

Voices of People with an Immigrant Background – Inclusion in Education, Work and Society

Themes from the focus groups

Conference – 11 May 2023 - Reykjavík

Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir

Lara Hoffmann



Overview

1. Background information about the research
2. Theme 1: Education
3. Theme 2: Work
4. Theme 3: Society
5. Recommendations

Method and participants

Focus group interviews in 5 different regions of Iceland: Capital Areas, Southern Peninsula, Northern Region, Western Region, Westfjords

Interviews took place at the Lifelong learning centres (Símenntunarmiðstöðvar), this institutions also recruited the participants

Length of interview: 60-90 min

Participants per group: 4-7

Languages used in the interview: English and Icelandic

Participants background

Total: 29

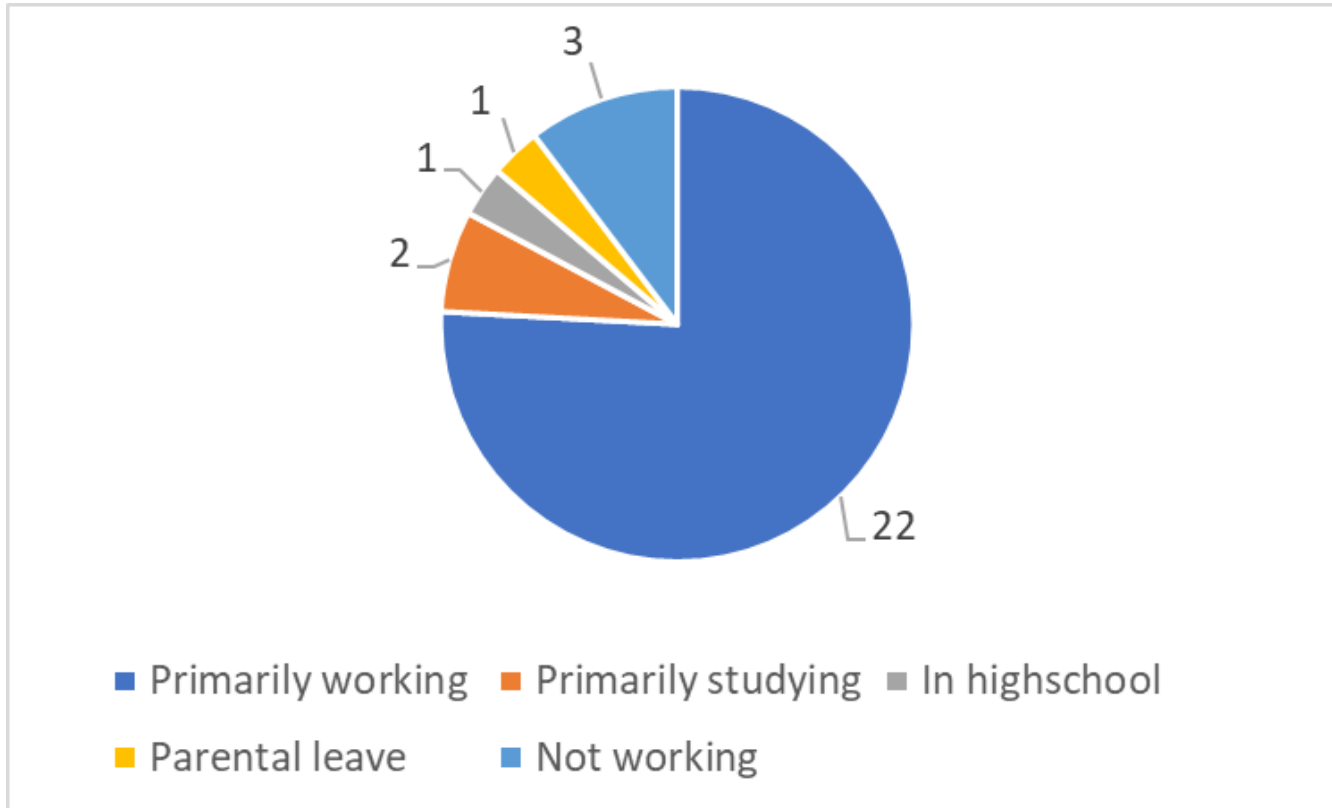
Age: 18-35 [in one focus groups some of the participants were a bit older]

