suggested that, if all migrants resident in Ireland were employed at a level fitting their educational level, it would add between 3.5 and 3.7% to GNP. Similarly, research conducted by the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (2005) concluded that migrants are prepared to take up positions beneath their educational level in the short-term to secure their entry to the Irish labour market. Restricting migrants' access to jobs, however, that is not commensurate with their educational attainment in the long term is "a wasted opportunity for the Irish labour market which cannot utilise the skills needed and already existing in the economy". A further related difficulty has been highlighted by Ní Mhurchú (2007) who observed that migrants who have been refused access to the occupations they have trained for in their home countries, and who lower their expectations, still have difficulty finding employment as employers avoid hiring them because they are seen to be 'overqualified'.

While the importance of migrant workers is increasingly recognised, it has been established that migrants continue to be disadvantaged when accessing employment (Ecotec, 2005). Denayer (2008) noted that factors such as legal status, qualifications, work experience, lack of language skills, poor knowledge about working



practices in the host country, prejudice and discrimination by employers, distinct cultural practices, lack of political power and of social capital, as well as a whole set of practical problems – spatial barriers and child care – function as significant barriers to employment, and consequently to the integration of newcomers and settled immigrants. Denayer further suggests that spatial barriers to employment refer to limited access to transport and greater geographical distance from employment opportunities. This can lead to migrants living in segregated neighbourhoods in which they become more isolated from employment opportunities.

Niehoff and Maciocha (2008) believe that, for migrant workers, their most immediate concern relates to their adaptation to the host culture. The challenges of cultural adaptation create considerable stress for migrants. Studies have also found significant health consequences from adaptation stress, including depression and mental illness (Hener *et al.*, 1997; Hafner *et al.*, 1977). Adaptation is also related to the migrants' perceived trustworthiness among the local population. Niehoff and Maciocha suggest that, as immigration continues, human and progressive management practices would call for human resource professionals to help facilitate migrants' adaptation to the host culture to reduce potential stress and accompanying health and attitudinal problems. It is believed that such development begins with a clear understanding of the motivations and expectations of the migrant populations. Similarly, in relation to diversity in the workforce, the report by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2007) suggested that diversity is not simply a matter of differing nationalities and ethnic groups working together. Other factors, such as the changing age profile, educational attainment levels, and work patterns, as well as greater female participation, will impinge on the cultural ethos of organisations in the future. Cultural diversity will create a demand for 'new' skills in the Irish context, at management level, throughout the workforce, and within the spheres of education and training. The Expert Group suggests that training to respond to diversity in the workplace, and to conflict resolution potentially arising from that diversity, are important skills-agenda issues for the future.

Since 2000, asylum seekers have not been allowed work or cook for themselves, and have been required to live in 'direct provision' accommodation centres, with bed and food supplied along with an allowance of €19.10 per week for adults or €9.60 for children. Ireland is the only one of the 27 EU member states which has refused to incorporate the Reception Directive which allows for asylum seekers to work under some circumstances. This system directly creates poverty and social exclusion as well as isolation and widespread depression and mental illness. Denial of the right to work and to earn a living, coupled with their weekly allowance which is considerably lower than other welfare payments to Irish citizens, increases the social and economic gap between asylum seekers and virtually all others. The explicit exclusion of asylum seekers from integration policies is likely to build up social problems for the future. Many people who receive refugee status or who receive leave to remain in Ireland have been de-skilled and have become socially isolated, wasting a potential resource of new skills, ideas, and energies that could be available to the Irish economy and society (EAPN: 2007).

Denayer (2008) believes that the existence of barriers to economic participation is "perhaps the most serious problem that immigrants face in Irish society" (2008: 20). Denayer suggests that having a job means economic and social integration, the development of self-esteem and social contacts, opportunities for personal advancement and development, and the ability to be independent or to raise a family. In the case of migrants without work, this often means being without welfare benefits which means that people inevitably suffer

hardships such as poverty, exclusion, domestic violence, isolation and mental and other health problems. Brunkhorst (2005) suggests that the removal of barriers to employment is essential, but in itself it is not enough to accomplish integration. Instead, according to the Scottish Advisory Board for Naturalisation and Integration (2007), it is necessary to develop a consistent integral approach, driven by immigrants, immigrant groups, as well as local and national policy makers.

There were a number of significant changes in legislation in 2007, beginning with the new Employment Permit Act which came into force in January 2007. Among the key changes were: the introduction of a so-called “Green Card” for highly-skilled employees, mostly in occupations with an annual salary above €60,000; and in a restricted number of occupations, in sectors with skills shortages, in a salary range between €30,000 and €60,000. Applicants do not need to pass a labour market test and are entitled to bring their family with them. The card is issued for two years, after which holders can apply for permanent residence. Almost 3,000 Green Cards were issued in 2007 (OECD, 2008). In April 2007, the Third Level Graduate Scheme was implemented providing that non-EEA students who graduated on or after 1 January 2007 with a degree from an Irish third-level educational institution may be permitted to remain in Ireland for six months. The scheme allows them to find employment and apply for a work permit or Green Card permit. During this six-month period they may work full time.

Despite the changes in legislation, however, research by Niessen *et al.* (2007) has revealed that most Irish believe ethnic discrimination is fairly widespread and that it worsened between 2001 and 2006. Research by Mac Éinrí (2007) noted that some empathy with migrants may well exist, but, there is a lack of policy, legislation, infrastructure, support organisations and experience of those European countries long used to dealing with immigration. Mac Éinrí concluded that the challenge now is both to respond in the short term to the needs and rights of these new members of Irish society, and to address in the medium to long term the task of building a new society in which place of origin and ethno-national identity are no longer the sole defining vectors of identity.



3.0 Background to Focus Groups

This chapter summarises the results of the focus group interviews which were conducted with migrants by the working group members as part of the Education in Employment project. Focus group interviews were conducted by working group members in their respective geographical regions. One hundred and sixty migrants (82 males and 78 females) from twenty-one different countries participated in this research. Participants ranged from less than 20 years to over 40 years, with the majority of participants in the 20-35 age category. The length of time participants lived in Ireland ranged from less than half a year to over nine years, with the majority of participants living in Ireland between one and two years.

Working group members conducted three focus group interviews in their respective local communities and selected participants based on the largest community of migrants in that region. A fourth focus group was conducted within their own respective third-level college. Each focus group consisted of six to ten participants. Each working group member acted as facilitator for the focus group interviews they conducted, and had administrative support from their respective college to tape-record and take notes during their interviewing of the focus groups. Some working group members also invited a translator to attend, particularly, if they knew in advance that the level of English of the participants was poor. In order to more fully explore cultural differences and similarities in each focus group – and for translation purposes – the majority of groups consisted of people from the same country of origin. In some cases, however, groups had participants from different nationalities. Each focus group had participants which could be divided into three categories: (i) those who previously had third-level qualifications from their home countries; (ii) those who never attended a third-level college; and (iii) those who are currently attending third-level colleges in Ireland. All focus groups had participants who were employed and unemployed and had various residency statuses. Focus group participants were selected through immigrant support centres, word of mouth, migrant networking groups, voluntary organisations and personal contacts.

As many participants in the focus groups which were conducted in the general community (i.e., outside the colleges) had not engaged with third-level education in Ireland, it was decided that a further focus group study would be held within each of the partner colleges to gather the perceptions of those who have engaged with third-level education. For inclusion in a college focus group, each participant needed to be a migrant (i) currently *in* employment and (ii) currently enrolled in a third-level education course. The college-based focus groups comprised students of diverse nationalities and enrolled in a variety of disciplines in the colleges. These participants were selected through word of mouth, referrals from lecturers, and personal contacts.

As focus groups were restricted to the geographical vicinity of partner institutions, the findings do not represent all regions of Ireland. The findings are intended to provide a snap shot of a number of barriers to accessing third-level education by migrants living and working in various regions of Ireland. Focus groups were conducted in cities, large and small towns and rural areas generally within a forty-mile radius of a partner college. Interestingly, the findings illustrate that overall there are no regional differences and the difficulties which were experienced were similar in cities, towns, and rural areas.

Table 3.1 Country of Origin of Participants

Country of Origin	Number of Participants
Poland	37
Nigeria	36
Lithuania	20
Iran	11
Brazil	9
China	8
Russia	7
Latvia	7
Ghana	5
Turkey	3
Syria	3
Zimbabwe	2
Venezuela	2
Lebanon	2
Congo	2
Moldova	1
Algeria	1
Ukraine	1
Czech Republic	1
Romania	1
Paraguay	1

Country of Origin of Participants

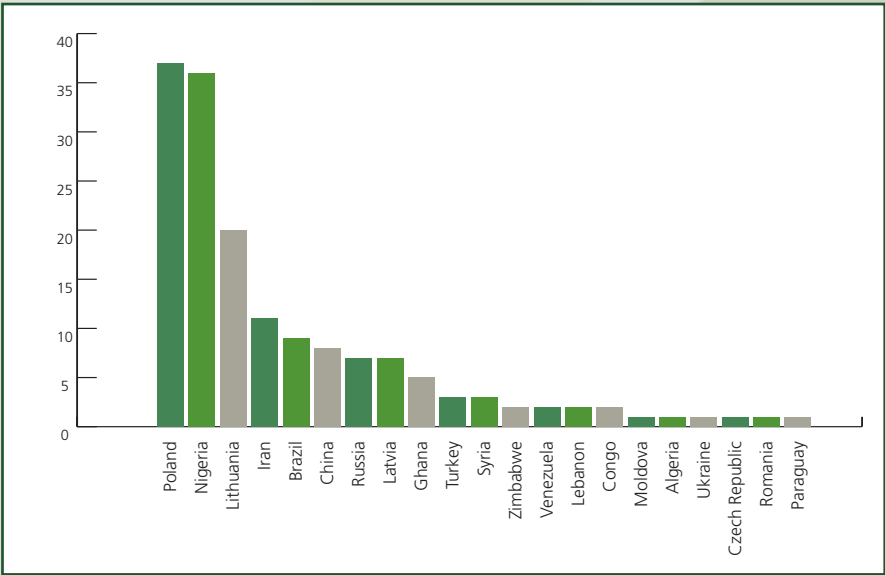


Table 3.2 Gender of Participants

Gender	Number of Participants
Male	82
Female	78

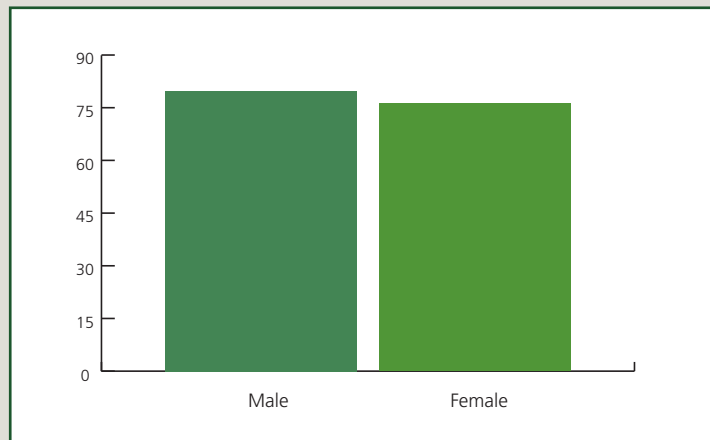


Table 3.3 Ages of Participants

Age	Number of Participants
<20 years	3
20-24 years	45
25-30 years	53
31-35 years	36
36-40 years	16
>40 years	7

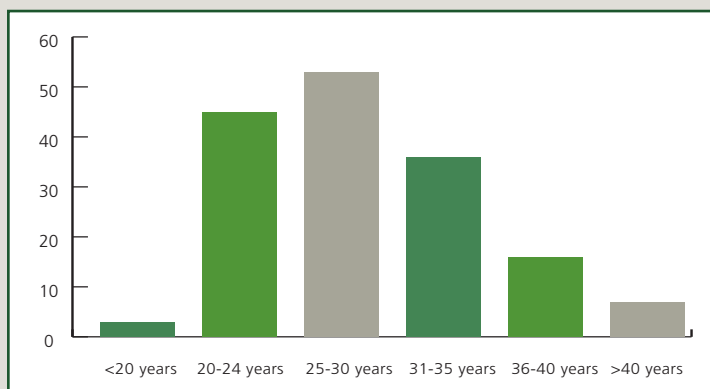
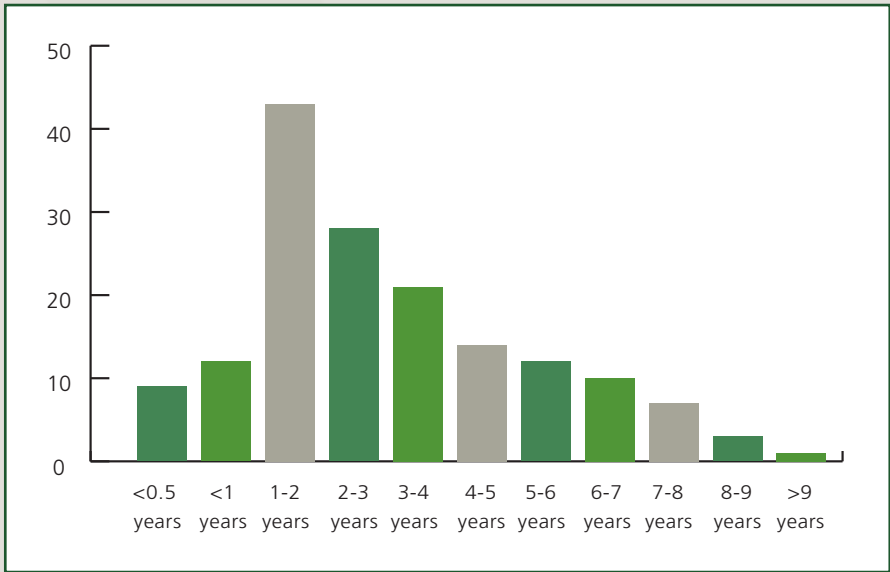


Table 3.4 Length of Time in Ireland

Length of Time in Ireland	Number of Participants
<0.5 years	9
<1 year	12
1-2 years	43
2-3 years	28
3-4 years	21
4-5 years	14
5-6 years	12
6-7 years	10
7-8 years	7
8-9 years	3
>9 years	1





3.1 Focus Group Interview Guide

A focus group interview guide was developed by members of the working group to ensure that information addressing selected topics was obtained from a broad number of people. The questions which formed the focus group guide are listed in Appendix B. The focus group interview guide included selected topics or subject areas about which the interviewer was free to explore, probe deeper, and ask related questions that would optimally elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. The most fundamental use of the focus group interview guide was to serve as a basic checklist during the interviews, to make sure that all relevant topics were covered by the different groups and interviewees. A further advantage of the focus group interview guide was that it helped to ensure that the interviewer carefully decided how best to use the limited time available in the interview situation. The guide helped to make interviewing different people more systematic and comprehensive by confining the issues to be discussed in the limited time available for each group of interviewees.

3.2 The Appropriateness of Focus Group Methodology for the Current Project

A focus group study is a qualitative research method. As such, it uses guided group-discussions to generate rich understanding of participants' experiences and views, drawing on three of the fundamental strengths that are shared by all qualitative methods:

- (i) exploration and discovery;
- (ii) context and depth; and
- (iii) interpretation (Morgan, 1998).

The focus group is essentially a form of group interview but is also crucially distinctive for the explicit use of group interaction as research data. This interaction also facilitates the active involvement of the interviewer in the research. Though a distinct research methodology, it incorporates elements of a range of qualitative techniques, including the interview, group discussion, participant observation, and active researcher involvement (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Morgan (1998) argues that the use of focus groups is a "particularly desirable research method" in situations where the researcher is investigating complex behaviour and motivations because "focus group conversations can be a gold mine of information about the ways that people behave and the motivations that underlie these behaviours" (1998: 58).

Other advantages of focus groups include:

- Increasing the sample size compared to one-to-one interviews, thereby helping to offset the labour intensive nature of qualitative research;
- Facilitating the collection of information in a flexible, low cost, and interconnected way that produces speedy results and that have high face validity;
- The conversation, questions, and debate between participants helps to reveal, in their own words, their perceptions, underlying assumptions, attitudes and priorities and this helps to clarify why people hold particular views (Seale, 2004).

The focus group methodology was chosen as it was deemed to provide the greatest potential to investigate the research questions in a holistic, in-depth, and meaningful way. Another important consideration was that this methodology allowed for a substantial increase in the research sample size and because it provided immediate results. While the research exercise was highly labour intensive and time consuming, the focus group methodology allowed for a sufficient but manageable number and range of participants, and for the timely gathering, recording, and analysis of data.


The focus group interview findings are presented under eleven main thematic areas that emerged from the discussions:

- Impressions of Ireland
- Racism and Discrimination
- Integration
- Cultural Differences and Cultural Barriers
- English Language Difficulties
- Cost of Education
- Lack of Information Regarding Access to Education
- Recognition of Qualifications and Prior Learning
- Residency Status
- Right to Education
- Future Plans and Aspirations.

3.3 Impressions of Ireland

Participants were asked to give a very brief overview of their general impressions of Ireland and Irish society, in order to ascertain their perceptions since their arrival in Ireland. This was a broad question but it was included to establish an overall sense of their general experiences. Research participants, overall, had a very positive impression of Ireland and described the Irish generally as friendly and polite. One participant knew a little about Irish culture before arrival:

For me Ireland always painted a romantic picture, from reading stories about the Celts (Slovakian participant, Galway/Mayo).



Most participants believed Ireland is a good place to live:

Life is easier. The social life, including the lives of our children, is better here
(Polish participant, Galway/Mayo).

When I came here, I started a job; I did not speak English, but, the Irish people helped me with everything. The Irish provide a kind of community for Polish people and other nationalities to work together (Polish participant, Sligo).

When I came to Cork first I found the Irish people very friendly. This was a new experience for me, especially at the beginning. Their friendliness exceeded all of my expectations (Polish participant, Cork).

We are made feel very, very welcome here. I have met some very good Irish men and women and I like all the people in Carrick-on-Shannon where I live (Iranian participant, Leitrim).

I remember when I arrived in Sligo first I thought the people are very friendly. People on the street say 'Hi' to you. This would never happen in Poland. When somebody says 'Hi' to you, you just feel better (Polish participant, Sligo).

There is a calm and quiet atmosphere here in Ireland and it is very laid back (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

The Kurdish Iranian participants in Sligo stressed that they were very grateful to the Irish people for making them feel so welcome, and also to the Irish government for accepting them as refugees, for taking them from a 'very bad situation', where they lived 'under a tent'. They were also keen to make clear that they hoped to get a good job here as they were unhappy accepting social welfare – or 'social money' as they termed it. One participant stated that he felt 'shame' as he had not been able to work and find employment. Other Latvian participants in West Cork described how they had been overwhelmed by the support they had received from the local Irish people in the aftermath of a tragic accident occurring within their own community. Some of the Polish participants in Cork stated that the Irish people were 'most helpful'. All of the Middle Eastern participants believed that Ireland is a welcoming place and again compared this more favourably to their experiences elsewhere in Europe, though some Dublin-based participants suggested that Irish people were becoming gradually less tolerant, particularly towards traditional Muslims.

All of the focus group participants thought the pay in Ireland is very good and their experience was that even lower paid jobs here provide enough for the achievement of a good standard and quality of life, though they did recognise that Ireland was an expensive place to live. The following quotation summarises such sentiments:

Even lower paid jobs provide enough money for a good standard of living in Ireland compared to similar jobs in Venezuela, where a lower paid job will allow you to pay only your rent and to eat (Venezuelan participant, Dublin).

One participant, however, noted the difficulty in getting a pay rise. A Chinese participant in Dublin believed that Irish people tend to get preferential treatment in workplace promotions. Ghanaian participants interviewed in Letterkenny were generally happy in Ireland, though some stated that they found it very difficult to find work here. Some of the Nigerian participants based in Letterkenny, however, commented that the Irish did not mix socially with them, even with their children in schools. Middle Eastern participants believed that Irish society is more tolerant of Islam than other European countries, such as Britain.


