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The Open University



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Poverty, ethnicity and international migrants to Northern Ireland: new opportunities or new vulnerabilities?

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'One of the things that we have noticed here are the number of cross-cultural relationships and marriages taking place that just came out of people working together. People were working on the same line and they met, fell in love and got married. That impacts on families and on communities and it changes perceptions. So there is a lot of stuff like that that has moved people into generally being more accommodating'. (Interview 14, Advocacy worker, 20.06.13).

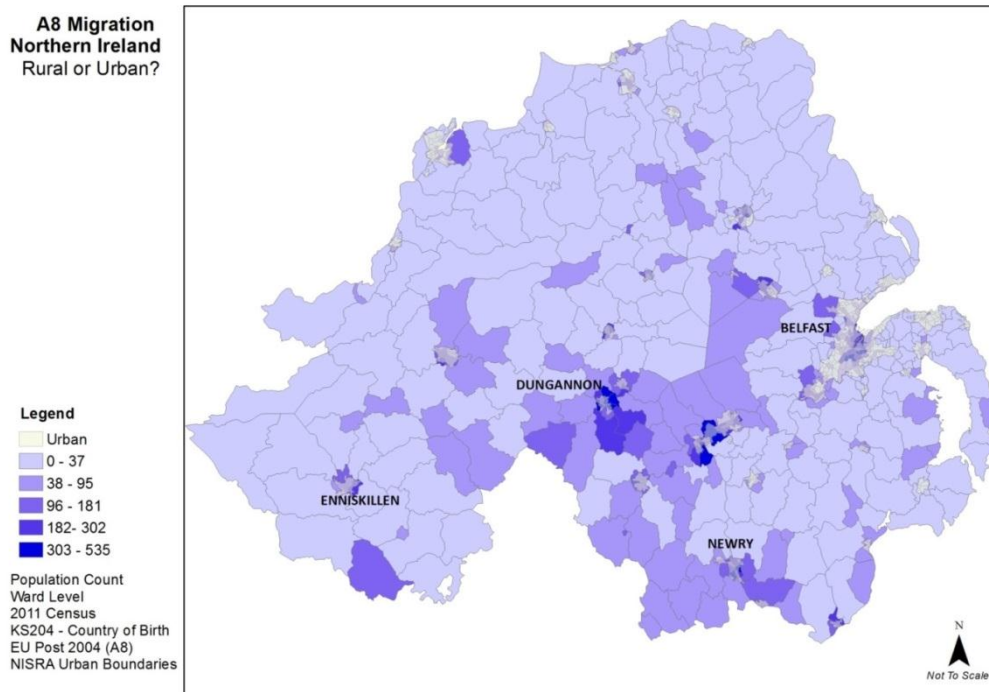
This briefing provides a brief overview of recent patterns and processes of migration to Northern Ireland and to identify the major challenges arising for society. It is based on primary research conducted by the author during 2013 that consisted mainly of focus groups and interviews with individual migrants. This briefing paper proceeds as follows: it identifies the key features of recent migration to Northern Ireland before presenting evidence from the research to show the experiences of migrants in the labour market. The key policy questions to be considered will be the role of the state and civil society for building positive inter-group relations and the opportunities that exist for migrants to achieve economic and social mobility.

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New patterns of migration to Northern Ireland

Recent migration to Northern Ireland reversed an established pattern of emigration and was particularly notable due to the rapid rate and pace of migration. Additionally, migrants moved to both urban and rural areas across Northern Ireland.

For a long time Northern Ireland was known as a place of emigration, although there are some longstanding and settled minority ethnic communities living there including German Jews, Chinese, Indian and Bangladesh. Global trends at the turn of the 20th Century resulted in the arrival of migrants from Portugal, South East Asia and the Philippines who filled vacancies predominantly within the food processing and the health and social care sectors respectively. Subsequently, and following the expansion of the European Union in 2004 to include Accession 8 (A8) countries, there was a shift in the scale and pattern of migration with unprecedented levels of migration from Eastern European countries (most notably Poland and Lithuania). In total 25 per cent more A8 citizens registered with the WRS in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK. It is estimated that over the ten year period from 2000, 122,000 international long-term migrants arrived in Northern Ireland, while 97,000 left¹. Census 2011 shows that the white population has decreased from 99.2% of the population to 98.2%, with ethnic minority groups accounting for 1.8% (an increase of 1%). Meanwhile country of birth shows that in 2001 1.5% of the population was born outside the UK and Ireland. This figure rises to 4.5% in 2011. Some migrants settled in urban centres including Belfast and Derry and significant numbers chose to live in communities throughout Northern Ireland. Dungannon was recorded as having the highest proportion of people born in EU accession countries (6.8%); within this district council area the Ballysaggart ward includes 825 people or 30% of the population who are EU and other migrants. The following map² illustrates the spread:



¹ Russell, R. (2012) *Migration in Northern Ireland: An update. A Research and Information Service Research Paper*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly

² Map created by Carey Doyle, PhD researcher, QUB <http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/TheInstituteofSpatialandEnvironmentalPlanning/PostgraduateResearch/CurrentPhDProjects/DoyleCarey/>

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Currently the following different ethnic groups exist in Northern Ireland; these categories provide an indication of the make-up of the population, rather than a fully comprehensive picture:

- Protestant and Catholic communities
- Travellers
- Longer established ethnic groups
- Recent migrants
- Refugees and asylum seekers

How the data was collected.