Gender: 19 women, 10 men

Length of stay in Iceland: From more than 20 years (immigrated as a child) to 1.5 years

Region of origin: Central and Eastern Europe: 13, Africa: 5, Middle East: 4, South and Central America: 3, Asia: 2, North America: 1, Western Europe: 1

Participants: employment status



Themes

- Education
- Work
- Society



Education

- Many working **outside their area of education**
- Most are working, interested in courses that they can take **alongside their work**
- Lack of knowledge about **opportunities where to take courses (e.g. what is available in English)**

Education – not valid

I have to do it again because before everything happened in my country, for some reason I had to leave. I was studying and I lived in [Country A], and I was making my degree to be able to move to [Country B] **to make my master in this profession but I couldn't. So, I moved here [to Iceland] and now all my dreams, they're gone. So, I needed to restart and how do you call it, **reinvent.****

I am a doctor. For that I got a diploma, like general doctor. [...] I ask ministeries, really hard to continue here. I need to start again from first course until sixth course, I'm not ready, you know, to do it again. [...] **I want to work as a doctor.** Right now I'm working in **the rental company.** Before I was working in the **car washing** also, rental company also, uhh.. **Building,** like **working outside,** it was hard job.

Education – language aspects

- Lack of **opportunities to study in English** mentioned as hindrance
- Icelandic courses: Same level of Icelandic courses often **taken multiple times**
- Considerable group of immigrants comes to Iceland with **little English skills**, learn English first before learning Icelandic (about 5 of the 29 participants)

Education – language aspects

So, as you mentioned, **there is nothing really available in English even though everybody speaks English.** And when you go to study to Holland or other universities in the world and you coming from, let's say France, you still can speak English! You have subjects in English, so I think this is a big issue for Iceland.

the manager she gave me the jacket and told me „Go to the kassa [register]!“ And I told her „**I don't have any English or Icelandic!**“ And she told me „Don't worry, you will just learn.“ I said „Okay.“ And I just start to work in 10-11, two years and half and I just start speak English but I don't know how! **I have no idea how I can speak English!**

Education – feelings of exclusion

- Experiences of discrimination due to foreign name
- Extra support needed for those who don't speak Icelandic natively

Education – feelings of exclusion

Yes, the language! I know Icelandic but there are some words that you don't have the translation in English. So when you have to study like tölfræði [statistics], it's like what! **When you have to make these groups, nobody wanted to do it with me because I don't speak Icelandic.**

But this is not the only reason I stopped studying, it's also **because I felt discriminated in the group unfortunately. I read the lists and I saw three other people from overseas, I wanted to send them email and ask them how was it going for you, are you getting answers?** But before that even happened, I started getting assignments in tölfræði, statistics.. And my account just didn't work! Anything! I didn't get any videos, I didn't get any instructions of the things, so I send email after email after email.. I called, did this and that.

Education- suggestions

- Re-evaluate the **recognition of foreign diplomas**
- Predictable and continuous offer of opportunities for education
- Re-evaluate **availability of information** about courses (e.g. courses in English)
- Consider the needs of people that move to Iceland **without English skills**

Work

- Many immigrants work outside their field of expertise
- Most information through friends (if you know someone)
 - How to build a network
 - Reference letters: difficult if you have no previous experience in the country
 - Icelandic often seen as an obstacle to work in their job of expertise
- Difference between sectors (for example tourism/ education sector)
- The responsibility of managers/ individuals - some really supportive, others not
- Training for a new job is lacking; lack of preparation by the companies before they start working
- Migrants starts their own projects and initiatives, several examples of people starting their initiatives, applied for grants etc.