Interestingly, in Cork, a number of the Polish participants, who lived in Ireland for a number of years, believed that attitudes towards migrants have changed dramatically in the last few years. One participant stated that when he first arrived Irish people were extremely friendly – people would say ‘Hello’ to him on the street and local Irish people would visit his house, socialise with him and, generally, ‘we were made to feel very welcome’. He believes, however, that this changed when 10 further countries were admitted to the EU. A second participant also believed that Irish people, particularly the younger generation, tended to be very jealous of migrants. Another Lithuanian participant, based in Cork, agreed that Irish people were less welcoming now, but she believed that this was understandable given the growing competition for work. One of their key concerns about Ireland was the poor standards in the health services. All of the participants agreed that, if they needed an operation, they would prefer to fly home if possible rather than depend on the Irish health service. In the education context, some of the Athlone-based Nigerian students stated that they found their lecturers to be very approachable and compared this favourably against their experiences in their native country. Likewise, students in Cork believed that they received excellent support in college, from both lecturers and tutors, and this service was something which they believed is very important and influential in their educational success.

Many of the focus group participants agreed that Ireland was experiencing rapid change with regard to immigration and that, in another ten years, the experiences of migrants should be qualitatively different, as Irish people would become more accustomed to – and younger people used to growing up in – a multicultural society. Others commented that starting a new life can be difficult, but as one expressed it:

If you’re a migrant, at the back of your mind, you know these challenges will be there (African participant, Sligo).

The main impression of Ireland for all participants was that it was:

A land of opportunities (African participant, Sligo).



Overall, focus group interviewees in the different parts of Ireland expressed positive experiences upon their arrival in Ireland. Many of the interviewees, however, articulated what appeared to be an increasing apprehension about migrants among Irish people, coinciding with the slowdown in Ireland's economic growth in recent years. Some Irish people now view migrants to be 'taking Irish jobs', with the result that the previous more benign attitude towards migrants is becoming less positive. Some interviewees also suggested that, while Irish people tend to be friendly towards them when they first meet them, the friendliness seems to remain 'rather superficial' as many of the Irish tend not to socialise or mix with them over the longer term.

3.4 Racism and Discrimination

The study participants were asked if they experienced any racism or discrimination since their arrival in Ireland. Issues relating to racism and discrimination emerged most prominently in focus group discussions with African migrants. A number of interviewees articulated incidents of racism and bullying in the workplace and in children's schools. Nigerian focus group participants based in Athlone believed that racism among children was a result of ignorance and the only way it might be eradicated would be through social integration. Most of these participants believed that social integration could be achieved in Ireland only by actively adopting positive discrimination employment policies for black minorities across all professions, including the teaching professions. These Nigerian interviewees believed that, otherwise, it would take 'many generations' for true integration to occur spontaneously, in the absence of active supported efforts. On racial discrimination in the workplace, one interviewee commented that she was given degrading jobs and believed her skin colour was the reason for this:

I was always asked to empty the bin simply because I'm black (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

Participants commented that racism was not only confined to the workplace, as it was also evident in social situations:

I am living in a small town and I stand out because I am black. Irish people do not think they are racist, but they are. We are treated differently. If I go to a counter in a shop and want to ask a question I am left standing there and people do not want to talk to me, and I have seen that happening to other black people also. There is also a sense of community in a small town and people are not used to interacting with strangers (Nigerian participant, Sligo).

Being coloured is a big, big challenge here in Castlebar. When I came here first in 1998, Castlebar was a tiny little place. I remember walking in the main street and people were looking at us. I'm not that black but I am not white either, so we are seen as strangers. In Castlebar, when you talk of racism, it is different; it is not like being in France where they tell you straight away you are coloured, or Muslim or Jewish, and that causes more rage. Here, racism is hidden, it is deeper, you don't see it, you don't understand it, but, when people find out where we come from we are ignored and that is insulting. People do this in an ignorant or narrow-minded way (North African participant, Mayo).

Most people I know have experienced some form of discrimination or racism but it is mostly in secondary schools and not at third level (Nigerian student participant, Athlone).


I have noticed that black people living here experience a lot more racism than we do (Polish participant, Cork).

A Dublin-based Nigerian interviewee believed that both country of origin and skin colour had an influence on access to employment. The Nigerian research participants based in Dublin also believed that they experience racism and exploitation in the workplace, though it was noted that experience of racism among Irish employers varied, depending on the sector worked in. This group agreed they are treated with respect more often by people who have attained a high level of education. One person gave an example that a Nigerian national would more likely experience racism while working in a warehouse or supermarket. It was also noted by participants that racism was more likely experienced from fellow employees than from management. Some participants spoke of positive experiences with managers when discussing issues of discrimination. One interviewee commented, however, that equality was not often implemented in the workplace. The interviewed Nigerian nationals based in Cork had a mixed view of Irish people's attitudes towards them. They had all experienced some form of racism and believed it was difficult to progress as a black person living in Cork, particularly through any employment opportunities. They noted specifically that the elderly and people who had travelled were less racist towards them. Additionally, the Nigerian participants based in Cork expressed that they had experienced racism and discrimination from non-Irish nationalities based in Ireland as well as from the native Irish:

When we shop in supermarkets and if there is a Polish person working at the checkout, they will not put the change into our hands like they do with other customers, they will throw it on the counter and not look at us (Nigerian participant, Cork).

In relation to the experiences of Middle Eastern participants, five interviewees believed that being Islamic was an influential factor in the way they were treated in the workplace; again reporting that discrimination was more often exercised by fellow employees rather than from management. Although they believed that Irish society was trying to challenge racism in the workplace, they concurred that this was a difficult task.

Some of the participants in Cork who came from EU Accession States also experienced discrimination, though they believed that 'racism' was too strong a term to describe it. They believed that the people who were most discriminatory towards them were Irish people younger than 35 years. One Lithuanian participant based in Cork concurred with this, believing that the more educated people and older people were generally quite welcoming, but that Irish in the 25-35 years age-group were more likely to be discriminatory and 'jealous'. The EU Accession State participants also commented that black people experience more racism. In relation to work opportunities, one eastern European woman who had worked for both Irish and American companies reported that, while she was not given opportunities to progress within the Irish company, she is now an assistant manager with the American company. Some migrants perceived a problem regarding career progression for 'foreign nationals',



even where their qualifications surpass those of their Irish colleagues, with some participants arguing that “Irish employers are biased”. It was also stated by Polish participants in Cork that employers are less helpful towards foreign nationals. Another Polish participant commented:

I have experienced lots of racist comments but it is mostly because I work in a bar and when people get drunk they are more difficult to deal with and I have to deal with people under the influence of alcohol a lot. I am living in a country town with lots of other Polish people living here also and local people have commented that there are too many Poles living in this town (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

The above findings illustrate the variety of experiences towards the issue of racism and discrimination. From the current research, it is clear that participants from African counties tend to suffer more discrimination than participants from other countries might. Despite difficulties related to discrimination, however, many participants from all backgrounds indicated that they would like to make Ireland their permanent home.



3.5 Integration

Regarding integrating with Irish society, the interviewees presented mixed responses. Many believed that Irish people were friendly, but it was difficult to make more meaningful and lasting friendships. In Cork, the EU Accession State migrants stated that they “had no Irish friends their own age”. Similarly, the students based in Athlone found their Irish counterparts, and in particular female students, to be “cliquish”, and as one participant stated:

They say hello to you, but never invite you round to their house or to go out with them (Nigerian student participant, Athlone).

Another commented:

When you come here everyone is so welcoming. After about two weeks you realise that they are welcoming only to tourists and that you have to make an effort to really fit in (Student participant, Galway/Mayo).


I have a job here and my son is going to school here but I would like to be more fully integrated into Irish society (Iranian participant, Sligo).

The lack of a support network of friends is difficult for us, for example, if you want to apply for a course it is a massive challenge if you are doing it alone, whereas if your friends have already done so it seems easy. A further difficulty for us in becoming integrated is the difficulty we face in meeting Irish people (Moldovan participant, Co. Galway).

Some of the participants who have been living in Ireland for a number of years believed that, when they return for a holiday to their country or origin, they realise that they are integrating to Irish society:

When I go back to Poland I see that everything is changing there, so we are getting more involved now here in Ireland and less involved with the Polish community. I still have a lot of friends in Poland but I have lots of friends here also and I can have fun and enjoyment with them because now I have a home in Ireland. I love it because this is my home and I should love it (Polish participant, Sligo).

All the Cork-based student interviewees believe they are treated the same in class by their lecturers and tutors, and they perceived themselves to be well integrated into the third-level education system. In terms of workplace integration, the Dublin-based Nigerian migrants believed that integration was more difficult to achieve. Likewise, the Middle Eastern migrants in Dublin stated that their overall experience of working in Ireland was good, but they knew that some of their compatriots were in lower paid jobs and found it harder to integrate.



They believed it was difficult to integrate into the workplace “until you build up trust”. One participant believed that integration is particularly difficult when one is not interested in going to the pub, as he believed that social life in Ireland is centred on pub life. He summarised that while he gained financially from moving to Ireland, his quality of life has suffered:

I have more money but have less enjoyable free time. On one hand you gain, but on the other you lose (Lithuanian participant, Cork).

In summary, participants in all of the focus groups confirmed that there are challenges for workplace and social integration, both in urban and rural Ireland. There was a general consensus that integration is difficult to achieve, but, many participants believe that there is a lack of emphasis placed on integration strategies. Participants also suggested that there are not enough opportunities available to them to integrate with local people. A number of interviewees commented that having meetings, such as these focus groups, would provide opportunities for improved understanding and integration, and that, overall, there is a need for developing opportunities and shared activities to help migrants to more easily integrate with local communities.

3.6 Cultural Differences and Cultural Barriers

Participants were asked if they had experienced any cultural barriers in their attempt to integrate with Irish society. While some participants identified specific cultural barriers, the following quotation summarises the feelings of a number of participants:

I live in Sligo now and I have lived in England and in America for a long time, so I know what it is like to live in another country. It is never your country; it can be painful sometimes. Even if the country is good you still miss your home country in your heart (Iranian participant, Sligo).

General sentiments regarding cultural differences and cultural barriers included:

I came here to experience a different culture, but, there are a lot of drugs in third-level colleges in Ireland so I do not want to send my children to third level in Ireland. I came to Ireland to gain some new cultural experiences and also I had an ambition, I did not want to stay at home in a factory folding clothes all day long (Chinese participant, Dublin).

I have a driving licence since 1978 but it is not accepted here. I have asked why it is not accepted and I did not get any explanation (Iranian participant, Sligo).

There are a lot of different cultures here, but, people do not talk about them too much. Very few people have the courage to bring out their own cultures. There are not many opportunities to show people our culture. The only time I saw an opportunity to show our own culture was when our company organised a welcoming food day. There were a few Chinese people, a few Indian, a few Africans and the rest were Irish, and we all brought in our own traditional native foods. Now, even with more foreigners, we do not share our culture. There should be more opportunities for cultural expression, but, we have fewer opportunities to do that (Nigerian participant, Co. Mayo).

Coming to Ireland was a big culture shock because of the land, the language, the people, the music; everything was different (Polish participant, Sligo).

I find it difficult to progress in life here in Ireland as a black person. People judge me on the colour of my skin and this is a cultural barrier for me in my progression in the workplace (Nigerian participant, Cork).

Some Nigerian participants, in particular, indicated that there were some obvious cultural differences between African and Irish behaviour, which can cause initial difficulties in understanding communication styles, especially with official or workplace authorities in Ireland. Cultural practices in Nigeria, for example, dictate that one should address all superiors formally and without eye contact:

I have noticed here in Ireland it is possible to look directly in the eyes of a person when talking to them in formal situations. In Nigeria we do not do that, and that is one of the biggest cultural differences I have found. Also in college, I have noticed that students address their lecturers by their first names. In Nigeria, it is much more formal (Nigerian participant, Cork).

All focus groups reported that non-EU participants faced more acute cultural barriers than the EU migrants faced. Students in Athlone, predominantly African, also noted that there were some cultural differences in interpersonal communication, making it difficult to understand the lecturer in the classroom:

There are some obvious cultural differences between Nigeria and Ireland. Nigerians for example tend to represent a culture that keeps a distance from those in high power positions and this causes initial difficulties for us in the classroom situation. A positive cultural difference is that third-level lecturers in Ireland are very approachable (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

Some participants suggested that intercultural education at schools and colleges should aim to promote respect for different cultures and should highlight the benefits of cultural diversity. The interviewees believed that the promotion of different cultures should begin with young children in primary schools. Interviewees also suggested that there should be an emphasis on showing respect for differences and for cultural diversity at all levels of education and in workplaces. They further suggested that there should be a focus on the positive contribution migrants can make to the economic, social and cultural life of Ireland.

3.7 English Language Difficulties

There was consensus among all research participants that difficulties with English language were the single greatest factor in terms of access to education and employment in Ireland. Mixed results emerged from the focus groups in relation to English language proficiency of the participants. As one participant observed:

It is difficult to go to another country where everything is different. If you are going to study in another language, this is a very big consideration (Lithuanian participant, Cork).

When I came to Ireland first, I do not think that my spoken or written English language skills were good. It would have been helpful if there were special classes for me to improve. It was difficult for the beginning of my time here, but, now I am studying in third level and I find the printed handouts and the notes that lecturers give out are very helpful and now I do not have a problem (Polish participant, Cork).

There are ten of us here tonight, eight from China and two from Venezuela and we are all studying English here in Dublin. This is necessary for us to further our education and careers (Chinese participant, Dublin).

The above quotations confirm that most participants would welcome the chance to improve their English language skills, particularly in relation to discipline-specific areas they wished to study. Interviewees reported a wide variance in their proficiency in spoken and written English — and difficulties with attaining higher proficiency. Some of the Nigerian participants in Athlone reported a lack of confidence in their ability to express themselves in English. The following comment is representative of the sentiments of the majority of participants:

The first barrier is the English language and the lack of confidence we have for expressing ourselves in English. General English classes are not enough to give us confidence to pursue a third-level course; we need more specific classes in whatever area we decide to study (Polish participant, Athlone).

There is a fear of not succeeding because of language difficulties (Polish participant, Cork).

Some of the older research participants in Athlone stated that they found it very difficult to learn English, even though they did speak a number of eastern European languages. Some stated that they felt “ignorant” or that they were perceived as such by Irish people because of their inability to speak English fluently. Many found that they had few opportunities for conversing in English as their workplaces and homes tended to be populated by people who spoke the same language as themselves.

Many participants with a good level of proficiency in English identified the need for more specialised English language provision. A common finding from most of the focus groups was that general English classes are not sufficient to provide them with the capacity and confidence to pursue third-level education through English. One Lithuanian participant had attended beginners' level classes in Cork but did not think that they were adequately delivered. Two other Cork-based Lithuanian participants had learned English by reading newspapers and watching television and had an excellent level of spoken English. Some of the Athlone-based Nigerian participants proposed the provision of technical English classes or other English classes dealing with particular areas, for example, English for accounting students, or English for science students. Students in Cork also expressed the view that specialist classes, such as English for business, would be beneficial. In relation to accessing third-level education, the younger participants in Athlone expressed fears that they would "not be able to understand lecturers" and would not be able to write essays. The eastern European participants in the Athlone focus group believed that general English classes do not provide sufficient preparation for third level and that a "higher level" or specialised English classes would be required. Another participant added:

At the moment I am studying for a PhD in physics and additional specialised tutorials which deal with scientific terms would be very helpful. I do not have a problem with writing English but the translation of some terms is very difficult for me (Polish participant, Cork).

The Nigerian focus group in Cork found difficulty not only in writing and speaking English but also the requirement in education for speed-reading. They also found regional differences in accents difficult to comprehend and, in particular, the Cork accent. The problem of accent was expressed in most of the focus groups.

Many focus group participants believed that employers should organise English language classes for migrants to help them improve their language skills and to integrate better into the workplace. Some suggested, however, that employers might be unwilling to do so since their employees would then gain a better understanding of their rights and entitlements. The Polish interviewees in Cork argued that migrants should be more self-motivated to learn English and believed that they must engage more with English speakers to help themselves to improve their language skills, rather than socialising and speaking solely with their compatriots. These Polish participants who were willing to speak English believed that they had gained confidence and improved their competency while living and working in Ireland, an achievement which allowed them greater opportunities. Some participants argued that the high fees charged for English language courses caused problems for them and that this factor caused considerable delay in language acquisition.

Overall, it was apparent from all of the focus groups that the language barrier caused difficulties for the majority of participants, in education, work, and social settings. There was a willingness among all participants to learn English, but cost of classes and cost of childcare emerged as barriers to their participation in such classes. Many participants also spoke of the need to move beyond Basic English classes and to introduce discipline-specific English classes for them to integrate more fully with their specialised field of work and study.



3.8 Cost of Education

A common finding emerging from all focus groups was that participants are very eager to partake in third-level education. The cost of education, however, was identified as a major barrier to access by all participants in all regions. The issue of finance was of greater significance to the non-EU migrants or migrants with non-resident status, due to the differential fees demanded by education institutions depending on status and country of origin:

I saw a course advertised for a local third-level college, but, when I asked about enrolling on this course I found out that I would have to pay three times the amount per year as people from Ireland and other European Union states. There is just no way, no way at all that I could afford to do the course. I already have a degree from my home university and I am working here as a security man to make a living for my wife and daughter. Very often, my daughter asks me why I work as a security person but I cannot tell her that I cannot afford to do a course and get a better qualification and then I would not have to do security work (Nigerian participant, Cork).

As illustrated by the above quotation, many other participants commented that international fees are often three times greater than those for EU citizens. This issue was, in particular, noted by all African participants. In Dublin, the African participants argued that the high cost of foreign-national/non-European fees prevented most people in their community from accessing third-level education in Ireland. All of the Dublin-based Nigerian participants knew of people who achieved high points in their Leaving Certificate but who could not access third-level education because of high fees. This issue was also noted by the Dublin-based Chinese and Venezuelan participants. The African participants in Cork also specified fees as the key barrier to education and believed that if these were lower, more people would access education. One participant had applied to go to college but was forced to withdraw because the application fee was prohibitively expensive:

I am a qualified nurse but I am working here as an assistant in a nursing home, so I decided I would like to get a qualification in business in order to have a better chance of changing from my current job. When I realised how much I would have to pay to attend college in the evening, I realised all of my wages would go on paying the fees, and I would not have enough money for food and rent (Nigerian participant, Cork).

With regard to EU-status participants, fees emerged as an important issue but were less significant in comparison to the non-EU participants. Some interviewees stated that the cost was only marginally higher than in their countries of origin and as the average salary was considerably higher in Ireland, the cost of education here was in real terms less than in their countries of origin. The Polish participants in Athlone, however, noted that as citizens of the European Union they were paying the same fees as Irish citizens and they welcomed the opportunity to avail of this fee structure. It was also suggested in all of the focus groups that it was necessary to save money so that loans which were acquired to move to Ireland could be repaid. Another budgetary consideration for the participants was that they frequently send money to their families in their countries of origin. Overall, the barrier created by prohibitively expensive education enrolment fees was a recurring concern for the focus group interviewees:

I would love to go to a third-level college to do a master's degree as I already have a primary degree from my home country, but, it is just too expensive. I am working as a waitress here and I am enjoying the work, but I do not want to do this work for the rest of my life. I would like to stay in Ireland as the standard of living is good, but when I pay my rent and send some money home to my family there is not a hope of paying college fees (Polish participant, Cork).

Of course the price of courses is a difficulty for all of us, and also because we are working in jobs like bars and hotels we work in the evening times and this is generally when the courses take place (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

I had difficulties getting a maintenance grant and am overwhelmed with all of the paperwork involved (Polish participant, Letterkenny).

A further cost identified by participants accessing education is that of childcare. All of the participants, regardless of nationality or residency status, referred to the high cost of childcare in Ireland. This difficulty is compounded by not having the support of extended family members:

If I want to enrol in a third-level course here in Ireland it is very, very difficult for me as I have three small children and my husband has to work extra hours to make sure that we are looked after. I cannot afford to pay for childcare and I do not have any other family here. In my home country there would be a family structure which I could avail of to look after my children with no cost for the hours I attend classes (Nigerian participant, Cork).

The main barrier for me is childcare costs. I have three children to mind and even if I did get a job to help pay for my education the money would go on minding the children (Nigerian participant, Sligo).

Ireland is a very expensive country. Everything is very expensive here especially as we are depending on the Government to give us social welfare money (Iranian participant, Co. Leitrim).

In summary, it is clear that the cost of education is a major barrier for migrants who are interested in pursuing third-level education and the costs are particularly prohibitive for those who have to pay non-EU fees. Despite the cost barrier, however, many participants are willing to work in low paid jobs in order to save money for their education. Participants also suggested that they would like to have more information on the fee structures for third-level institutions and some advice on where to locate this information. Some participants also reported that there is a demand for more low-cost English language courses.



3.9 Lack of Information Regarding Access to Education

The majority of focus group participants articulated that they had very little guidance or other information on access to third-level education in Ireland. A major theme arising from the research was the frustration voiced by participants in relation to this lack of available information on access to education. There was a general lack of awareness among interviewees about services available to ‘foreign-nationals’ resident in Ireland wishing to apply to third-level education institutions — as one participant put it:

Nobody has ever explained whether we are permitted to go to college, and to be honest we have not checked out this option (Brazilian participant, Galway/Mayo).

The information available for getting into college is not clear, especially in relation to funding. It is not clear where we are to get information from. It appears that there are a lot of agencies doing the same job and that is confusing (Nigerian participant, Letterkenny).

We do not have enough information on how people from our community can enter third-level colleges (Chinese participant, Dublin).

The information we need about third-level education is probably out there somewhere even if it is not in Polish but the difficulty is we do not know how or where to get this information (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

When we find out how to get the information from different public services the information provided can be inconsistent (Ghanaian participant, Letterkenny).

Many of us get information from our friends about going to college and about getting our qualifications from Poland recognised. It would be great if the procedures for foreign people would be advertised in places where we could easily get the information. My friend told me that she applied to have her qualifications from Poland recognised here in Ireland but she told me it takes about 12 to 14 weeks for this. I never heard of this before (Polish participant, Cork).

Most of us know third-level colleges from a distance and would like to go to college but do not see it as an option. We do not know if third-level courses are available to us. I would like to go to college but I think the entrance exam would be most difficult. The first year in college would be difficult but we would pick up the language just as we did in the workplace (Lithuanian participant, Galway/Mayo).

Interviewees noted a general dearth of information for potential students on both eligibility requirements and services available. They found the application process extremely confusing. Some stated that they found it difficult to ascertain how “the system” works in Ireland. Many participants believed the system to be overly “difficult, patchy, cumbersome, awkward and burdensome”, particularly for non-CAO and foreign-national applicants. While services might be available for information provision, the general consensus was that migrants were not made aware of them:

We would all like to have more information on third-level courses. Some of us are doing FETAC courses at the moment but nobody has given us any information on what is possible for us when we finish these courses (Iranian participant, Co. Leitrim).

Many of the participants mentioned the Internet as an information source, but not all interviewees had access to the Internet. Interviewees also suggested that they would like a “human face” to interact with to find immediate answers to questions:

I know it is possible to get information about courses through the Internet but it would be good if we had somewhere we could go to meet, somebody to explain to us what courses are available for us (Nigerian participant, Cork).

An Athlone-based participant from an EU Accession State observed that, although third-level college websites do list available courses, these websites do not have dedicated sections to addresses queries relevant in particular to migrants, such as pages explaining to recognition of foreign qualifications, the fees category they are subject to, and details regarding their application process. Similarly, interviewees from some of the other focus groups recommended that college websites should be redesigned with a dedicated section concerning the application procedures and requirements for international and non-CAO applicant students.

Some Nigerians based in Letterkenny believed that advisors dealing with these issues were unhelpful and very quick to say that they would not qualify for grants. Likewise, other participants argued that every third-level college should have a dedicated information office set up to deal specifically with applications from migrants. One participant suggested that each college should provide an open information-day to deal with all queries on requirements and entitlements.

Overall, the participants in all focus groups across all regions perceived that lack of information regarding accessing third-level courses to be a major barrier for their advancement in education and in the workplace. A large number of participants requested that specific information on how to access third-level courses in Ireland should be provided in a user-friendly way and this information should be available locally for them and without over-reliance on the Internet. Participants suggested that information leaflets could be made available through their local libraries, money-transfer outlets, social welfare offices, accommodation houses, citizen information centres, Bus Éireann offices, local ethnic shops, restaurants and bars, regional drop-in centres for foreign nationals, and billboards.



3.10 Recognition of Qualifications and Prior Learning

Formal recognition of international qualifications and formal recognition of prior learning are complex and related issues, but are considered of utmost importance for migrants wishing to attend third-level institutions. One of the key themes identified by all participants in all regions, regardless of nationality, was the difficulty in getting qualifications which they had been awarded in their home countries recognised by employers and they feared that they would have a similar difficulty when approaching third-level institutions in Ireland. Participants observed:

Employers do not care what degrees we have from our home countries; they just want somebody to fill in and do whatever job becomes vacant. I have a master's degree from Poland and I am working in a chip shop here. Most of the Polish people I know that are here are working in bars, or as cleaners in hotels, or in Polish shops, and all of them would have degrees (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

I have a degree from my home country, Nigeria, and it is equivalent to at least a level 8 or even a 9 in Ireland, but, when I went to ask about this I was told that I would have to take a FETAC level 5 course (Nigerian participant, Mayo).

Participants in all regions knew of people whose qualifications were not recognised in Ireland. An Iranian participant in Sligo, for example, knew of someone whose nursing qualifications had not been recognised. A Romanian participant also spoke of her own experience:

I have both primary and postgraduate qualifications from my home town university in Romania, but, people here treat these qualifications with suspicion. There is a perception that all Romanian people are here in Ireland to beg on the street and steal money and my qualifications are not taken seriously. I have now started a night course in CIT in order to gain an Irish qualification which I hope will help me in my future career (Romanian participant, Cork).

The medical qualifications that we receive from our own country are very difficult to have recognised here. I know lots of people here who have been trying for many years to have their qualifications recognised. We need more access to information and help for getting our hard earned qualifications recognised here in Ireland (Nigerian participant, Cork).


Our existing qualifications from Ghana are not recognised here in Ireland, whereas in Britain all we would have to do is a short course for the qualifications to be recognised. This is the case in nursing, for example (Ghanaian participant, Letterkenny).

In Nigeria I was a lecturer in a department that trains medical scientists and I worked in that department for eight years. I don't just have a primary degree, I have a master's degree. I have been trying to register with the Academy of Medical Laboratory Scientists here in Ireland and they told me it would take about six months. I rang them after a few months to find out what was happening and they said that they assessed my qualifications and said I could work here in Ireland, that was fantastic and it made me very jubilant. After more time, however, they told me that they were wrong and my master's degree is not the correct standard, because it is pure micro-science, or something like that. I have been a scientist all of my life and I have worked in a hospital as well as in a university in Nigeria and I cannot become recognised here. I also applied to the Institute of Medical Science in Britain with the same credentials that I used for the Academy of Medical Laboratory Scientists in Ireland and they accepted it, they accepted everything, but I want to stay in Ireland. I am hoping that in the next two months they will meet again to decide about me (Nigerian participant, Co. Mayo).

One of the Polish participants now based in Athlone stated that, even in Poland, she had difficulty getting her qualifications recognised as she acquired them during the era of the Soviet Union and these qualifications are now considered somewhat alien or imprecise. Some participants stated that this was a serious concern as they would like to “continue their education but not repeat it”, and they believe that if their qualifications were not recognised then they “would be going back to first year again”. Polish migrants in Cork also experienced difficulty in having their qualifications recognised and believed that professional qualifications should have the same status everywhere. Some of the Athlone-based migrants from other EU Accession States also believe that their qualifications were treated with “suspicion” and “cynicism”. Participants living in Co. Cork observed that there was little awareness among migrants about the opportunity for recognition of qualifications through the NQAI and that the procedure “should be advertised and non-Irish nationals should be informed about it”. The following quotation summarises these sentiments:

One of my friends, who came to Ireland before me recently, found out about getting our previous qualifications recognised. She was surfing the web and found the NQAI website. She has now sent off all of her documents to them and she is telling all of us to do the same. Nobody ever told us about this when we arrived here. We live 25 miles from the nearest city where we would have to travel to for third-level courses, and we would be prepared to travel together in the evening to do advanced study but we do not want to have to start again in first year (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

Participants in the Polish and Lithuanian groups based in Cork city and county again emphasised that the majority of employers do not care about recognising the qualifications of employees and perceive the level of education of migrants to be inferior. One of the Lithuanian participants, however, had a positive experience with his company as they had organised the recognition procedure for him. Another Lithuanian was recruited by an Irish person in the Ukraine on the basis of having a degree in mechanical engineering. On a positive note, however, others argued that employers are now slowly starting to change and are becoming “more adaptive”. Nevertheless, participants in most of the focus groups suggested that employers should be more aware of the recognition of the NQAI system.



In addition to the lack of recognition of non-Irish qualifications, many participants also observed that there is a lack of coherent information on RPL for access to employment and education. These two reasons were especially cited by the African participants in Athlone for not enrolling in third-level education. Many expressed the need for one centralised office within Ireland offering a co-ordinated and transparent service for the evaluation of all foreign national qualifications for both educational and work purposes. While such a service exists in the NQAI, many participants were heretofore unaware of the agency. Five of the nine members in the Athlone-based Nigerian group had qualifications that were not recognised in Ireland. Most of the participants throughout all focus groups expressed frustration with the system and the process for qualification recognition for work purposes or for enrolment in higher education. Two Nigerian participants had difficulty getting their prior professional training favourably recognised by Irish professional bodies, the Law Society and the Medical Council. Some participants had problems with a lack of documentation to prove their qualifications or level of education. Some participants indicated an additional problem relating to the translation of degree and diploma certificates, leading to a misinterpretation of qualifications for accessing academic ability through the NQAI. Focus group participants, who are in employment throughout Ireland, believed that they were 'overqualified' for their current occupations, which were mainly in the services sector. They believed that their low level of employment was due to problems arising from the lack of due recognition for their qualifications and their work experience. This causes great frustration to participants in all regions. One Polish participant summarised:

A lot of highly qualified people from our country who came here are doing menial work because the employers do not know how to assess our qualifications. Some even have PhDs (Polish participant, Galway/Mayo).

In Poland, our courses are broader so we tend to know about a lot of areas, but we are not given credit for our previous learning. In Ireland the courses tend to be narrower, with more of a specialised focus; but because we have a broader education we are not given credit for that (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

The majority of African focus group participants believe that their original qualifications were as good as "obliterated" in the eyes of prospective employers, and, that the only way to progress their careers was to "go back to college and start all over again or to go back again for one or two years" and to be examined again for qualifications which they had already achieved in their home country. A Nigerian participant based in Cork felt as though he had to "abandon his qualifications completely", and others in the group agreed that the time they had spent studying in Nigeria was "meaningless". Many participants stated that multinational companies were more progressive in the recognition of qualifications from outside the EU, whereas Irish employers tended to ignore prior learning and qualifications completely. One Polish participant articulated his frustration as follows:

People who came from our country with bachelor degrees and master degrees very often end up working in hotel kitchens. Employers don't know how to equate our qualifications to the Irish system. Employers worry that our qualifications are substandard, so in a lot of cases they don't take our qualifications into consideration at all. Irish people with easily recognisable qualifications generally get the jobs; Irish employers consider those with just Leaving Certificate to be more qualified than our graduates (Polish participant, Galway/Mayo).

In summary, the above research findings confirm that the majority of migrants are employed in occupations for which they are over-qualified. The focus group findings from all regions indicate that migrants are unsure or unaware of how to have their previous qualifications and prior learning formally assessed. There was a very real sense of frustration evident among migrants who attempted to have their previous qualifications equated with Irish qualifications, due both to delays in the system and the low level of credit they were awarded. These migrants suggested that their many years of study and work in their country of origin was “meaningless” in Ireland.





3.11 Residency Status

Focus group members discussed the impact that residency status has on migrants wishing to engage with employment or with third-level education. Asylum seekers, for example, are prohibited from applying for full-time third-level courses unless they can pay their own fees. This difficulty, however, is compounded since asylum seekers have to pay international fees, which are generally three times greater than fees for European Union citizens. Residency status emerged as an issue particularly among non-EU participants in the focus groups:

Current immigrant regulations can act as a deterrent in applying for education courses as it might put residency visa status on the radar screen (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

Illegal residency status is a potential deterrent in applying for third-level courses for many migrant workers, as we might have to return to our home country if we are identified (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

Some participants were concerned not only about their own education, but believed that a 'good' education is of primary importance for the future of their children:

I would like a new start here in Ireland in education and employment. It is probably more important for our children to have a good education and for all of us to have a good life here. Most of us are here because we are seeking asylum from our homelands. We hope our extended family will be able to join us. We would hope to stay here in Ireland in the future (Ghanaian participant, Letterkenny).

I believe that Irish society has a strong focus on education and that Ireland can offer my children a path to education. I know this is a view that is also shared among my Nigerian friends here (Nigerian participant, Dublin).

In some focus groups, especially where participants were refugees or asylum seekers, the issue of residency was highlighted as being problematic for integration. The separation of family members from each other usually leads to considerable hardship and this may be a contributory cause of serious obstacles to the integration of refugees in any new society. Participants suggested that refugees and asylum seekers should have ready access to support services and support staff when exploring services and assistance they are entitled to. Participants also suggested that providing support services to such groups are important and, in particular, at the earliest possible opportunity after their arrival in Ireland.

3.12 Right to Education

The majority of focus group participants believed that regardless of their status they should have a right to an education. On analysing the data, it was apparent that many participants, particularly non-EU natives, were unsure of their entitlements to education. This contrasted with, for example, the Polish participants all of whom strongly believe that they have a right to education in Ireland:

We all have a right to education here in Ireland. We are working and paying our taxes and if we want to progress in our careers we have a right to access third-level courses. It is our responsibility to be motivated to attend college and I think the educational opportunities here are comparable to Poland (Polish participant, Cork).


Myself and my friends are interested in returning to third-level education, so part-time education would be perfect for us. We all have a right to be educated here, the same as everybody else (Polish participant, Letterkenny).

Upskilling and completing courses is important. It is important to do something with yourself in relation to further education. If we do not do some courses while we are here we will regret it. Everybody has a right to education. I have started a third-level course and I find the teachers very helpful and I definitely see my future in Ireland (Polish participant, Cork).

Similarly, many of the Lithuanian participants believed that they had a right to education in Ireland because they are Europeans and have EU-status:

Everyone has a right to education if they want to be educated. If people are educated they work better. It is in the government's interest to make education more attractive for immigrants, then there will be a more competent workforce. We are all Europeans, after all (Lithuanian participant, Cork).

The Nigerian participants based in Letterkenny were acutely aware of their rights to education in Ireland, however, the group were a little suspicious about being interviewed as they thought the information they offered “might go against them” if they wished to apply for third-level education. Most of this group were in receipt of social welfare payments, so they stressed that the cost of third-level courses is a major barrier to education access for them. The majority of these interviewees came to Ireland with their families and expressed the desire to continue their own third-level education here, but also emphasised the right to education for their children.



Some interviewees stated that the Government should incentivise further enrolment in education, arguing that better education makes the workplace more productive, thus their education should be a good investment for society overall. Some related their right to education based on their status as European citizens. Others said the onus is on the individual if they want to be educated. Some participants added that they were confused about their entitlements to education and suggested:

It would be good if each college provided an open day to deal with all the queries on requirements and entitlements. In addition, every third-level college should have a dedicated information office set up to deal specifically with applications for resident migrants (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

I along with most of the people here would like the opportunity to study at third level in Ireland. We are aware of our rights regarding third-level education in relation to refugee status. In some cases when we have approached third-level institutions they did not know what the procedures were and they were not always helpful (Nigerian participant, Dublin).

I am doing a third-level course now, but I had to pay for it myself. I was told that I am not an Irish citizen even though I am here five years and I have got legal residence. There is confusion regarding our rights and entitlements to education. We do not get a local authority third-level grant, or the millennium fund, or the partnership grant. As this is a serious block to our education, we are advocating our entitlement to grants (Nigerian participant, Mayo).

We do not have enough information about how members of our community could enter third-level education in Ireland. We need to get more information about our rights to education. I cannot study at third level here in Ireland because I do not have an Irish visa (Chinese participant, Dublin).

I came to Ireland to improve the quality of life for myself and my family. I want to invest in the education of my children here, but I find it difficult to understand how the system works in relation to education. I need more information on fees and entitlements; we all have a right to be educated here (Turkish participant, Dublin).

As illustrated by the above quotations, the interviewees perceived that there is not enough information available to migrants regarding their entitlements to access third-level education. This has led to misinformation and confusion for many people coming to Ireland, particularly those who have been granted refugee or asylum status.

3.13 Future Plans and Aspirations

Finally, participants were asked to elaborate on their future plans and hopes, and if they believed their futures would be likely to be in Ireland or elsewhere. There were mixed responses from participants across all regions on whether they planned to stay in Ireland or return to their countries of origin. Many of those who arrived as asylum seekers and had since achieved citizenship rights here said they intended to stay in Ireland. Given the nature of their circumstances – having originally fled their home country in fear of persecution – many of this cohort do not have the opportunity to return to their country of origin and all participants who fit into the ‘refugee’ or related categories believed that the long-term future for them and their families is in Ireland:

My children are here and my children are Irish, so my future is here (African participant, Sligo).

My family has a better opportunity here in Ireland, in the English-speaking world, and they would not have this opportunity in Nigeria. I am looking forward to being able to find work here in my field (African participant, Sligo).

I am happy to be here and happy for my family to get the opportunity for a new start. Our future is in Ireland (Ghanaian participant, Letterkenny).


I have a strong desire to remain permanently in Ireland (Nigerian participant, Athlone).

We feel very welcome here. There are some very good Irish men and women, and my future is in Ireland. I want to stay here (Iranian participant, Sligo).

Other respondents were less certain that their long-term future would be in Ireland. In this regard, the issue of economic uncertainty in Ireland came to the fore, thus many participants believe that they might have to leave the country in the near future to find employment elsewhere. This was especially evident in relation to the eastern European participants. Many were concerned that work opportunities in Ireland were becoming scarce and there was an increasing level of insecurity for these economic migrants:

My opinion is that people who are moving to Ireland now are having great difficulty in finding employment, particularly if they have a poor level of English. When I first arrived it was no problem to find a job but now it is very different. There are many immigrants looking for work and the problem is that the economy is going down. People are losing jobs and there is more opportunity now for local people than for migrants (Lithuanian participant, Cork).

There is big competition among migrants now for jobs, so staying in Ireland is getting tougher (Lithuanian participant, Cork).



I am not sure if my future is in Ireland. It depends on what the country can offer us in education and employment. My future here in Ireland depends on upskilling and education. I have started a course here and the fees are very expensive but it is important for me to finish the course. I have gained confidence and improved my English skills since I started my course and this provides opportunities for my future; but I am unsure about it being in Ireland (Polish participant, Cork).

My future plans are fluid and I also know many of my Polish friends are the same. We are not sure about our future, or for what length of time we will stay in Ireland. I know that some of my friends wish to stay in Ireland for four more years, and more of us wish to stay for up to eight more years, but it really depends on our work and other personal circumstances (Polish participant, Athlone).

Similarly, many of the Latvian participants commented that work opportunities were becoming limited:

My plan is to stay here and live with my family, to work, and earn more money. This would be very good for me and for my family. But I don't know if this is possible. I love it here, but I have to work. If I lose my job, it will be not so easy for me to find another. So that makes me feel very unsure about my future in Ireland (Latvian participant, Cork).

With regard to the importance of educational achievement in enhancing their future careers, there were again mixed responses. Some believed that education would not necessarily enhance their work opportunities in Ireland, particularly those working in the construction sectors. They argued that if there is no work in building and construction, then the level of education qualifications one has makes little difference in securing employment.

Those who were already attending college reported uniformly that education and upskilling would play a vital role in their future success and career plans, as almost all intended to remain in education to graduate and postgraduate level:

My quality of life in Ireland should improve when I get an Irish third-level qualification. I am studying here to get a qualification and I am motivated by the challenge of getting the degree. I hope to have better career prospects because of doing the course here, and an Irish qualification should help me to advance in my career further (Romanian participant, Cork).

I would like to increase my level of education and to have a better job. I would like to be better qualified as this will provide more opportunities for me to progress in my career. Training is important also and I cannot understand why the Irish Government is paying to bring nurses into Ireland from abroad instead of putting the money into training the people who are here (Nigerian participant, Cork).

I hope to get top qualifications and then go on to work and settle here in Ireland, if at all possible (Congoles participant, Letterkenny).

You can change your life through education and work at any time. I am a young woman, I am only 22, and I am given the chance to go to college here and I am also a supervisor in my work. I would not have been given this chance in Poland at all. My experience is that there are much better opportunities to study and work here than in Poland (Polish participant, Sligo).

I came here with my wife, we decided to come and try out living in Ireland for two years first, then five years. I have spent much of my life in Europe but I decided to come to Ireland for more training. My wife also wanted to study here and she thinks there are good opportunities here. We are here now for over two years. I will support my wife with her study as I am fairly ambitious for the two of us (African participant, Mayo).