Work – guidance and support

Okay, you are going with [Name] and [Name] to this house and then you work together”. It was learning by doing. For me, again, the problem is that **nothing is clear how to do it! Everybody is doing it in a different way and there’s no specification about how to do it!**

Work – suggestions

- Provide training before start in new job
- It's stressful to start a new job in a new country with limited knowledge of the language - afraid to make mistakes and loose the job
- Applications: re-evaluate the availability of social workers etc. as potential references
- Increase the availability grants/ support for immigrants to initiative their own projects (and information about such opportunities)

Society

- Low bureaucracy seen as positive
- Flexibility (positive & negative): informal way of handling things seen as positive but also gives a feeling of less security
- Those as children, different experience, but foreign name still reason for discrimination
- Talk about Individuals within the system by name = life savers
- "Migrant informants" play an important role in their community
- Lack of support network when things go wrong
- Mobility --> everyone assumes that you have a car – even a barrier in the countryside to get a job
- Expectations: most participants see their future in Iceland

Society - Access to information

- “... getting to know the right people ... it has taken me a very long time to figure that out and for my parents, because Iceland which belongs to the so-called Western democracy has this idea that here the system is perfect. You go smoothly through it, you don't have to know people somewhere else; do you understand what I'm trying to say? So, I'm kind of living in a myth that I don't have to ask NN. I don't have to ask someone or know the right people, call the right people to help me with this and that. Because that's just something that exists in Russia or Latin America, but it has taken me a bit of time to realize that that is also how things work here”.
- “In Iceland if you don't have connections, you are very screwed sometimes”.

Society - "Immigrant informant"

"I don't need it. Ég er sú manneskja sem er að hjálpa við einmitt með að gefa upplýsingar eða hjálpa að finna. Aðrir spyrja mig." [I am the person who is helping with giving information or help to find them. Others ask me.]

"I would say I am smart in these things [...] I really hope that everybody would do the same. But I know many people from abroad are very afraid, just happy to have the work."

"I actually started a podcast for people from abroad in English [...] so that people know things"

Society – lack of support network when things go wrong

I was working with [Company A] for one year. **After that my mom she got cancer here.** So it's very hard. So I had to leave the work and I was in [School A], learning Icelandic, **and I left [School A] and also [Company A] to be with her..**

Society - Iceland is good and safe

Here is like the safest country in the world. **I feel more safe**
[...] You know, in [Country A] I cannot say I'm Muslim, I would
be killed. I cannot even pray. Here in Iceland, I feel I am home

So, every time I made those check-ups, there was Covid so I
preferred to stay here. The war started in Ukraine, I prefer to
stay here. So, all those situations that come up kind of shows
me from a different angle that I feel very safe here. **I feel that**
I'm safe in everyday life and my child is safe. So those things
are always the foundation, the number one.

I think I will stay until I will be retired or something. My biggest nightmare is that
I went to [Country X] for vacation and
then I couldn't come back! This is my
biggest nightmare.

The power of the group

- Individuals in the groups were suggesting and supporting others
 - Said he would check with boss about available job
 - Giving information on options and activities within their community

Resilient people who want to give back to the people and society

And many people don't understand how important mental health is, and it's not easy because I moved alone, I didn't have anyone! I also had a really hard time. **Incredibly difficult time**, but I just made an effort to make my life better and learn Icelandic and just be there. **It was incredibly hard work and I want to help others feel as good as I do.**

Recommendations

- Formalize the access to information and pathways to work and education: **you should not need to know a person who knows a person**
 - Info needed on how to navigate public online services
 - People who are not used to online/computer- based services – hard to navigate the system
- Utilize and support those who already have the role of "**immigrant informant**" in their aim to provide information to other immigrants
- Support public spaces where people can meet, chat and get information and expand their