I would like to do something better with myself and this is important to me. I would regret if I did not make an effort to do something better, but it depends on further education (Polish participant, Co. Cork).

Overall, the findings from the focus group study illustrate that migrants who were already enrolled in third-level courses were very enthusiastic, ambitious, and determined to complete their courses in order to progress further in their careers. This cohort was largely motivated, optimistic, and determined to overcome whatever barriers or obstacles they would encounter.

3.14 Summary Observations

The interviewed migrants highlighted many barriers they have to overcome to integrate into Irish society, including a range of obstacles to engaging with higher education and employment. Across all regions in Ireland, the majority of interviewees articulated that their most serious challenges included:

- English language difficulties
- The lack of recognition of their previous qualifications and prior learning by education and employer bodies
- Difficulties accessing relevant information concerning third-level education
- The burden of third-level fees



A large number of participants believed that education is a key step in their integration process. Access to higher education for migrants, however, was hampered for a variety of reasons, with English language difficulties identified as the main barrier by participants in all regions, as English was accepted as a fundamental key to participation in Irish society generally, as well as in education and employment. English language tuition, therefore, was seen as vital if migrants from non-English-speaking countries, employers, and society are to fully benefit from immigration.

The focus groups also highlighted that, while many migrants already hold third-level qualifications, they are employed at levels which do not reflect their educational status. Participants believed that this disparity resulted in many cases from poor English language proficiency and the lack of recognition of previous qualifications and prior learning. Migrants believed that the lack of recognition by Irish third-level colleges and employers unduly denied them opportunities to contribute more effectively to the Irish economy. Many migrants were unaware of the process of having their previous qualifications mapped to the national framework of qualifications. This indicated a widespread lack of awareness of relevant information on third-level education provision. There is an urgent need for the NQAI, for third-level institutions, and employers to work together to address this lack of awareness and to actively promote information provision to migrants across all regions.

In addition to English language difficulties and a lack of relevant information, many focus group members, particularly those from non-EU countries, believed that the high level of fees charged by third-level education colleges constituted a major barrier to access. Interviewees also stated that there is a need for clear and standardised fee policies in all higher-level education colleges. Focus group interviewees suggested that information on fee structures and grant entitlements should be included as part of college information packages for migrants.

Evidence shows that investment in education and training yields positive results for individuals, employers, and for the economy, therefore policymakers need to co-ordinate their work to focus on methods of improving migrants' access to third-level education and training. Currently, many migrants are employed in areas of work that do not match their knowledge and training. Access to promotion and progression routes in education and employment is often denied to migrants as they are often perceived as temporary workers where they are used for their labour and not their skills.

Finally, forecasts for the economy for the latter part of 2008 and beyond have been steadily revised downwards, and the impact of the economic downturn will have significant impact on migrants, who have been employed in large numbers in the hospitality and construction sectors over the past number of years. As many migrant workers are employed at lower skill levels, they are particularly vulnerable, reinforcing the need for them to have access to additional training and education in order to upskill themselves for wider opportunities in employment.

4.0 Introduction

An analysis of the focus group findings in this report should provide third-level colleges with a better understanding of the concerns, hopes, views, and general context of migrants in Ireland. One of the themes explored confirms a dearth of information available to migrants concerning access and admission to third-level colleges in all the regions in Ireland. In order to gain further in-depth understanding of the current policies and procedures for migrant students in partner colleges, the admissions officer and access officer in each college were interviewed.

Interviewees were asked if they could estimate the participation rate of migrant students in their institutions. In some institutions, statistics are available on participation rates according to nationality. No data were gathered in relation to student immigration status (e.g. refugee, person granted humanitarian leave to remain, etc.). One participant estimated a population of migrant students constituted about 3% of the total student population and other interviewees concurred with this estimation.

An interview guide was drawn up by members of the working group to enable all interviews to cover the same topics. These interviews were conducted face-to-face by the working group member in each college, and the average length of each interview was one hour. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and each interviewee was assured that it was the content of the information that was important rather than the identity of the person being interviewed. The data from these interviews were summarised under the following headings:

4.1 Information and Advice Provision for Potential Migrant Students

There was a consensus among all interviewees representing third-level colleges that most migrants presenting themselves as potential students would be directed to the admissions office when they had pre-admission enquiries. Generally, however, there was little specific information targeted at migrants and admission policies tended to be rather ad hoc. Where two different types of admissions office existed – general and international – some education providers would redirect enquiries to the relevant office on the basis of the EU or non-EU residency status of the potential student. For migrants who are unsure of their citizenship status, they are directed to the Fees office in the relevant third-level college, where, on presentation of their documentation, staff would advise them on their entitlements. The admissions offices in all universities and institutes of technology generally advise students about fees and grants, which are areas of core concern to migrant students. The admissions office typically receives most enquiries dealing with student applications, however, depending on the nature of the enquiry, applicants are occasionally redirected to, for example, the access officer (particularly in relation to finance issues) or to a head of department or course co-ordinator. The following quotations are representative of views from the interviewed admissions officers:

It would depend on how good the person who answers the phone is to pass on the query.

If somebody phones up we would not necessarily know where they are from, but, in the main we would refer them to our website. They would probably be familiar with our website anyway as that is normally their first point of contact. There is one significant gap in our service and I have been advocating for some time that we should have a fully fledged international office to deal with all of these queries. They should be advising and assessing all foreign students. We are doing the best we can here in the admissions office but we do not have the time to devote to advising foreign students.

We find that for those potential foreign students who come in to talk to us we would look at the course they are applying for and give them advice on their documentation and all that type of information. We would tell them which channels they would have to go through and we would arrange for them to talk to the head of a department or to an academic staff member to see that they understand what they are applying for and the various aspects of the programme of study.

One of the interviewed admissions officers suggested:

I would like more standardisation of issues like admission requirements and procedures and so on for migrants. The more standardisation we have between all third-level colleges the better. I would definitely welcome better networking of all admission officers within the third-level education sector.

Some of the access officers interviewed noted that on occasions their office would be the first point of contact for migrant students. Their comments were similar to those of their admission officer colleagues. One access officer stated:

There is not one person identified for dealing with pre-entry queries for foreign students and even for someone looking at our website it is not clear who they should go to. Should they go to admissions, or the department the course is being offered in, or the course co-ordinator, or myself? From time to time I would get emails through the website address but it really depends on whose lap the query falls on, therefore, they may be getting different information from different sources. Unfortunately, as a college we have not been very proactive in relation to migrants. We have not done the ground work with migrants in relation to pre-entry, and then I find at the post-entry stage they are coming in here looking for information on fees, etc.

All of the interviewed admissions officers believe that the website of their third-level colleges provided the major sources of information for potential students, though word-of-mouth information was also a significant factor. Many believed that most potential migrant students could access this information quite easily. The majority of admissions officers interviewed believe that third-level colleges should be making "more of an effort" to target migrant students. They also noted that, because of the large volume of work which admissions offices deal with, they do not have additional time and resources to specifically address the needs of migrant students. All interviewees, however, stressed that they were very sympathetic to the plight of migrants and believed that third-level colleges have a duty of care for all citizens, regardless of their country or origin.

4.2 Suitability of Student Applicants for Courses

Interviewees were asked who in their college would assess and advise potential students in relation to their suitability for enrolment on courses. The answers received indicated that many prospective students would have been advised by guidance counsellors in second-level schools and schools of further education. Those over the age of 23 would be advised by the office dealing with mature students, where the same advice was available to all students, in most instances, with no specific advice tailored for migrant students endeavouring to choose a course. One admissions officer stated:

It depends on whom the individual students make their initial contact. Students often contact the student guidance office. If students come through the Mature Student Access Courses they will receive advice regarding their suitability for courses from course co-ordinators and other academic staff.

The majority of interviewees believed that most migrants would receive information on courses through the Internet. One access officer stated that she would get very few queries on suitability for courses, as such queries would usually be directed to the career's office, particularly the career counsellor. Sometimes students might ask representatives at adult education exhibitions or they might contact individual schools within the college directly. One admissions officer stated that students were generally well informed about what is offered by the college, though others countered that lack of information was a big concern, particularly for mature students as no guidance service is available to them at the pre-entry stage:

If migrant students come in here to college, we can direct them to the various services like the careers and counselling service. I am not sure who they approach for advice before they come in here. There are no facilities here in relation to career advice for any part-time students; there are no career guidance services here at night.

Another admissions officer observed that:

Prospective students are usually well informed of what the college offers them. The main advice migrant students usually want is in relation to fees and grants. The access office is rarely asked for advice on suitability of applicants for courses; this is generally done in the careers office.

As noted above by the interviewed admissions and access officers, the advice given to migrant students in relation to their suitability for courses largely depends on their first point of contact with the college. All interviewees believed that additional guidance and career advice should be available specifically to address the needs of migrant students who attend college on a part-time basis.



4.3 Who Should Advise Potential Students?

Some participants believed that there should be a dedicated institutional officer for migrants to give advice and information on courses, grants and fees. One recommendation was for public relations officers who would be available in the community to speak with different groups:

There should be a dedicated person as a first point of contact for migrants to help them with issues around courses including financial issues. This person could be a public relations person who is available to meet with groups in the subject area and answer their questions. Some colleges hire current or past students to talk to their own native groups. There is probably a need for more than one person to be involved. Many non-Irish potential students may need encouragement to get them involved in third-level education.

Another interviewee recommended that a separate section on the website for migrants would be valuable as this was very often the first point of contact. Website links to other useful sites, such as the Citizen's Information site at www.citizensinformation.ie, or the National Access Office section of the HEA website, as well as the www.studentfinance.ie website should be included. One access officer pointed out the lack of information clarity, particularly in the absence of designated personnel:

An issue for all students, and for all mature students in particular, is a lack of advice because there is no career guidance service available to them. The careers and counselling staff should be the people advising all students.

This access officer also believed it unlikely that dedicated staff would be made available to advise migrant students in the future as, she observed, this is currently a very underdeveloped area. She believed, however, that there was potential through the Strategic Innovation Fund for all universities and institutes of technology to collectively develop resources for disseminating information, particularly since policy was the same across the national sector and therefore "it would be well worth our time coming together and establishing something like that". Another admissions officer also spoke of the importance of having specialist advisors for migrant students, giving an example of one of the practices his college has implemented:

We have had training for staff from the Irish Council for Overseas Students. They are a non-governmental organisation but act as advocates for foreign students. We brought them here to the college to train staff who are involved and interacting with migrants. These sessions were for the administration staff, but we have training sessions organised for academic staff this autumn. We are going to do a training session on different cultures and how to deal with students from various cultures, specifically this time for academic staff.

Interviewees also believed that clarity on policy and practice is essential for those dealing with migrants, particularly since so many different departments are involved in the process – the Departments of Education and Science, Social and Family Affairs, Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and others. One interviewee working in the education sector admitted that it was difficult for her to understand the various official categories of

migrants and their respective entitlements for access to education; she added that it was much more difficult for those for whom English is not their first language:

Making all the information clear regarding fees, for example what they can avail of and not avail of etc. is important. If we are bringing in non-EU students and expecting them to pay thousands of euros then the level of service they would expect should be provided.

In one institute of technology, both the access and admissions officers argued that the key issue, in relation to not properly targeting students and thus missing out on revenue, was the absence of an international office which should have responsibility for assessing and advising foreign students. Another interviewee argued that “we should be out there encouraging people to come in”.

The majority of interviewees believed that there should be specialised staff in each of the third-level colleges who would be the first point of contact in providing advice to potential migrant students.


4.4 General Policies in Relation to Migrant Students

All interviewees were asked if their colleges had any policies specifically relating to migrant students. All interviewees confirmed that there are no specific policies for migrant students in any of the participating colleges:

There is not a specific policy for migrants; our policies would cover all students, but not particularly migrants. There are some policies and supports for all minority groups that attend college. These minorities would include Travellers, handicapped and special-needs students as well as migrants. It would not be appropriate, therefore, to create a policy to cover only migrants when all the other minorities would have their own requirements.

The admissions office refers to the set criteria, as laid out in our prospectus and college handbook. There are no specific policies for migrants, but non-EU students always have questions around fees and grants. Non-EU students usually need some assistance around fees. So, when a prospective student applies for a course, the admissions office deals with the issue of fees first.

When a student enrolls here, they are first and foremost a student of this college rather than a mature student or refugee or any particular category, and that is what we as an access team focus on. We aim for full integration of all students and this has to be an institute-wide policy. At the moment we are looking at developing specialist training programmes, which will be run through the access office, for staff endeavouring to make teaching more inclusive in the classroom. We are also looking at setting up a mentoring programme so that existing mature students could mentor new-entrant mature students, for example, a second-year daytime student could mentor a first-year student in a type of buddy system. We are trying to make sure that when a student starts college that they would not feel isolated, and that they would be more aware of what is going on in college.



All administration staff interviewees concurred that access policy for migrants tends to be defined on the basis of whether one is dealing with an EU or a non-EU applicant/student. One of the interviewees suggested that general policies relating to issues of finance and fees can be readily accessed but there is a dearth of policies relating specifically to migrant groups:

Another concern I have relates to financial maintenance for foreign students after they have enrolled. They need to be made aware of various grants which they may be entitled to depending on their residency status and income. We also offer some financial help to students under a number of headings, for example, there is a hardship fund whereby if a student is suffering from severe hardship through no fault of their own and they do not have any financial aid then we would help them. We cannot obviously support them for the long haul but whatever supports are available should be documented in some form of policy documents.

Another of the access officers interviewed also believed that there should be clearer policies for migrant students:

Financial barriers are a major obstacle for foreign students but, as well as financial barriers, there is a lack of clarity on whether they can enrol on a course or not, and then once they are enrolled, there is confusion regarding what they are entitled to. For example, if they could avail of various student funds, but all of this information is not documented in any clear fashion. A booklet would be helpful for this. I know the finance office has a little booklet regarding student fees and information, but any additional documented information would also be helpful.

Another interviewee believed that his college had not been very proactive in relation to migrants, even if they have become a relatively recent addition to the college's target groups. He believed that there had been little groundwork done with migrants at the pre-entry stage, requiring these students to seek information on fees at the post-entry stage. Three of the access officers believed that it is now an opportune time to formulate policies to address the requirements of migrant students:

Given that each of the institutes of technology will soon be required to design an access policy and an access plan, an opportunity would be presented for acting more strategically in relation to migrants, particularly given the increase in demand from this cohort.

The national access office has directed that we develop an access strategy and plan which has to be tied into our strategic plan. It has to be an institute-wide access plan and policy.

What we need in all colleges is a strategist to formulate policies for migrant students. I am too busy fire-fighting and I do not have time to think strategically. What is best policy for the ordinary Irish student is not necessarily going to work for all others, so if we can just turn our thinking around a little and make it a strategic priority and push hard for inclusion of migrants we could make a difference.

One of the access officers also spoke of psychological stress among migrant students because of the lack of clear policies:


I meet a large number of migrant students who are very stressed over their finances. A bit of clarity and information would go a long way. Finding out relevant information is very difficult even for staff working in an educational institute, not to mind for those trying to get this information when English is not their native language. There are so many places that hold the fuller regulations, such as the Department of Social and Family Affairs, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and the Department of Education and Science — and these are only the main ones; it is very confusing. Making all the information clear regarding fees is important.

The majority of administrative staff interviewees spoke of policies which related solely to fees and fee structures, and admitted that these policies are complicated. Overall, the interviewees affirmed that the participating third-level colleges do not hold any collated body of policies or guidelines specifically for migrant students explaining admission entitlements and regulations on fees, which could act as a common guide to all migrant students and to administration staff dealing with admissions and fees.

4.5 Fees and Financial Considerations for Migrants

The migrants interviewed in the focus groups highlighted the issue of fees as a major barrier to their participation in third-level education. Some of the focus group participants were also unsure of the costs of courses and suggested that they would like more clarity around fees and fee structures. All the access and admissions officers interviewed agreed that the fee structures for the various categories of migrant students are confusing.

All interviewees noted that fees and grants are a major area of concern particularly for non-EU students. The admissions office will usually be the first person to deal with the issue of fees when a potential student applies for a course. In order to qualify for free fees, applicants must have been living in Ireland for at least three of the previous four years. They also need what is termed a 'Stamp 4' or 'Stamp no. 4' form (permitting residency in Ireland until a specified date) from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The onus is on the



applicant to provide proof of residency in order to qualify for a 'Stamp 4'. Household bills or P21 are deemed acceptable for proof of residency. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform lays down the guidelines regarding residency and the local VEC decides on who qualifies for third-level grants. One of the interviewed access officers stated that the different categories of fees is very complicated, not only for potential students, but also for staff members:

Dealing with increasing numbers of non-Irish students is all new to me, and it depends then on which category they are in. Are they refugees or asylum seekers and then what fees do they pay? Do they pay EU-fees, non-EU fees? It is extremely complicated, and I am only familiar with Stamp 4. I know with Stamp 4 they only have to pay registration. The refugees can have free fees and can apply for a maintenance grant, and that is clear-cut. Stamp-4 people cannot apply for a maintenance grant, but they must be registered students in the college, and then when they are registered they can avail of all the student services in the college. I find that it is very much word of mouth. If I meet with somebody then they tell their friends and then it is all the same category of people come. Students that come in have to pay €825 and that is a lot of money for them to have to pay over. The finance department or head of department or myself try to make it possible for these students to come to college; the finance department will allow them to pay in instalments. The only problem is that they pay the first instalment, then they are up on the system as being registered students and then we are chasing the second and third instalment and that is a big difficulty.

A similar viewpoint was expressed by another admissions officer:

We try not to put any more obstacles in the way of any of our students, including migrant students. We review the status of every person that applies to the college. If a student enrolls and we allow them to pay by instalments, and if there is an outstanding amount against them we would give them a review of their financial status every month. We try to be well-disposed and flexible towards all students and we would do as much as we could in terms of making life easy for them.

The high cost of fees and non-qualification for free fees was noted by all interviewees as a major barrier to education access for non-Irish potential students, and particularly for those coming from outside the European Union. One of the interviewed access officers stated:

The most obvious barrier for migrant students is the ability to pay fees. The access office and the mature access office, for example, will support any students admitted into this college on either the school-leaver access route or those who entered through the mature student access course route. The access offices, however, have no role in determining what fees the student pays. If a student is deemed not to qualify for free fees by the international office, then the access offices cannot apply for a fee waiver.

Another access officer suggested that:

We should all be working together both the institutes of technology sector and the universities sector to solve the fee problem, particularly for non-EU students. The fee situation for non-European students is absolutely crazy. They are coming here on the basis of being a refugee or an asylum seeker and they are not going to have €10,000 a year so that very first step in accessing education prevents a lot of them from ever setting a foot in the front door. The way forward has to be a joint discourse because there is nothing any individual institution can do about grants or fees.

In some institutions, a Student Assistance Fund is made available to eligible students through the access office and many migrant students require financial aid because they do not qualify for a VEC grant and do not have time to engage in part-time work. In one of the participating institutions, there is a course which is particularly popular with migrant students as it has a six-month work placement along with social welfare benefits paid throughout the duration of the course, suiting students with acute financial concerns.

One access officer recommended the introduction of a scholarship system which would specifically target students who are not entitled to EU fees, but do have residency status in Ireland. She believed this group are the most seriously disadvantaged by the current system:

One of the groups that find it hardest to access education includes those who have been living in asylum-seeker centres and clearly do not have money. I would like to see the introduction of a scholarship fund and free fees for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds whose country of origin is outside of Ireland. I would like to recommend a scholarship fund for twenty really good students every year who have residency status but do not qualify for EU fees.

The charging of fees for part-time students was identified by many interviewees as a key barrier to many potential student enrolments. Contrasting with the case of full-time courses, which are free to EU citizens, fee charges are imposed on part-time students, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, since full fees are demanded for part-time courses:

There has been no change in policy in relation to charging full fees for part-time courses and that is a huge issue. I got a document recently from the HEA asking about barriers to distance education and the barrier is fees, fees, fees. All the time, it's fees. The definition of a full-time student does not relate to the number of hours required. The definition is based on the contact hours being between 9.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.

All the interviewed admissions officers and access officers perceived that the issue of fees and financial support is a major barrier to migrant students wishing to access third-level courses. The interviewees believed that fees present real concerns to potential students, and unambiguous information on fees needs to be made transparent for staff as well as for potential students. The interviewees also suggested that broader policies in relation to fee entitlements for migrants should be more widely available and in a more user-friendly manner.



4.6 Recognition of Previous Qualifications

In the focus group interview findings, the majority of migrant students highlighted the lack of recognition of their previous qualifications and prior learning as barriers to accessing third-level courses. To gain a more in-depth insight to the practices and policies relating to the recognition of previous qualifications, all interviewees were asked to explain the current situation in their own institutions.

The majority of the interviewed admissions staff confirmed that, in their respective college, the same policies and procedures are applicable to all students regardless of nationality:

There is not a specific policy for migrants; our policies cover all students. All foreign students must observe the minimum requirements to have their previous qualifications recognised. All foreign students need to have the prerequisites for course entry, and they must have the legal requirements to enter the country, with visas, etc. This applies to students applying from within the EU, like Polish students, and those applying from outside the EU. Regarding the RPL, we do not have a separate policy for migrant students; all students have to go through the regular RPL route which is well established in the college and students are aware of this.

We have specific policies for the recognition of previous qualifications and prior learning but these policies are concerned with the rules and regulations for access to the programmes. As a general rule, our attitude is that we want to facilitate people, and our approach is if people want to study here, irrespective of what their ethnic origin is, we favour doing everything we can to admit them. We know that means more for the migrant student than it does for the standard Irish applicant, so we would be well disposed towards migrant students applying through these routes. However, there is a set of rules that have to be complied with: the first rule is the academic entry requirement and that must be met first. The second issue on enrolling through these routes concerns the various categories of migrant students, for example EEA and non-EEA residents, as residency is a big issue for people who come from outside the EEA.

In relation to those applying through the CAO as a school-leaver, qualifications attained at the end of the second-level system in some countries were not recognised as equivalent to the Irish Leaving Certificate. Many of the interviewed admissions officers highlighted the plight of students in relation to some professional bodies, which do not recognise qualifications obtained in certain countries. This poses difficulties for colleges in allowing potential students to access some postgraduate courses:

One of the cohorts of students we deal with includes people who have obtained medical and dental qualifications in other jurisdictions, and who want to practise in Ireland. This cohort looks for postgraduate courses. One of the biggest problems we have is that the professional bodies do not necessarily recognise their foreign qualifications. Even though these students are qualified some professional bodies here do not recognise their qualifications. Their registration for postgraduate courses depends on their ability to register with a professional body, and if they cannot register they cannot access the postgraduate course. The main difficulties arise with veterinary, medicine and dentistry. Recently, I was dealing with a couple where both qualified as dentists in Iran and had refugee status here but their qualifications were not recognised by the dentistry council. Our requirements demand that all postgraduate students are recognised with the professional bodies, so that is not a college issue as such, it is an issue for the professional bodies.

Regarding previous qualifications and prior learning, all of the interviewed admissions officers believed that the policies and procedures which are in place in their respective institutions are clear and transparent. The interviewees suggested that individual students who apply to have their previous qualifications and prior learning recognised are all treated equally, regardless of their country of origin. The interviewed admissions officers stressed that it is important to ensure that the minimum entry requirements for all courses are met by all students. The interviewees, however, did suggest that a dedicated contact person should be identified in each college to deal with queries from foreign students in relation to these specific policies and broader questions. One admissions officer summarised the current situation:

The admission of migrant students is a growing area, and more and more questions are coming to the admissions office every day, and to be quite honest we do not have the time nor the expertise to deal with the queries.





4.7 How Are Previous Qualifications Assessed?

The focus group findings confirmed that many migrants were unaware of the procedures for having their previous qualifications assessed. Additionally, there was a perceived lack of information among participants regarding the initial approaches they should make to their local third-level education provider regarding assessing their previous qualifications. All of the admissions officers and access officers interviewed were asked to explain how previous qualifications achieved in an applicant's home country are assessed.

Interviewees explained that qualifications were generally assessed using information available through a number of international qualifications databases. The main such database was UK NARIC (United Kingdom National Recognition Information Centre). UK NARIC is the official body entrusted by Britain's Department for Education and Skills to provide information and advice on the comparability of international qualifications with those in Britain. UK NARIC compares qualifications from over 180 countries. An Australian version of this database is now available, and one institution participating in the current study was in the process of signing up to the Australian service. Interviewees stated that experience has shown that, though a qualification may initially seem valid and relevant, external advice is often required when deciding on relevance. Citing the external standard is also important when relating a negative judgement to a student whose qualification is not deemed appropriate for a successful application to the institution, and it is useful to have the rationale for that decision supported by an external body, staffed by personnel whose sole role is to thoroughly research these qualifications.

All NUI admissions officers, for example, have a working document relating to all European qualifications, based on a synthesis of information from agencies like UK NARIC and their own accumulated evidence. The NUI defines, for each country, what exams and qualifications are valid in Ireland for the recognition of prior learning. There may also be additional matriculation requirements which should be met. If a student, for example, wishes to study French, there is a matriculation requirement for having achieved at least a Higher Level C grade in the Leaving Certificate and therefore a prospective student will have to demonstrate equivalency in this. A student, therefore, may be eligible for one programme but not another. Each student's application must be examined on a case-by-case basis and all NUI admissions officers will liaise in making a decision on an unusual application. In relation to non-EU applications, there are basic standards which have been set, but students may also have to prove additional competencies or higher grades for specific courses. In the past, some students whose qualifications were not initially recognised returned to study a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) course and successfully gained access in the subsequent year through this route. One participant institution has a policy of not providing foundation level courses, so students are referred to colleges of further education in the area which provide FETAC courses.

One of the interviewed access officers argued that a more uniform approach is required when attempting to assess prior qualifications, and she suggested there was a need for all third-level education providers to standardise their approaches to recognising such qualifications:


The recognition of foreign qualifications is a bit of a hot potato. I have spoken to other access officers around the country to see if we could approach this jointly because the difficulty is that each institution seems to be doing its own thing around how it views these qualifications. There needs to be a joint process so that a baseline would be established and that would have to come both from the universities and institutes of technology. We need a standardised process which would be a one-stop solution application process for having foreign qualifications recognised. A further challenge for us is that sometimes applicants do not have the paperwork from their country of origin and we are going to have to find a way by means of an entrance test or something else to confirm the ability of an individual to take the course based on their own previous experience and previous qualifications. This would be particularly common among asylum seekers as the majority of them do not have any of the paperwork. If a person is dashing out of a country they are not going to be in a position to gather up the required paperwork.

One of the admissions officer from an institute of technology explained the procedures for institutes of technology in relation to equating foreign qualifications with the Irish Leaving Certificate:

We are a member of the Institutes of Technology Central Evaluation Forum (IOTCEF). This is a subgroup of the Council of Registrars. This body assesses foreign qualifications and equates them with the Irish Leaving Cert. A CAO rating is created based on the comparison of these qualifications. I am part of this body and every year we meet and we assess all the foreign applicants and we try match the foreign qualifications with the Irish Leaving Cert and then we come up with a rating and that rating represents the score that a foreign applicant gets. That is all carefully documented and subscribed to by all the institutes of technology. When we are doing the assessment, the students have to have all of their necessary documentations translated, for example, a student from China would have to have their documents translated into English in order for us to be able to do a comparison. The students know this in advance. We have a book explaining all of this and I think there are 120 countries documented in it. In the book, there is a synopsis of the foreign qualifications and an explanation of how to equate them to Irish qualifications. It is clear and obvious to everybody what is involved.

Many colleges also liaise with the NQAI for fact-finding and briefing exercises which help to raise awareness of the issue of recognising foreign qualifications. Some staff had invited members of staff from the NQAI to visit their colleges and inform staff members of the procedures involved in having foreign qualifications recognised. The interviewees suggested that they liaise with the NQAI, particularly in relation to postgraduate applications, as the previously mentioned book which deals with matching foreign qualifications to Leaving Certificate results relates to undergraduate applications only. The following quotations illustrate some of the responses from admissions officers in relation to the assessment of foreign qualifications:

I've had interaction with the NQAI and I've always found them very cooperative. Members of their staff have come here to the college and we talked about a lot of things. I found their information very important and they will be useful to us in the future. They are a national agency which advises people like ourselves and it is well informed in terms of various foreign qualifications.



The college does recognise non-Irish qualifications. The applicant must provide the college with a transcript of results. If these are in a foreign language, they must be translated by a recognised translator. The onus is on the applicant to provide this information. Difficult cases are sent to the NQAI for review and decision.

One of the interviewed admissions officer working in a college with a large intake of Polish students said the college now has leaflets available in Polish which provide relevant information for these students. The college has also advertised in foreign languages, but the admissions officer added, “I’m not too sure how successful it has been”. All interviewees again stressed that minimum entry requirements must be met by all foreign students. This applies to students applying from both within and outside the EU.

4.8 Recognition of Prior Learning

A closely related area to the recognition of prior qualifications is the recognition of prior learning (RPL). All interviewees were asked to explain their procedures for recognising prior learning in relation to migrant students. Analysis of the data illustrated that there was some variance in policy around the RPL. One participant institution does not currently have a policy on recognition of prior experiential learning, though this is being developed at the moment:

Existing qualifications for migrants are one thing, but recognising prior learning procedures is something we are all agonising over. This is a very live issue for us at the moment and we hope to have a system in place shortly whereby we will be able to assess people’s prior knowledge for the purposes of admission and for the purposes of exemptions and so on. We are part of a project under the Strategic Innovation Fund in relation to RPL, and SIF provides a forum for consultation between the colleges involved. There are definitely other people working on the same type of processes for other institutions but I am not aware of any central co-ordination for the RPL process. We have an officer employed here to create the system and she has it at an advanced stage. The more standardisation we have relating to RPL the better across the institutes of technology network and I would definitely welcome more interaction between all of our institutes.

One college has a central unit which processes non-Irish applications, with a designated officer for the recognition of all prior learning applications. Other colleges also have well-developed policies in the areas of accreditation and RPL:

We have a very good RPL system here in the college and we have a dedicated person who deals with all RPL queries, however, there is not a separate policy which deals with foreign students. The RPL policy is the same for all students regardless of their country of origin. A lot of the staff here would not be familiar with the operations of RPL but they would refer all applicants to the RPL staff member. I don’t think many foreigners would have knowledge that RPL is available to them. We are a very large college and we get a lot of queries from both Irish and foreign students in relation to RPL. Very recently, the college has appointed an RPL Officer and now all queries are passed on to that office.

One of the interviewed access officers interviewed suggested that:

Word of mouth regarding RPL is very important. If we could develop a policy booklet in relation to RPL and advertise it through immigrant centres and all the other agencies which deal with this sector it would be good. We need to get the information about RPL out to these particular groups as they do not know where to go for information. It would also be a good idea to have a separate section on our website for migrants as very often the college website is the first point of contact. Information such as RPL and the assessing of foreign qualifications could be included there. A very good website is the Citizens Information one, and lately the National Access Office has launched a new website called studentfinance.ie and in it there is a very small section on migrants. If we could even do a link to these from our own website that would be good because there is no point in putting the same information up again.

All of the interviewees believed that migrants should be encouraged to avail of the RPL and the recognition of previous qualifications. One admissions officer added:

I would be quite in favour of positive discrimination for the RPL to help migrants because we have the scope to do it on most of our courses so why not do it? I would be very well disposed towards that. We do not have a college RPL policy in place yet but I certainly would not be putting any obstacles in their way. Our main objective for admitting any students under the RPL system is that they have the ability to complete the course and for migrant students it would be important to ensure that they have sufficient reading, writing, understanding, and numeracy skills.

Overall, RPL provision and policy was quite uneven among participating colleges. In colleges where RPL has been established for a number of years, interviewees believe that the process works well for most Irish and non-Irish students. One of these interviewees suggested that it is important for migrant students to realise that their prior learning can be recognised in two main categories. The first category deals with the recognition for learning which already has formal certification within the education system. The second category deals with the recognition of learning gained through experiences in the workplace, in voluntary work, or elsewhere. The system allows for learning to be measured and recognised regardless of where it was gained.

4.9 English Language Skills

As identified in the previous chapter, members of the focus groups identified the lack of competence with spoken and textual English as a major barrier to third-level education. All the access and admissions officers interviewed concurred and identified English language skills as a matter of priority for non-Irish students. Confidence and competency in the English language was consistently referred to by all interviewees as crucial for academic success for migrant students. Even where students present with the necessary qualifications and standards, as demonstrated through tests such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System), the demands of academic English was seen to be very challenging for any student for whom English was not his/her mother tongue and was not sufficiently bilingual.

The following quotations summarise the views of the interviewed admissions officers:

One of the biggest problems is the language issue and having the ability to communicate in English. We have structures in place which allow us to deal with foreign qualifications, and if they have illustrated that the student has English up to a certain level then we accept it. That does not always work because, in the last few years, we have had quite a number of Chinese students who were having English language difficulties even though they met our entry requirements.

Lack of competence in the English language is a big problem. Our courses are run through the medium of English, and there is a lot of technical language in the science and engineering courses. A lot of migrants would not have very good English, and it can create problems for people dealing with them. We are trying to find a way to help ethnic minorities with English language skills. Recently, we established contact with an English language college in town and we are trying to set up an arrangement whereby if people come here to college and if they do not have sufficient English they could do a six-month course there to build up their English skills. I know some universities run English courses specifically for their own students, so we could perhaps imitate that.

All interviewees believed that English language skills are difficult to assess and some colleges have put measures in place such as:

We try not to obscure the culture of migrant students but if they do not have the English requirement we will tell them that we need them to take an interview and to write an essay of about 500 words. We give them every opportunity but we also have to be aware that there are students out there who want to get into Ireland for reasons other than education, and they might not be always upfront with us in that regard. We have to be conscious of that, but we also have rules and regulations for residency status; if students meet our requirements in these regards they are very welcome here. We generally give most students the benefit of the doubt and say to them if you want to study we will accommodate you. I would be in favour of making studying here as easy as possible for them.

One of the access officers also spoke of the possibility of introducing an English examination at the pre-entry stage:

I was speaking to colleagues in our registrar's office recently and they were also concerned about the competence of people in reading and writing English. At the moment we do not offer them an opportunity to sit an English exam but that might be something we should look at. One of the students that came to me had good English but he could not understand the accent of one lecturer, and he also said that the lecturer spoke very quickly. If the information was written he could make it out, but he found lectures very difficult. This raises the whole question of staff development for migrants, and dealing with diversity in the classroom, etc. First of all, we need to get migrant students to prove that their English is good enough to study here, and second, the whole lot of issues around staff development needs to be looked at.

Furthermore, interviewees noted that, while a student may have good spoken English, their level of written English may not be of a high enough standard for third level, particularly when they have difficulties with spelling and punctuation. Classes are available in some institutions through language centres, but interviewees pointed out that students have to pay for such classes. FETAC courses were identified as particularly valuable for preparing students in English language training for third-level education. Some colleges demand students to demonstrate competency in written English language skills, though not all colleges do so. In particular, technical language within science and engineering, for example, posed major difficulties for students and this was perceived to be creating major problems for lecturers involved in teaching such courses.

4.10 Support Services for Migrant Students


The interviewed participants, both in the focus groups and in the access/admission offices, identified additional barriers facing migrant students throughout all regions. Admission and access officers were asked if their colleges provided any additional support services to help migrant students to overcome these barriers. They responded, however, that none of the participating institutions had support services designed specifically for migrants. As some interviewees pointed out, there are many services available to the student population as a whole, but none available solely to migrant students. While interviewees across all the participating colleges believed that the same services should be available to all students and that migrant students should be treated in the same manner as every student, they acknowledged that some additional support services could be provided. At the same time, the interviewees pointed out that it would be inappropriate to generalise by assuming that every migrant student would experience the same difficulties, given the diversity within these groups.

One of the interviewed admissions officers suggested:

We are not doing enough for migrant students. We need to get information out to them because some of them are coming into the country and they do not have a clue where to turn to for the information they need. At the beginning, third-level courses will probably not be on their minds, but after a while they begin to look around and they see it as an option. So, there is a need for us to get information out there and to be more supportive towards these groups.

Another access officer suggested providing support through staff training and awareness:

When academic staff are coming here for the first time, they are given a module on dealing with staff with disabilities as part of their induction training. Their induction should also include an access module so that it covers issues like barriers facing migrant students. This should be a matter of course for everybody employed here. At the moment, we have excellent staff who are very accommodating and make extra efforts for migrant students, but this is at an individual rather level rather than an institutional level. Institutionally speaking, we do not have the same approach and we don't seem to be able to capture that personal interaction. As an institution we are poor on policies across the board. I have come across very few policy documents in this office on how we should deal with certain issues, and I know some people raise their eyes to heaven about policy documents, but I believe we can make a policy document a living thing. We are doing an exams policy document for students with disabilities, for example, so there should definitely be more policies and supports for migrant students.



An access officer also commented:

I cannot ever see that in the future we will have a dedicated person to deal with migrants, but this is an area which needs to be supported and developed and will take time. First, if we had all the information gathered ourselves for migrant students, that would be a big support but that would be a huge task. If we could get all the partners in the SIF project to distribute information about their colleges, and a lot of it would be fairly similar, it would be well worth our time coming together to provide something like a co-ordinated and comprehensive information source.



Another access officer pointed out that her college is unlikely to provide additional support for migrants unless the college authorities specifically target and recruit students from this cohort. She argued that support systems should be developed to address the needs of all students, regardless of nationality, residency or citizenship status:

I would prefer us not to specifically target ethnic minorities as a group, as this could unnecessarily treat them as 'different' from students in general. I would much prefer us to have good supports in place for our whole student body — a system which recognises diversity and student needs. Those supports should equally meet the needs of a student from Donegal or a migrant. Recognition of diversity and recognition of different needs on campus as a general policy will also support the migrant student. I have a problem with singling out student sectors, whoever they are and wherever they are from. Additional support should be available to any student who needs it. People have needs which can be temporary or transitory and needs change; sometimes students cope successfully and sometimes they do not. The system should be flexible enough for any supports which are available to be used by all students. I would like to see an integrated support and learning centre.

Overall, there are no additional support services currently in place for migrant students in participating colleges. All interviewees are aware of the lack of support services and they particularly highlighted the lack of information available at the pre-entry stage to college. All of the interviewees expressed enthusiastic support or hope for the idea of providing institutional support services in future, but emphasised that such supports must be resourced and proactively inclusive for migrant applicants/students.

4.11 Staff Training and Development

All interviewed access and admissions officers were asked if their colleges had any staff training and development sessions in relation to the needs of migrant students. All believed that intercultural training is very necessary for staff, and that this must be approached sensitively to avoid any stigmatisation of migrant students or for other groups who feel discriminated against, as one access officer suggested:

Staff training and development in relation to dealing with migrants is badly needed but it needs to be approached properly. We do not want to alienate this group even further or to make other groups feel discriminated against.

Other Interviewees concurred with the above quotation and believed that, although staff training should facilitate a better understanding of cultural issues, it should not promote differential treatment. Another interviewee declared that staff development should include the raising of awareness about issues and difficulties encountered by migrant students.



One of the admissions officers stated:

We have started training staff in relation to the needs of migrant students. It is something we are very conscious of and over the past couple of years we got different staff to meet with various agencies that deal with migrants, for example, engaging with staff from the NQAI and with the Irish Council of Overseas Students, etc. We recently had our first part of staff training on managing ethnic diversity and managing the non-Irish student. Staff need to be aware of these and other issues. Soon we will have a session for the teaching staff or for anybody in the college who wants to attend, and this session will be specifically geared towards dealing with migrant students and the difficulties they encounter in reading and writing in their non-native language. We also have a session planned on ethnic diversity and issues that arise around that in an educational establishment.

All interviewees agreed that if they had additional resources to train and develop staff in their institutions they would be in favour of introducing awareness-raising sessions. They did caution, however, that this training should be professionally provided and should aim to make policies for migrant students more inclusive.

4.12 Targeting Migrant Students

All administrative staff interviewees were asked if their college actively targets migrant students. The interviewees noted that most institutions do not specifically target migrants but many suggested that this was in the context where demand for places currently far exceeds the availability of places. Interviewees generally believed, however, that colleges should target such groups, as reflected in the following quotations from two admissions officers:

This town and surrounding area has a large population of non-Irish who could be targeted to attract them into third-level education. They may need encouragement. Migrant students are a diverse group and there are no groups or clubs set up here in college yet which would help them specifically. The information technology support course and the access course are our two main courses that attract migrants. The information technology support course is a practical 18-month course, which does not demand a huge commitment in terms of time, but it introduces the students to third-level education.

Students from different backgrounds always require different kinds of targeting. The successful way in which our college has targeted non-traditional students (e.g. on the basis of socio-economic status or students with a disability) may prove to be a useful model for targeting migrant students. Additionally, students from other cultures may often require additional supports to retain them in college after the initial targeting.

Another admissions officer illustrated the method used by his college to specifically target migrant students:

I put an advertisement in Polish in the local press recently about an open evening here in the college. We also contacted the Polish community through the local priest, as the Poles are the biggest non-Irish community here. I still think there is more we could do to target migrants in terms of getting information out there and making contact with them.

Two admissions officers spoke of targeting non-EU students, particularly for disciplines which are experiencing falling numbers, for example:

Very recently, senior staff from the Science Faculty here in college went to India on a trade mission and they are now fostering links with colleges in India. India is one of the places that we get very few applicants from, this initiative may increase our population of Indian students.

The college actively seeks to recruit international students. It does this through various media and as part of broader delegations to their countries. We also target students through the Mature Student Access course and we promote this in all of the migrant media. We also provide information sessions for migrant students through community and advocacy groups.


Other interviewees also believed that colleges would probably begin to target migrant students if demand for courses fell in the future. As one admissions officer stated:

We do not target ethnic minority students, but, we are now currently in a situation where our demand far exceeds our availability for places. Generally, there are very few cohorts of students specifically targeted. If, in the future, demand were falling, we would then engage in all types of marketing.

Another admissions officer believed that if colleges were to target migrant students the most effective way to do so would be within migrants' own communities:

If we decided that we were going to target migrants, or if we decided that we wanted to have different quotas, and if migrants became an identified group, then I would do that through the communities that represent them. If we decided we wanted to target the Polish community for example, we would liaise with the local Polish community. Unless we have set a target to increase particular quotas, a targeted marketing strategy would not be developed.

Another interviewee, however, commented that, if colleges decide to target migrant communities, this should be undertaken in a very inclusive manner, as "targeting such students can make them feel exposed". That interviewee suggested that, as most towns and cities now have a large population of migrants, they could be targeted in an inclusive manner and encouraged to enter third-level education. Some colleges already target such groups through adult education exhibitions run by the Vocational Education Committees.



One of the access officers commented that a key difficulty in targeting and recruiting migrant students was that most were engaged in full-time employment and therefore had little time to access higher-level courses. She believed, however, that this is a barrier which is faced not only by migrants but by all employees. She also observed an increasing trend by the third-level education providers towards targeting people in the workplace for further training and education:

There is a lot of energy devoted to targeting people in the workplace in order to pursue higher education. Migrants are a subgroup of this cohort. But, first we need to develop a policy for all people in employment who wish to access higher education before we can develop policies for migrants. The current issue for upskilling the Irish indigenous workforce is a huge task, but it is an area we need to work on. Migrants are a subgroup of the larger employed population, but, we need to develop policies which extend beyond this group.

One admissions officer argued that the conditions of access to education for full-time employees were so complex that they created barriers to education enrolment. The same interviewee added that the necessity for improving systems of recognition of prior learning and experiential learning were key in targeting those in employment who wished to upskill or engage in higher education:

We have people from outside the EU who are employed in pharmaceutical companies or information technology companies, and they would often ask if there is a course at graduate level in which they could enrol, but when they are working full-time in industry it is very difficult, it is almost an impossibility. But these issues are not specific to migrants; Irish people face the same difficulties. How do they upskill while still maintaining status as a fulltime employee? It is a broader issue affecting everyone and not just affecting migrants. Unless there is a system for the recognition of informal learning, potential students are effectively looking at a four-year programme, which on a part-time basis might take eight years. If the recognition of prior experiential learning cannot be factored in, this approach is not going to be feasible. The main policies that I would like to see developed in this college would be the RPL, both formal and informal, and providing people who are in full-time employment with additional opportunities to engage in higher education. These policies would also benefit migrants.

In summary, administrative staff interviewees believed that migrant students are generally treated the same as all other students. Most of the participating institutions do not specifically target migrants, but many interviewees believed that this is a cohort which should benefit from promotional material aimed at addressing their particular needs. One institution has produced specific promotional material for migrants, for example, some recently acquired funding for access was spent on developing booklets in different languages. Some interviewees also believed that the strategic innovation fund should make provision for more targeted and more specific focus on migrants in the near future. One participant believed that word-of-mouth promotion arising from efficient and supportive admission practices along with provision for delivery of courses to migrants was a very important marketing tool. It was also suggested that third-level colleges should form and maintain stronger connections with organisations working in the voluntary and community sectors. These connections should provide positive and useful input to developing policy and promotional materials, particularly since many potential students do not know where to go for information.

4.13 Summary Observations

The views of the access and admissions officers interviewed for this report concurred with the findings from the focus group observations that there is great difficulty in readily ascertaining relevant regulations governing access to third-level education for potential migrant students. The interviewed administrative staff shared the view with migrant interviewees that a co-ordinated and up-to-date single database should be developed and maintained. These interviewees also shared the view that ready access to this information, specific to the needs of migrants, would benefit not only the students but also the staff in each third-level college. One of the most significant problems identified from this set of interviews was the lack of dedicated personnel to specifically deal with queries and questions relating to migrant students. There is clearly a need for a staff member in each college to be available and trained to deal with migrants and their specific issues at the pre-entry stage. As illustrated, the prevailing system operates on an ad hoc basis, and as one interviewee succinctly stated, “it really depends on whose lap the query falls”.

These interviewees, coinciding with the focus group interviewees, also identified English language difficulties, high fees, the lack of recognition of previous qualifications, and the lack of RPL, as the major barriers facing migrants when accessing third-level education. These challenges present opportunities to build on further institutional collaboration, now being developed through the strategic innovation fund, to promote access, transfer, and progression for all students, with a particular focus on the needs of migrants.



5.0 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from interviews conducted with representatives of various stakeholders including:

- Construction Industry Federation
- Fáilte Ireland
- FÁS
- HETAC (Higher Education and Training Awards Council)
- IBEC (Irish Business and Employers Confederation)
- IVEA (Irish Vocational Education Association)
- Irish Hotels Federation
- Hotel Managers (Jurys Doyle Hotels; Radisson Hotels)
- Director of Immigrant Support Centre
- Intercultural Training Consultant.

The research findings provide a snap shot of the main issues under investigation from the perspective of interviewed stakeholders. An interview guide was prepared and used by all interviewers to gain answers to the questions under investigation. As a diverse group of stakeholders was chosen for interview, some questions were specifically directed at employers and employer bodies while others were directly relevant to education authorities, and NGOs (non-governmental organisations). Appendix D contains a full list of questions from which appropriate interview questions were drawn for the different types of interviewees. These interviewees were chosen for a variety of reasons, including: expertise in the areas under investigation; responsibilities for recruiting migrant workers; being representatives of bodies with strategic responsibilities for policies and practices in higher education; or for having professional involvement with migrants.

5.1 Impressions of Migrant Workers as Employees

As illustrated in previous chapters, many migrant workers have high levels of third-level education, but are employed at levels which do not reflect their educational attainments. In an attempt to establish if this occupational gap impacted on their work performance, interviewees were asked about their impressions of migrant workers. All stakeholders commented on the invaluable contribution of migrant workers to the national economy. Migrants working in the tourism and hospitality sector, for example, accounted for an estimated 35% of Ireland's total workforce of a quarter of a million. All interviewees representing the tourism and hospitality industries praised the contribution of migrant workers regarding their work ethic:

Given the growth which the hospitality sector has experienced, that growth could not have been achieved without a skilled workforce and the large contribution of foreign nationals. The growth could not have been sustained without them. From that point of view, they have certainly made a valuable contribution. I have heard very positive accounts from the human resource managers regarding foreign workers in the hotels I have contacted (Fáilte Ireland representative).

The majority of hotels I have heard from have said very positive things, especially with regard to attendance and punctuality. Migrants never phone in sick. In general migrant workers are very pleasant to work with (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Migrants are excellent workers; they have very low absenteeism rates and they illustrate a willingness to work hard (Hotel representative).

Similarly, both the Construction Industry Federation and the IBEC representatives believed that migrants have a positive contribution to make:

We have had very, very good feedback from our members regarding migrant workers. They are diligent, hard working and are willing to learn, and they are given every opportunity to partake in training courses which would help them adapt to the cultural environment of working in Ireland. Workers from some countries place a great deal of emphasis on procedure. This can sometimes lead to confusion/misunderstanding about Irish flexibility in relation to the process of work (Construction Industry Federation representative).

Migrants have the same basic needs and wants as all other workers and have a positive contribution to make to the workplace. My overall impression of them is favourable, and it is important for them to be positively treated to enable them to fully integrate in their workplaces (IBEC representative).

Respondents also believed that in relation to the promotion of employees within the hospitality industry there were no discriminatory practices. Employers believed that many migrants succeeded well in the Irish labour market and their work performances were rewarded accordingly:


A lot of foreign nationals here are frequently promoted. We look at individuals, not nationalities (Hotel representative).

*We produce a magazine called *Get a Life*, which encourages second-level students to enter the hospitality and tourism sector, and for the past two years the Employee of the Year award has gone to foreign nationals (Irish Hotels Federation representative).*

Respondents noted that within their industries there was generally no evidence of discrimination or racism in relation to any of their organisational practices or procedures. Interestingly, however, interviewees reported instances of racism from clients, and found this particularly evident within the hospitality sector:

Racism is a bit of a problem. There is a perception from the public that the sector is saturated with foreign workers (Hotel representative).

Some staff in the industry have been on the receiving end of nasty comments from customers, such as 'Can you get me someone who speaks English?', when the person is perfectly capable of dealing with their queries (Hotel representative).



One of the education-authority interviewees, however, commented that racism may act as a barrier to migrant education and employment:

Racism may be an issue – maybe cultural and religious discrimination in the workplace – although we have no direct experience of such discrimination (Education-authority representative).

The interviewed Director of an Immigrant Support Centre, however, believes that racism is a serious barrier for access to employment, particularly for Africans:

Racism is a big problem for accessing employment, particularly among black people. A lot of black Africans are finding it very, very hard to find employment at the moment. If a black person is competing against an Irish person for a job it is obvious that there are racist issues there. One of the colleges that we deal with here also told me that they find it very difficult to get work placements for black African students. When they come to the end of the course they are left with black African students, as employers tend not to want to give them work placements. So, there is an opportunity for third-level colleges and employers to work more closely to formulate policies in relation to work placements (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

One of the interviewees who participated in this research was an Intercultural Training Consultant specialising in cross-cultural issues in organisations, cultural training, and cultural coaching. That interviewee believes that the cultural diversity among migrant workers has a very positive contribution to make to Irish organisations and Irish society. She also believes that the talents and valuable contributions of these workers could be further harnessed through fostering mutual respect and co-operation among different cultures in the workplace:

Service providers should engage in preparing migrants for living and working in Ireland by giving them some basic information regarding working in Ireland. This should include culture, business and social ethics, and networking (Intercultural Training Consultant).

She concluded by stating:

Cultural adjustment, information and understanding of the infrastructure, and negative attitudes all act as barriers to the integration of migrants into Ireland, to its education systems and workplaces.

The Construction Industry Federation interviewee and the IBEC interviewee also emphasised the importance of inter-cultural training:

Migrants may not have enough understanding of Irish employment policies and practices and Irish culture in general, when they first arrive. There are opportunities to provide further cross-cultural skills training in the workplace. Migrants need to be confident enough to act as individuals in organisations, and to have the courage to raise a query as an individual, the same way as an Irish employee would do. Some employers provide newspapers for migrants in their native languages in order to help them feel welcome in their places of work (IBEC representative).


The challenges of adapting to a very different cultural working environment are difficult. When a working culture is very different and English language skills are poor, then adapting to the new workplace can be a big barrier. We try to do everything we can to make this cross-cultural transition easy for our very many workers in the construction sector by providing as much information as we can (Construction Industry Federation representative).

In summary, the findings from the interviews conducted with industry stakeholders on their impressions of migrant workers are all very positive. None of the interviewees referred to any prior work experience or the qualifications of their migrant workers, illustrating that employers are primarily interested in filling vacancies rather than investigating what level of qualification levels are held by prospective employees. This research finding concurs with findings from focus group participants who also suggested that employers depend on migrants, particularly in the hospitality industry, to ensure the smooth running of their organisations, but are not interested in taking prior qualifications into account. Perhaps, employers need to look closer at prior learning and prior qualifications when hiring migrant workers in order to ensure that these workers can achieve their full potential. Achieving a better 'fit' between prior learning and current job requirements should also ensure a better rate of retention of migrant workers.

5.2 Access to Education and Training

One of the findings emerging from the focus groups' research was that employers generally did not seem to be interested in employees accessing further education or training. In order to gain a better understanding of this perception, industry stakeholders were asked about their opinions on migrants' access to education. Employers were reluctant to offer support to an employee to attend full-time courses as they perceived this would negatively impact on their work performance:

Our experience would be that, because of labour shortages, it would not make sense for employers to promote full-time education (Fáilte Ireland representative).



Employers, however, recognised the advantages of third-level education and training for all their employees, regardless of nationality, and were supportive of flexible learning options. The interviewed employers believed that arrangements for flexible and work-based learning would be easier to accommodate within the work context:

We believe that what happens regarding education and training should be 70% work-based learning and 30% should be learning-based through college. We would support block release courses, online learning etc (Fáilte Ireland representative).

Our hotel sponsors a lot of foreign workers to attend block release programmes (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

It is very important for migrants to have access to further education and training and at present many migrants are finding it very hard to access middle level jobs. In all countries there are lower level and middle level jobs and it is very hard for migrants in any country to break into the middle level jobs without access to additional education and training (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

Obviously access to third-level education broadens the horizons of everybody. It is important to improve access for migrants by giving them every opportunity available to access third-level education in Ireland. It is also important for migrants to see the relationship between third-level education and achievement and success (IBEC representative).

Employers also agreed that the many benefits of further education for employees in employment should be contingent on the individual employee's performance:

Certainly if hotel owners or managers see a commitment from their staff they are more than willing to support them with regard to furthering their education (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Respondents from the hospitality industry spoke of funding opportunities offered by hotel employers for employees who may wish to invest in upskilling staff:

There is a lot of funding for training in the hospitality sector. Some of the bigger hotel chains who have a greater emphasis on training have no problems paying fees for staff to attend courses (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Employers spoke of recruiting migrant workers with very different levels of skills and education. Employers who recruited migrant workers through EURES (The European Job Mobility Portal) found that this cohort typically does not have previous third-level qualifications, but employers will often provide them with educational opportunities to reach a FETAC Level-4 award. Generally, all respondents spoke positively about the benefits of training and further education for their staff, and added that they do support staff members who are interested in pursuing education.

Certainly, we would support anyone interested in further education. A FETAC Level-4 award will get them into the system and then they would be supported in progressing and building transferable credits (Fáilte Ireland representative).


I believe that third-level colleges should work, together with employers, to put policies in place for upskilling all workers including migrants, particularly, as the economy is in recession. Ireland became too dependent on the construction industry, but now it really needs to move to a knowledge economy and to invest in upskilling workers. There should be a focus on education in conjunction with work in order to upskill workers now that the jobs in construction are gone. Technicians and general operatives should be upskilled and a lot more work needs to be done to ascertain what upskilling is needed. There is need for serious thinking and strategic planning around providing courses for workers. The unemployed should also be targeted as they are now really struggling to get jobs (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

We are in favour of facilitating and supporting all staff in further training. We would allow them to do exams orally if necessary. Construction workers can go on training courses with ourselves, or some large construction companies also provide their own training. We are very much in favour of any initiatives which promote education and upskilling of workers, at all levels, to make the industry more competitive, and to make sure our workers are better equipped with necessary skills to face the global challenges that the construction industry is currently facing. We encourage workers to talk to their human resource manager in their company first. We would then try to offer advice and support. We deal with thousands of queries, and we are delighted to give any help or advice on upskilling. We have a Level 6 Certificate in Construction Administration and we offer as much information as we can to help all our workers (Construction Industry Federation representative).

The education stakeholders interviewed also stated that they are very aware of the difficulties and barriers faced by migrant students, and are attempting to make third-level education accessible to all students. These interviewees highlighted that they offer induction, integration, and cultural training through the English Speaking Other Language (ESOL) programme which is accredited by the Advisory Council for English language schools, though it was acknowledged that this process is still at a developmental stage:

To date the translation of policies into other languages is incomplete. However, a study of ESOL across post-primary level and further education is due to be published shortly. This report will also have a list of recommendations which should be of benefit to all students (Education-authority representative).

Another education stakeholder interviewee believed that access to higher education and training was important for migrants themselves, for employers, and for the Irish labour market. The following interview extract argues for the importance of developing stronger links between third-level education providers and employers, and this could be achieved by having more work placements included in academic programmes:



It is important for individual learners, employers and the Irish economy to have third-level graduates. Third-level qualifications appear to be highly valued by Irish employers and by Irish society in general, and serve as a necessary prerequisite for working in a competitive environment for all those residing in Ireland regardless of ethnic origin. The National Skills Strategy is focussed on upskilling the Irish workforce with specific stated targets. The funding agencies are also focusing on projects to enhance collaboration between employers/industry and education providers to implement a range of life-long learning initiatives which could be further strengthened by inclusion of more work placements (Education-authority representative).

In an attempt to widen access for migrants, an initiative relating to assessing their English language proficiency has been introduced in some third-level colleges. One of the interviewed education stakeholders noted that overseas students are facilitated with induction programmes and with skills for the assessment of oral and written language and communication, to determine if additional tutorials are required. The level of additional training provided, however, is variable:

The assessment of English language skills is a matter for the education provider and depends on the number of overseas learners present in a university or institute of technology (Education-authority representative).

One participant made a cautionary observation on the apparent widespread presumption of homogeneity of migrant workers, a caution that should be considered when developing education and training in employment programmes for this cohort:

There are clear and distinct differences in all groups relative to age of the learner, their role in the family, etc. While general anecdotal remarks are made regarding all groups, e.g. "Polish are hard workers", "Africans value education", etc, it is difficult to make hard and fast judgements about any particular ethnic group. It is clear that flexible modular programmes are desirable for migrants in accessing education and employment (Education-authority representative).

It is clear from the above findings that stronger links need to be established between employers and third-level education providers to ensure that migrant workers are given opportunities to access third-level education and training while in employment. Work-based training and education is ideally suited to serve this need. Work-based learning offers scope for developing further employer engagement with higher education colleges in the design, development, implementation, and delivery of work-based learning programmes. The primary source of continuing skilled labour supply is, and will continue to be, achieved through the training of, development of, and learning by individuals. In effect, from the perspective of employers, the focus is on workforce development – the upskilling of an organisation's employees at a higher level. Unlike other forms of learning, work-based learning has the great advantage of being directly related to the needs of employers and/or the employment needs of those in work. An opportunity, therefore, exists for developing and formalising work-based learning partnerships between employers and third-level education providers in order to broaden access to education for all employees including migrant employees.

5.3 English Language Competence

On analysis of the focus group findings and the findings from the access and admissions officers, it was clear that the majority of interviewees identified similar barriers to third-level education for potential migrant students. In order to investigate if there are additional barriers, not previously identified, the interviewed stakeholders were asked to identify and elaborate on any barriers they perceived to be detrimental to migrants. Concurring with the findings of the focus groups and of the access and admissions officers, the majority of stakeholders identified poor English language skills as a major barrier.

A number of interviewees reported that migrants' skills in spoken and written English vary widely:

Some migrants have very poor language skills and some have excellent language skills (Hotel representative).

English skills are very, very variable. We need to develop some system which would encourage multi-lingual skills to enable migrants to integrate better to Irish society (IBEC representative).

English skills vary widely. We did have a programme, joint-funded by ourselves and ICTU, to provide English language for migrant workers in the construction industry (Construction Industry Federation representative).


Research undertaken by the interviewed Intercultural Organisational Consultant reported ratings of migrants' level of English as follows:

- 17% - Beginner's Level
- 15% - Basic Level
- 29% - Intermediate Level
- 20% - Advanced Level
- 19% - Proficient

This respondent also stated that levels of written English competence were far lower than spoken language skills. All interviewees underscored that they believe that English language competence was the greatest challenge that migrants face in accessing both employment and third-level education:

Language is the problem rather than skills or commitment (Hotel representative).

The level of English is the biggest problem. Obviously I can't employ people whom I can't conduct an interview with if they have poor language skills (Hotel representative).



English skills are the most important and the biggest barrier for migrants. The standard of English people arrive with seems to have dropped in the last six months. I can't employ foreign workers if they don't have a basic level of English, even from a Health and Safety perspective we have to have translators (Hotel representative).

English language is definitely a major barrier. A lot would depend on the country the migrants come from, and some migrants struggle much more than other migrants, depending on their country of origin. They may competently speak a version of English in their home countries but still may struggle with a different standard of English here, so they may need extra attention in this regard (Director of Immigrant Support Centre).

English language competence is the greatest challenge that migrants face in accessing third-level education (FÁS representative).

Interviewees pointed out, however, that a number of strategic efforts have been made in tackling the English language problem for many migrants. Employers who recruit through EURES, for example, stated that they can ensure that their potential employees will have already attained a good standard of English language competence prior to moving to Ireland. The interviewees representing the hotel sector reported that some hotels offer in-house training which allows for better integration of migrants, as well as organising tours of the region to provide them with a better knowledge of the local geography and dialect. Some employers offer English classes to staff twice a week and organise fun days to develop interaction through English. Other employers encourage staff to speak English as much as possible.

The hotels encourage staff to speak English at all times, even in the staff canteen, to ensure language skills improve (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

We encourage our workers to refrain from speaking their native language and to speak English to improve their language skills (Hotel representative).

English language skills were also identified by employers as a key element for promotional opportunities:

For some migrants, the main barrier for promotion is the language. Frequently we offer foreign workers junior positions until their language is at a level where they can be promoted (Hotel representative).

We encourage our staff to improve their language skills at outside classes, particularly if they wish to be promoted (Hotel representative).

If a construction worker has good English language skills and they have done any other types of upskilling courses, such as leadership courses or project management courses, then it is whoever is best for the job is given the promotion regardless of nationality (Construction Industry Federation representative).

One of the interviewees spoke of how language courses provided by Fáilte Ireland enable migrant workers to improve their English language skills and thereby to access promotional opportunities:

A lot of people start working in the accommodation section of the hotel and as their English improves they move to front of house. A lot of Poles coming here now are doing a lot of Fáilte Ireland courses with the support of their hotels and are progressing to management posts (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

One of the interviewed educational representatives recommended that Applied English support programmes for migrants would be useful to help overcome the language barrier:

In addition to third-level providers offering mainstream programmes, appropriate Applied English support would benefit migrants both when they are students on the programme and again when they go to employers after graduation seeking employment (Education-authority representative).

As identified by the majority of interviewees, lack of English language competence is a major barrier for accessing education and employment. It is clear from the interviews conducted with employer bodies that English language competence is essential to gaining employment, particularly for those in front-line positions. The overall findings from the research interviews confirm that proficiency in English meant migrants were more likely to be employed, were better integrated in their workplaces and society, and generally enjoyed a better quality of life in Ireland. As noted above, the levels of English language competence is quite varied among migrants, while some who possess excellent everyday English might still require specialised or discipline-specific English language training relevant to their employment. Employer organisations and education providers, therefore, need to work in partnership to develop and provide technical or specialised English modules which could be delivered in the workplace.


5.4 Financial Barriers and Lack of Information

Fee structures and lack of funding were identified by the majority of focus group participants and by the access and admissions officers as other major barriers to accessing education by migrants. Similarly, from the interviews conducted with relevant stakeholders, financial impediments were recognised as a key barrier to education:

Money is a major access barrier to education. In recent times, particularly with the downturn in the economy, more and more migrants are struggling to gain employment, which will obviously impact on their ability to pay for courses (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

One of the education-authority representatives commented on the importance of eligibility of funding for potential students, particularly given financial barriers to accessing training and education:

The VEC administer maintenance grants to the institutes of technology, but the most inhibiting factor for migrants is that many do not qualify for VEC maintenance grants because of non-conformance with residency and citizenship criteria. Non-EU fees coupled with no grant make it almost impossible for many migrants to even consider entering third-level education (Education-authority representative).



This interviewee also pointed out that some initiatives relating to the provision of financial support have recently been introduced and should help to alleviate financial difficulties:

Fortunately, thanks to changes last year in the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI), migrants can now enter ESOL programmes free of charge and the providers don't lose scarce funding in this operational area. Prior to changes in the BTEI, such programmes were run on a self-financing basis (Education-authority representative).

In addition to the financial barriers identified above, some respondents said that a general lack of information on education opportunities for migrants is a key barrier to access:

The simple lack of information is a major barrier. Many of those who have completed Level-5 FÁS courses are not aware that they are in a position to apply to third-level colleges (FÁS representative).

Lack of information about the education sector is a big barrier for migrant workers and this causes unease. When lack of information is combined with a lack of English they are at a disadvantage in comparison to the Irish construction workers. Lack of information can also mean that they are not aware of the opportunities available to them. We direct them to our website for all relevant information and we also have a monthly magazine and a monthly newsletter which go to our 16,000 members (Construction Industry Federation representative).

There is a widespread lack of information on courses for migrants. Generally, we find that migrants get their information through word of mouth more than anywhere else. Libraries are probably the best places to seek information. Many migrants get information from NGO organisations. Migrants come in here a lot looking for information on social welfare entitlements and on accessing courses and employment opportunities. We found that when we telephone various colleges, for information on behalf of migrants, there are no clear policies in place; we are often transferred to different people within the same college and get different answers (Director Immigrant Support Centre).

In summary, the interviewed stakeholders also believe that fees and the widespread lack of information on access to third-level education for migrants are additional barriers which have to be addressed by students. Interviewees also condemned the current prohibitive fees charged to non-EU citizens. Some stakeholders also observed additional difficulties in the complexity of the fees structure, particularly for non-EU students, which are often compounded by a lack of English language proficiency, thereby, making access virtually out of reach for many migrants. Interviewees also spoke of the lack of clear information relating to residency status, which causes problems not only for migrants but also for employer bodies, individual employers, and education providers. Educational stakeholders believed that migrants require additional informational provision and assistance when dealing with fee structures and financial supports, and recommended that this information should be available widely and in easily-understood and jargon-free English, through all higher education colleges.

5.5 Recognition of Qualifications and Prior Learning

There were mixed responses regarding the recognition of non-Irish qualifications and for the RPL. Interviewed respondents from the hospitality sector reported that some applicants arrive with experience and qualifications relevant to the industry in which they work:

A lot of people coming from Poland, India, and Sri Lanka have experience working in the area of hotels and some from Poland would also have achieved qualifications in the area (Hotel representative).

The Irish Hotels Federation representative noted that, in relation to hiring employees in their industry, most hotel owners or managers do not seek third-level qualifications from either Irish or migrant applicants. If employees, however, do hold previously attained qualifications relevant to the industry, employers use the FÁS system of recognition for competence-based qualifications. Some employers also check qualifications with higher-education institutions, and many employers ask job applicants to provide translations of their qualifications.

Many respondents reported that migrants frequently do not have qualifications relating to the industry in which they are currently employed. Interviewees stated that, very often, workers would have third-level qualifications from their home countries, but find difficulty gaining employment relevant to their qualifications. Rather than remain unemployed, migrant workers usually choose to work in, for example, the tourism sector, in which it was relatively easy for them to gain employment until recently:


A lot of our foreign workers generally do not have a qualification in the hospitality sector; they are often very qualified in another area. A lot of our Polish workers are teachers (Hotel representative).

A large number of staff members have qualifications in other areas rather than in the hospitality sector. Many workers coming from Poland, for example, have degrees in the areas of Engineering or Arts. They come to work in this sector as they have difficulty gaining employment in other areas (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

They may hold a higher level qualification in another area, so choosing another career path is a lifestyle change and there is nothing wrong with that (Fáilte Ireland representative).

Coinciding with the focus group findings, stakeholder interviewees confirmed that migrants experience difficulties when attempting to gain academic credits, in particularly for prior learning. Stakeholders generally believed that this lack of recognition was another barrier when attempting to engage in further education and training:

There is, in some instances, a failure to give academic credit to prior learning acquired through previous positions (FÁS representative).



Our experience of dealing with migrants is that they have difficulties in having their prior qualifications recognised, but, even more seriously, they may not be able to enter courses at the appropriate level. They do not seem to be able to join a course halfway through, which means they have to step backwards and start again (Director of Immigrant Support Centre).

A further difficulty migrants face is failure to have their previous qualifications recognised, or when they attempt to have these qualifications recognised they often encounter difficulties which are big barriers for them in accessing education (FÁS representative).

The lack of recognition of foreign qualifications and of RPL were identified by many stakeholders as additional barriers for migrants, from both educational and employment perspectives. One of the education-authority interviewees acknowledged that barriers exist in relation to these two areas and outlined procedures which they recommend to third-level education providers:

Education providers are encouraged to liaise with the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) located in the office of the NQAI to establish the recognition of overseas awards. HETAC assists in the NARIC recognition process. Experience to date would indicate that non-Irish qualifications would rarely if ever be recognised as above the Irish qualifications on the national framework (Education-authority representative).

This interviewee also argued that some discrimination may exist in systems designed for the RPL:

Barriers could exist in terms of unconscious bias. For example, in higher education, the learner assessment processes devised by providers may have unconscious bias due to the fact that they are devised for learners that providers are familiar with, for example, Irish nationals. Recognition of qualifications may be a barrier where there is no equivalent quality assurance or qualifications framework structure in the country of origin (Education-authority representative).

Similarly, the intercultural training consultant interviewed believed that some additional problems may arise because of the difficulties associated with matching Irish qualifications with non-Irish qualifications:

We have generally found that the standard of non-Irish qualifications are equivalent in terms of quality, but difficulties may arise because of the different framework of qualifications used in different countries (Intercultural Training Consultant).

The interviewed director of the Immigrant Support Centre, however, believed that further difficulties are encountered when the level of a foreign qualification is perceived to be lower than its Irish equivalent qualification:

Sometimes it is difficult for migrants to get recognition of their prior qualifications, and I know this is an unpopular thing to say and a difficult thing to say, but some of the qualifications from the African countries are below the level of Irish qualifications, though not all of them. From looking at CVs and from people coming for interviews here, I know they are at a different level (Director of Immigrant Support Centre).

Notwithstanding these experiences, the same interviewee has also dealt with many migrants who, despite having many years of experience in their professions, they were unable to get recognition for their prior learning:

There is a particular problem for refugees who do not have their paper certificates with them to get recognition of their prior learning. There should be a system in place in educational institutions and in industry for migrants to prove what they can do rather than what they cannot do. If somebody is given refugee status it means they have been persecuted, so they are unlikely to have their pieces of paper here with them, so they are stuck and must start at the beginning of a course again. There are other issues, for example, in some countries people do not need paper qualifications for certain jobs. We had a situation of a man who came here as a very qualified car mechanic who was 36 years of age and has four children. He had years of experience as a mechanic but did not have a piece of paper to prove this. So he could not get a job here even as an apprentice and he had to go back and start classes again with a group of 18-year-olds. If he had been given a chance to prove what he could do, our country would be well served by people like him. So, it is important to recognise prior learning (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

The education-authority representatives were very aware of the difficulties of having prior qualifications and prior learning recognised - both in third-level colleges and in employment situations. The interviewees believed that these difficulties are compounded when varying award frameworks are used in different countries, thereby making the comparisons of awards with the Irish framework problematic. At the same time, interviewees pointed out that a major objective of the national framework of qualifications (NFQ) is to recognise all learning achievements. The NFQ aims to do this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications/awards and by promoting the RPL. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning are closely associated with work-based learning, thereby affording further partnership development between employers and third-level education providers to ensure that migrants are compensated for their prior learning and qualifications both in the workplace and in third-level colleges.



5.6 Policies for Migrant Workers

All interviewees were asked if they were aware of any specific policies in relation to the needs of migrants, in the context of both employment and higher education. The two representatives from the education authorities stated that education providers are responsible for the translation of policies into different languages:

Policies and procedures are primarily directed towards education providers. It is the responsibility of providers to communicate the policies and procedures appropriate to the provision of programmes to learners. I am not aware of any specific policies relating to the needs of migrants, but education providers need to ensure that language barriers are overcome in the context of managing programme provision for overseas learners (Education-authority representative).

Policies are translated into different languages where appropriate. These languages vary by college or learning centre and depend on catchment locally (Education-authority representative).

In relation to the employment of migrant workers, industry representatives were asked if they were aware of any separate policies in this regard. All respondents stated that every member of staff was treated in the same way regardless of nationality or residency status:

There is no separate policy as such. Migrant workers are treated exactly the same as Irish citizens applying for jobs (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Absolutely not – everybody is treated equally (Hotel representative).

Migrant workers are treated the same as any other employee. The hospitality sector has a reputation for being difficult to work in – relying on tips etc. But I would say that migrant workers are treated the same. Like any other employee, if they are not being looked after, they will leave the employer. By and large they are treated fairly with regard to employment rights. I am not aware of any documented evidence of ill-treatment (Fáilte Ireland representative).

All workers are treated equally, regardless of country of origin. There is an obligation on us through our social policies to treat all workers equally. When migrants arrive to work in Ireland they have to learn about a new set of policies and practices, such as our taxation system, etc., but they are all treated the same as Irish workers. Treating migrants equally should ensure their full integration to Irish society (IBEC representative).

Interviewees were asked if their industries had additional policies relating to training of non-Irish workers. Interviewees stated that training was the same for all, regardless of the employee's nationality:

Most hotels have a certain day of the week when they provide induction for all new staff. If further induction is needed by migrant workers it is provided separately (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Generally, induction and training in most hotels is not a separate event for Irish and non-Irish workers. We do a full-day induction training course for Irish nationals and non-nationals. We treat all staff the same (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Training is exactly the same as for Irish staff (Hotel representative).

We have a Big Brother programme, a mentoring system for new staff for the first couple of weeks. The mentor signs off on training covered at the end of each week (Hotel representative).

In relation to intercultural training, some initiatives have also been introduced.


During the induction training period, everyone gets half an hour on-the-job training per day during their work time. At this training, we encourage workers from other countries to share their experiences from their home and from their culture with their co-workers (Hotel representative).

We do some training on cultural orientation for the general population in Ireland, but not specifically for migrants. We should do more orientation training. There is very little cultural training happening. Some of the colleges have orientation courses, but, overall there is very little training being given (Director, Immigrant Support Centre).

Some organisations do training on cross-cultural skills and this training is very important for integration. Another barrier for individual migrants is that they tend to be treated as a homogenous cultural group. People need to look at the attributes of each person and treat them as individuals (IBEC representative).

The FÁS interviewee also spoke of the importance of intercultural training, and believed that the lack of such training can lead to misunderstandings and bias:

It is important to recognise that norms of behaviour constituting customary practice in the country of origin of migrants are deemed socially unacceptable in Ireland. Certain communities, for example, fail to queue or some migrants have a custom of washing their hands in drinking fountains. These customs are not objectionable when considered in the light of their social background, but may be mistakenly considered rude to the unsympathetic observer (FÁS representative).



Some of the larger companies within the hospitality industry were reported by the interviewees to have a policy of translating recruitment application forms into different languages. Some companies also display notices in the workplace in different languages, even if those companies did not have formal policies in place to provide notices in translation.

Regarding dealing with policies on the legal status of employees, the respondent representing the tourism industry stated that employees from all countries are welcomed equally, but potential workers are always required to provide evidence of their work permit, i.e., the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) Stamp-4 permit:

We welcome any nationality in any constituent part of the workforce. We have an open-door policy. The only requirement is that anyone presenting for training who is not Irish would have to have a GNIB Stamp Four permit. The reason for this is that if we make an investment of three months training we want to ensure that that investment will benefit the Irish economy. We want to ensure they can study and work in Ireland (Fáilte Ireland representative).

The Construction Industry Federation interviewee reported that all workers are treated equally, but, was aware of policies which had been formally translated to other languages for migrants:

Policies and procedures in relation to the Health and Safety of individuals are translated into a language that can be understood by those working in the construction sector as is necessary by Health and Safety legislation. The Construction Industry Federation have induction/safety publications available in several languages. We have a lot of Polish construction workers, for example, so the health and safety policies would be available in Polish on the construction sites. The Polish workers would also receive their induction training in Polish in very many of the large construction companies (Construction Industry Federation representative).

The interviewed employer and employer representatives stressed that all employees are treated equally, regardless of their nationality. Some employers recognise the richness of diversity which migrant workers bring to their organisations and afford them the opportunities to display aspects of their home cultures during induction and on an informal basis. The employer representatives and employers did not believe that migrants were disadvantaged as a result of not having their various policies and procedures translated into different languages.

5.7 Targeting and Recruiting Migrant Workers

In recent years, many industries relied on migrant workers to fill vacancies in their organisations. The hospitality and construction industries, for example, have employed large numbers of migrants throughout the country. When conducting interviews for this research, with employers and related stakeholders, the impact of Ireland's recent economic downturn could not be assessed, therefore, the interview questions focused on participants' experiences of targeting and recruiting migrant workers over the previous number of years. Interviewees were

asked if they specifically engaged in targeting and recruiting migrant workers. The Construction Industry Federation representative stated:

We do not distinguish between any workers. We send all the information out to our contractors and they filter the relevant information for us and make sure it is available to any worker it would be of interest to (Construction Industry Federation representative).

Interviewed representatives from the hotel industry stated that their industry was heavily dependent on the contribution of migrant workers:

Certainly in the accommodation and kitchen areas we would have difficulties filling the posts were it not for foreign employees (Hotel representative).

In particular, hotel-industry stakeholders identified a gap in the availability of trained chefs, and discussed some difficulties in filling these vacancies:

The numbers of Irish people training as chefs has dropped radically and Polish workers coming here wouldn't usually have those skills. Usually there are no problems filling vacancies in all areas of our hotels, except for positions as chefs (Irish Hotels Federation representative).


It is difficult to recruit chefs because of the unsociable hours. It is virtually impossible to recruit chefs currently (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Many respondents referred to the European Recruitment and Employment Service (EURES) system, on which they rely for targeting migrants with specific skills:

We know from our own human resource development strategy and research that the prime requirements are for commis chefs and front-line people. We don't go to recruitment fairs as such, but we deal with our EURES counterparts who set up three days of interviews and we would recruit two hundred to three hundred candidates, bring them to Ireland, and train them (Fáilte Ireland representative).

Respondents believed that when migrants are specifically targeted for certain occupations, these migrants generally integrate more effectively in the workforce. The recruitment of such migrants not only means that they are better integrated in the labour force, but they are also likely to integrate more successfully in Irish society:

As a state organisation we have tried to improve the recruitment situation by working with FÁS on the EURES system. We believe that by going ourselves to eastern European countries, and identifying, targeting, and recruiting suitable candidates, and bringing them to Ireland for training, we can ensure more effective integration. We also believe that when we recruit migrants that we have specifically targeted these workers to integrate better to the workplace and to society because they have better English and an equivalent FETAC Level-4 qualification (Fáilte Ireland representative).



In recent years some of the hotel chains built up experience in targeting migrants abroad, and many of these hotels now undertake this process directly rather than going through the EURES system. Other employers in the hotel industry tended to rely on local resources for the recruitment of staff. Many hotel owners placed advertisements in local newspapers or recruited through FÁS and local employment agencies. Other hotel owners relied on word-of-mouth recommendations and many migrants were employed on the basis of handing in a CV directly to the hotel for consideration.

One of the interviewed educational stakeholders reported from her interaction with employers that there are general skills and competencies which tend to enhance the recruitment and employability of migrant workers:

Some work experience and communication or interpersonal skills appear to be high on employers' lists with an emphasis placed on work placement for academic programmes. Workplace experience would probably be even more relevant for minority learners in order to provide better opportunities for successful employment following completion of their third-level studies (Education-authority representative).

More generally, stakeholders argued that they would recruit the best candidate, regardless of nationality. Some of the more sought-after recruiting qualities were identified as:

Longevity in previous employment, experience in the area, attitude to work and training (Hotel representative).

Overall, from the interviews conducted with industry stakeholders, it can be seen that the methods of targeting and recruiting migrant workers vary between relying on the more traditional means of recruitment to travelling overseas and specifically targeting potential migrants who have specific skills. Employers commented that migrants are often not employed in their direct areas of expertise but, generally, their organisations have greatly benefited from an inflow of migrants in recent times. These interviewees also noted that the Irish economy too has benefited and could not have grown at the rate it did over the past number of years without employing migrant workers.

5.8 Retention of Migrant Workers

Finally, interviewees were invited to comment on whether they experienced any difficulties in retaining migrant workers. The hospitality and hotel interviewees, in particular, reported that retaining migrant workers was problematic:

Someone with a qualification in another area would tend not to stay more than a year or two before returning home. There's a high turnover of foreign workers (Irish Hotels Federation representative).

Migrant workers tend to stay eighteen months to two years, and then they go home, while some others upgrade their qualifications to progress in the industry (Hotel representative).

It depends on the international economy. As the Polish economy is improving a lot of these workers will go home. I don't think Irish people will be easily attracted to the industry and this is a major concern for hotels (Hotel representative).

The number of foreign workers has already decreased since October 2007. The economies of the source countries have improved and therefore people have realised they can do as well at home. I can see the numbers of foreign workers continuing to decrease in the future (Fáilte Ireland representative).

Similarly, the Construction Industry Federation representative noted:

We have seen a decrease in the number of migrant workers in the construction sector recently. Anecdotal, it is said that they are going to London to work in preparation for the Olympic Games or else going home. We know, however, that we still have very large numbers of migrants employed and they are very skilled workers and they have a huge part to play in our economy (Construction Industry Federation representative).

One respondent commented on the importance of treating employees well for their successful retention:

We provide good conditions here and we treat our workers very well with regard to work-life balance, etc. We have a great atmosphere here. I believe that is why they stay so long with us (Hotel representative).

At this point in time, with the recent economic downturn, it is very difficult to predict if migrant workers will remain in Ireland. The hospitality and hotel representatives interviewed noted that the pattern for migrant workers was to remain in the hospitality and tourism sector for approximately a two-year period before moving to different occupations or moving back home. Recent research by Mac Éinrí (2008) pointed out that, in the case of nearly half a million Irish who left the country in the 1980s, nearly half of those came back in the following decade and a half, while the rest stayed in their new countries. Mac Éinrí suggests that there is no reason to suppose that it will be very different in the case of migrants in Ireland. He concludes that a large number of Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians and other eastern European migrants may indeed return to their home countries, but substantial numbers will remain and become a part of Irish society on an indefinite basis. The findings from the focus groups conducted for this research concur with the research findings of Mac Éinrí, insofar as some participants indicate a desire to return to their home countries while many other migrants desire and hope to make Ireland their permanent home.

Given that the recent economic downturn is predicted to continue for a couple of years at least, it is likely that many migrant workers in particular will be adversely affected in their employment prospects. If unemployment continues to rise, migrants who are no longer in employment will be faced with three possible options: to return to their home countries, to move to another country, or to participate in further education and training to



upskill and progress in the Irish labour market. The latter option suggests that immediate action is required from both education and industry stakeholders, ideally working together, to ensure that access to third-level education is made much more accessible to migrants.

Finally, from the interviews conducted with the relevant stakeholders it is clear that many opportunities exist for all parties to continue to work together in a deliberate manner to overcome various barriers to migrant integration and advancement, as identified by all three sets of interviewees. These stakeholders illustrate that there is much potential and willingness to strengthen the collaborative approach between third-level colleges and industry to form powerful partnerships to improve the opportunities for education and employment for migrants so that they might become more fulfilled in their careers and personal worlds, and more successfully integrate to Irish society. A powerful message from one of the stakeholder interviewees quoted above, but, worth re-emphasising to all people dealing with migrants, is that:

There should be a system in place in educational institutions and in industry for migrants to prove what they can do rather than what they cannot do.



6.0 Challenges for the Provision of Third-level Education to Migrants

These conclusions and recommendations are based on the findings of the research conducted by working group members as part of the *Education in Employment* project. As reported in previous chapters, research was conducted with:

- Members of various migrant communities throughout Ireland;
- Migrant students who are both currently enrolled in third-level education courses and are in employment;
- Access and admissions officers in participating third-level institutions;
- Employer bodies, education-authority representatives, employers, and other key stakeholders.

The findings from the research provide an insight to barriers and difficulties experienced by migrants wishing to access third-level education in Ireland. In addition to education barriers, which are the main focus of this report, barriers to employment and to integration into Irish society were also discussed by focus group participants. Similar barriers were identified by interviewees across all regions in Ireland, with no significant differences cited between rural and urban areas. It was apparent, however, that the varying levels of barriers experienced by different sectors of migrants reflected on their respective continent of origin, which, in turn, impacted on their residency status and fee structures for third-level courses. The residency status of migrants and the nature of their entitlements caused much ongoing confusion, not only for migrants but also for administrative staff dealing with migrant applicants/students in third-level colleges.

Emerging from the research, the main barriers to educational advancement for migrants can be summarised under four broad themes:

- (i) information provision;
- (ii) English language skills;
- (iii) recognition of qualifications and prior learning; and
- (iv) fees and financial considerations.


These thematic areas will be used to illustrate challenges for third-level educators and to present recommendations.

Information Provision

While migrant interviewees acknowledged that some information regarding access to third-level education was available, they all agreed that it was difficult to find what was particularly relevant to their own individual contexts. Providing readily-accessible and relevant available information on the requirements for entry to third-level colleges is a challenge for third-level educators.

English Language Skills

The majority of those interviewed identified the lack of spoken and written English language skills as a major barrier to entering higher education and a fundamental barrier against fuller integration to Irish society.



Additionally, focus group participants noted that the entry level of English for third-level students was not standardised across all regions. Some colleges hold examinations of written and spoken English ability, some rely on international standards, while others do not use any methods of assessing applicant students. A further challenge, therefore, for third-level education providers is to develop a consistency among requirements for spoken and written English among migrant students at the pre-entry stage. After students enrol on courses, another challenge remains for the provision of specialised technical English language tutorials in the various disciplines.

Recognition of International Qualifications and Prior Learning

All focus-group participants, as well as access and admissions officers, identified the under-recognition of international qualifications and of prior learning. The majority of focus group interviewees were unaware of the services provided by the NQAI. Many interviewees reported that the terms for recognising their previous qualifications were quite inconsistent between third-level colleges. These interviewees reported further inconsistencies between individual administration staff within the same college. A challenge for third-level providers, therefore, is to ensure that all potential students are made aware of mechanisms for assessing international qualifications and prior learning.

Closely related to the recognition of foreign qualifications is the RPL, an issue that was identified by all interviewees as another major barrier to accessing higher education. Focus group participants claimed that they are not given credit for their prior learning in Irish third-level colleges. They further suggested that if prior learning is not recognised there is a real danger of developing an occupational gap, with many third-level-educated migrants not given the recognition they earned while in many cases being over-qualified for the level of employment they are offered. Interviewees also believed that, in general, employers do not consider previous learning and previous qualifications when employing migrant workers.

A challenge for third-level educators is to develop clear and standardised policies and procedures in line with best practice for the RPL. For academic and administrative staff, training and development is urgently required in the RPL, particularly in relation to learning acquired abroad. The development of standardised online tools for the RPL and assessment should be developed and widely marketed to all students and to the relevant administration staff dealing with students. A further challenge for third-level education providers in relation to the RPL is to ensure that employer bodies, employers, and employees are all made aware of the existence of such policies; and larger number of migrants should be encouraged to apply to have their prior learning recognised and accredited.

Fees and Financial Considerations

All focus groups confirmed a lack of clarity concerning information on fee structures and on access to funding entitlements for migrant students. Interviewees also recommended an overall review of existing policies towards migrants, so that newer policies would facilitate more effective administration of entitlements for migrants wishing to access third-level education while in employment. A challenge for third-level providers is to re-examine the practice of charging maximum fees for non-EU students and students who wish to enrol on part-time courses.

Overall, it is clear that there are many barriers for migrants when entering third-level education in Ireland. The main barriers, cited by all three sets of interviews, provide serious challenges to third-level education providers, and solutions for overcoming such barriers need to be urgently addressed. Entry to education is of pivotal importance to migrants endeavouring to integrate with Irish society, while, on the other hand, educational disadvantage is recognised as a factor behind much social and economic exclusion.

6.1 Recommendations

It is clear from the research conducted for this study that migrants are still significantly under-represented in all Irish third-level colleges. Based on a review of the interview findings and drawing on the experiences of working group members, a number of recommendations for addressing barriers to third-level education are suggested. The following recommendations for higher education institutions should enable significant progress on overcoming such barriers.

Information Provision

- Provide clear and comprehensive information on programme availability, entitlements, fees and access for learners;
- Ensure that the appropriate information is widely distributed and available in accessible formats;
- Raise awareness among academic and administrative staff in relation to the additional informational needs of migrant students.

English Language Skills

- Provide standardised entry-level guidelines for competence in English across all third-level institutions;
- Ensure that existing language support systems are made available and accessible to students after they have enrolled.

Recognition of International Qualifications and Prior Learning

- Develop clear and accessible policies on the RPL, including certified and experiential learning, across the third-level sector;
- Ensure clear equivalencies for international awards, mapped to NFQ standards;
- Build a shared repository of case studies to inform practice.

Fees and Financial Considerations

- Provide clear and consistent documentation in all colleges regarding fee structures, educational grants, and social welfare entitlements, taking into account the residency status of migrants;
- Provide input to a national debate on fees for part-time students, particularly non-EU and other students who are liable to maximum fees.

There are many considerations for widening access, both in education and employment, to help migrants to integrate more successfully into Irish society. Higher-education providers and employers can collectively take



responsibility for supporting integration by working together to help migrants overcome barriers identified in this research. The Minister for Integration, Conor Lenihan, TD, stated that “Integration is a shared challenge for society as a whole and cannot be successful without each sector playing a constructive and active role” (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2008: 19). Minister Lenihan also noted that the unprecedented immigration that Ireland experienced over the past decade and the challenge of integration that it brings are some of the biggest challenges that Ireland faces as a country.

6.2 Conclusions

The role of third-level education, training, and upskilling was identified by all interviewees as essential to combating racism and for developing a more inclusive, integrated, and intercultural society in Ireland. The education needs of migrant groups and individuals vary considerably. Where poverty, racism, failure to accommodate ethnicity, and other forms of discrimination prevail, social exclusion in the third-level education system can be exacerbated. It is clear that the current fee structures in third-level institutions are a contributing factor to exclusion for many migrant applicant students or potential students. Fee structures and access to reduced fees for non-EU nationals, including refugees, should be reviewed and addressed. Equal opportunities in third-level education are essential to prevent under-achievement, which can disadvantage migrants and be passed on to subsequent generations. The continued hampering of access to third-level education was particularly pronounced among asylum seekers, who identified the inadequate level of financial support they receive, coupled with the unrealistic fees they are expected to pay, as insurmountable barriers. This lack of access to third-level education may lead to further isolation and stereotyping of asylum seekers. In addition to financial barriers, particularly for non-EU students, there are other difficulties relating to policies and procedures that are often issued in isolation by the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the individual third-level colleges. The lack of cohesion between these bodies on issues concerning migrants creates additional and unnecessary barriers for potential migrant students.

Overcoming the language barrier has been identified as critical to successful integration. Without the ability to communicate in English, all other tasks — such as improving skills, accessing public services, and entering gainful employment — become virtually impossible for migrants. Recent measures and initiatives to provide English language training must be continued and additional resources should be provided as necessary.

Employment was another key factor identified as essential to social integration. Employment provides a regular income and economic independence, security, self-esteem or personal status, and opportunities for interaction with people from Irish society. Employment also brings improved lifestyle, an increased sense of belonging to the community, better interaction with people outside their own communities and allows migrants to contribute to Irish society. Employment prospects can be enhanced through additional third-level education and training, enabling migrants to further develop their skills and to reach their full potential. It can be seen from the focus group interviews that many of the practical issues facing migrants are interlinked and are all

contributory steps to successful integration. The prospect of gaining employment, for example, is hindered by poor language competence, which, in turn, affects a person's ability to participate in training and education.

The need to create awareness among employers, particularly small to medium-sized employers, of the benefits of a diverse workforce should also be emphasised. Recruiting from a diverse population brings new perspectives, experience, and language skills into the workforce. These enriching phenomena are particularly important for employers competing in ethnically and culturally diverse markets in Europe and globally. Information should continue to be disseminated to employers to become more familiar with issues concerning migrants, including their skills and their potential as employees. Employers must be encouraged to maintain a positive working environment for a diverse workforce by adopting anti-discrimination codes of practice. Employers should also be encouraged to develop diversity awareness and awareness of various cultures among management and staff in order to encourage positive attitudes and behaviour. Integration in the workplace is a two-way process that places obligations on employers and the individual migrant. From the migrant's perspective, integration requires a willingness to adapt to the Irish workplace without abandoning or being expected to abandon one's own cultural identity. From the employer's perspective, it requires a willingness to employ migrants on the basis of equality and to take action to prevent racism.

In summary, while education and employment are key factors for successful integration of migrants to Irish society, it is clear from the research findings that migrants in employment face many barriers in their attempts to enter higher education. The findings support recent research by the Immigrant Council of Ireland, in 2008, which noted that, as an emigrant nation for centuries, it behoves Ireland to be particularly sensitive to the challenges facing migrants in new societies. The Immigrant Council of Ireland cautioned that Ireland should not make the mistakes that other European countries made in the aftermath of the Second World War, when immigrants were marginalised and ghettoised, as this leads to disharmony and future conflict.

Finally, if conditions are not improved for greater integration of migrant workers and their families into education and employment, social exclusion and segregation would result. If cultural diversity is not recognised and actively supported, racism and xenophobia are reinforced and given a dangerous legitimacy.



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Appendix A

Entitlements to Education

European Economic Area (EEA) Migrants

According to Articles 48-60 of the Treaty of the European Union, 1992, EU citizens have the right to attend any educational institution on the same basis as an Irish citizen. People from EEA countries (and Switzerland) are entitled to access third-level education and local authority or VEC student maintenance grants on the same basis and at the same fees as Irish citizens.

Non-EEA Migrants

There are several categories of non-EEA migrants in Ireland and their entitlements in respect of access to and participation in third-level adult education vary depending on their circumstances.

Refugees

People with refugee status (and their family members) have the same entitlements to education and FÁS training as Irish citizens.

Asylum Seekers

While an application for asylum is being determined, applicants have no right to full-time education (unless under the age of 18). Adult asylum seekers do not have a right to access full-time state-funded education or training in Ireland.

People issued with GNIB Stamp 4

Stamp 4 indicates that a person is entitled to work in Ireland without a work permit. It is issued to people on work visas or work authorisations, and also to spouses of Irish and EU citizens, refugees, people with Irish born child residency, and people with long-term residency status. Holders of Stamp 4 permits are entitled to access education.

Persons Granted Leave to Remain at the Discretion of the Minister for Justice

People in this category are allowed access to third-level education and local authority or VEC higher education. Student maintenance grants are available only to persons with letters stating that they have 'humanitarian leave to remain'.

Persons granted Family Reunification

People in this category have the right to attend any educational institution on the same basis as an EU citizen. They also have access to third-level education and local authority or VEC higher education and student maintenance grants on the same basis as an Irish or EU citizen.

Persons Granted Leave to Remain on the Basis of Marriage to Irish and EU Citizens

These persons are allowed access third-level and local authority or VEC higher education and student maintenance grants on the same basis as an Irish or EU citizen.

Dependants of Work-Permit Holders

Dependants of work-permit holders may access education as long as their residency remains tied to the work permit holder (Stamp 3).

Student Visas for Non-EEA nationals (Stamp 2)

People from non-EEA countries who wish to study in Ireland may be required to apply for a student visa from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. They will need to submit (i) a letter of acceptance from the academic institution and evidence of payment of fees; (ii) proof of financial capacity (currently €7,000 in their account per year); and (iii) private medical insurance. Applicants must also demonstrate their academic ability and state that their intention is to return to their country of permanent residence following completion of the course.

Work Visa/Authorisation Holders

International fees are required for immigrant workers entering third-level education and they are ineligible for higher education and student maintenance grants.



Appendix B

Topic Guide for Focus Group Interviews

- What is your nationality?
- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- What length of time have you been living in Ireland?
- What is your level of education?
- What are your impressions of Irish society?
- Have you experienced any racism or discrimination since your arrival in Ireland?
- Have you integrated into Irish society?
- Have you experienced any cultural barriers in your attempt to integrate into Irish society?
- What level of spoken and written English skills do you possess?
- What do you perceive as the main barriers to third-level education in Ireland for non-Irish nationals?
- Could your quality of life be improved with a third-level qualification?
- If you obtained a third-level qualification before arriving in Ireland was this officially recognised by the relevant statutory authorities?
- Did you experience any difficulties having your previous qualification(s) recognised?
- Has your prior learning been recognised?
- What knowledge do you have of existing services available in relation to education provision?
- Are your qualifications recognised by employers in Ireland?
- Does your future in Ireland depend on upskilling and education?
- Do you think you are entitled to/have a right to education in Ireland?
- Do you think your future is in Ireland?

Interview Guide for Access and Admissions Officers

- Who deals with potential migrant students when they contact the college?
- Who advises migrant students on courses which are most suited to their needs?
- Who or where in your college do you think should be the first point of contact for potential migrant students?
- Where do the majority of migrant students obtain information regarding courses on offer at your college?
- Does the college have policies which specifically relate to migrant students?
- What barriers or obstacles do you perceive migrant students may face?
- Does the college recognise non-Irish qualifications?
- If so, how are these qualifications assessed?
- Have you had any experience of dealing with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)?
- What is the policy in relation to the recognition of prior learning for migrant students?
- Are there any additional resources or support services put in place to facilitate migrant students?
- Does the college provide staff training and development sessions in relation to the needs of migrant students?
- Does the college target migrants as potential students?

Appendix D

Interview Guide for Stakeholders

- What are your impressions of migrant workers?
- Do you have specific policies in relation to the needs of migrants?
- Do you have any of your policies or procedures translated into other languages?
- How do migrants get information regarding your business or service?
- How would you rate the level of English language skills of migrants?
- What are the main barriers of access to education and training for migrants?
- What are the main barriers or obstacles to employment for migrants?
- Do you offer any cultural or induction or integration training for migrants?
- Is it important for migrant workers to have a third-level qualification?
- Would you support migrant workers in their pursuit of a third-level qualification?
- Does your organisation recognise non-Irish third-level qualifications?
- Is the standard of non-Irish third-level qualifications equivalent, below, or above, Irish third-level qualifications?
- What general skills and competencies would enhance the employability of migrants?
- What additional support or services could third-level colleges provide to enhance the employability of migrants?
- Do you target and recruit migrant workers?
- Do you find it difficult to retain migrant workers?

Appendix E

National Framework of Qualifications

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was established in 2001 with the principal aims of establishing and maintaining a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression. The outline framework of qualifications is usually seen in the form of the 'fan' diagram shown below in Figure 1.

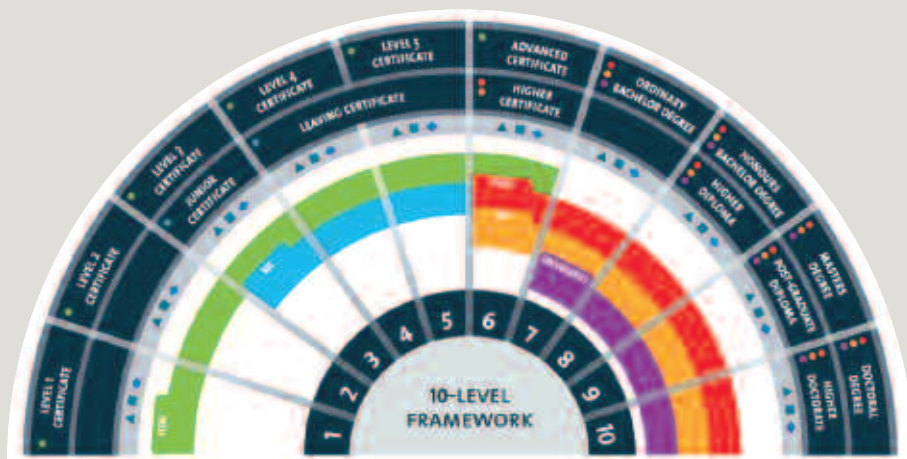


Figure 1 National Framework of Qualifications

Appendix F

Working Group Membership

Chairperson

Dr John Pender

Organisation

Institute of Technology, Sligo

Representative

Mr John Cusack

Athlone Institute of Technology

Mr Chris McDermott

Athlone Institute of Technology

Ms Marcella O'Shea

Athlone Institute of Technology

Dr Margaret Linehan

Cork Institute of Technology

Mr Will Peters

Dublin Institute of Technology

Ms Sinéad McCann

Dublin Institute of Technology

Mr Kevin Howard

Dundalk Institute of Technology

Dr Noel Harvey

Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology

Mr Fergus Timmons

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