This article uses evidence from interviews and focus groups that were conducted by the author during 2013 as part of a research project for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and in partnership with McClure Watters. That research examined connections between poverty and ethnicity. It also investigated the experiences of minority ethnic groups within the labour market. The fieldwork was carried out in Belfast and in Newry, Craigavon and Portadown. Most of the research participants were recent arrivals with none being born in Northern Ireland, although some have been living there for at least 20 years. In total four focus groups were conducted with people from twelve different ethnic groups as follows:

- Mixed Asian: India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan – 6 male
- Polish and Bulgarian – 6 female
- Nigerian – 7 male, 1 female
- Mixed African: Sudan, Congo, Ivory Coast – 3 male, 1 female

Twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with 12 females and 8 males. Most of the interviewees were Polish (N=17) and the remaining were from India, Brazil and Singapore. Interviewees included those working in professional positions, professionals working in unskilled jobs and unskilled workers. Some of those interviewed had multiple jobs. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed, with interpreters being used in some cases. The interviews explored in detail issues arising from focus group discussions. The payment of an honorarium to migrant participants provided token recognition of their contribution.

A racist society?

It is well known that Northern Ireland has for a long time grappled with binary notions of community. Here migrants enter a particularly dense web of social networks, where skin colour is visible and apparent. This is not something that is easily accepted by all:

‘...sometimes people were looking at me and saying are you black and they looked at me and said, ok just one minute – they rubbed my arm to see if my skin changed’ (he demonstrates) (No. 5, FG, Nigerian 15.06.13).

Meanwhile social markers of religion and territory are more difficult to understand but are of fundamental importance – not least in terms of physical safety. The hazards of falling foul of local paramilitary groups was made clear in 2009 through two particularly stark incidents: the expulsion from their homes of 100 Romanian families in South Belfast, and also in South Belfast, attacks on 40 Polish homes following skirmishes associated with a World Cup qualifier match.

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Racial crime and incidences have persisted since 2005³, but the level of racist hate crime has declined by just under 14% during the past two years⁴. McDermott⁵ found that support for EU citizens living and working in NI is lower now than it was in 2005 and 31% of people interviewed in the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey in 2012 believed that racial prejudice will continue to get worse over the next 5 years. This is not always easy to identify, but can be more subtle as the following excerpt illustrates:

'It's probably in the area of just ignoring, and not being that helpful, if someone asks, some of my staff for example are classic examples of when this has happened. People know what good customer service is, but they perform within their role, so there is a chill factor' (Interview 14, Advocacy worker, 20.06.13).

Positive social relations are a two-way process. Many migrants explained how they took action to be accepted:

'My neighbours accepted me, but not them...it doesn't matter if you're Polish, if you're their Polish you're fine, if you say hello to them, if you're open, then you're accepted. But if you put up the barriers then it's not good...it's the little things like letting the local window cleaner clean your windows, or if there is a funeral and they're collecting for flowers, that you give money for that. These types of things so that they don't feel that you are setting yourself apart' (Interview 9, Polish female, 13.06.13).

Other interviewees reported acts of kindness from neighbours, employers and even those working in official roles. A Polish woman became friends with a woman working in the local housing agency. Initially she helped her to find somewhere to live, but she was soon helping the Polish woman with all sorts of things including job hunting. The two women remain friends to this day. Other upbeat stories include a situation where an employer kept a job open for a Polish migrant so that he could return to work following treatment for a serious illness. Or in another example a woman described how her neighbours and work colleagues helped with Christmas presents for their two children during their first year in Belfast when they had very little money. These positive deeds engender a sense of belonging and are critical for individuals if they are to feel settled within a community.

The labour market

While positive experiences of the labour market were reported, as highlighted above, poor employment practices were also evident. There were perceptions among respondents that their ethnic group was treated differently than others in the workplace evidenced through less access to overtime or an expectation that they would do more difficult chores than others or by being offered unwanted shifts (due to times or location). Differential treatment existed in professional jobs as well as in less skilled employment sectors.

Gaining access to the labour market was problematic with English language proficiency, access to affordable childcare and the recognition of overseas qualifications presenting major barriers. Learning English can be a circular problem if individuals do not use it in their job, such as those individuals working on meat production lines with co-

³ OFMDFM (2010) *Good Relations Indicators, 2009 Update*. Belfast: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland

⁴ Nolan, P. (2013) Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report, Number Two. Belfast: Community Relations Council.

⁵ McDermott, P. (2013), *ARK Research Update 86: A 'Shared Society?' Attitudes on immigration and diversity*. Belfast: UU & QUB
<http://www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update86.pdf>

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ethnic workers. Childcare is a known barrier for anyone seeking employment, but this study found that it was heightened for those from minority ethnic communities as they have fewer family and support networks. The recognition of overseas qualifications seems to be heavily reliant on a combination of serendipity and on individual self-belief:

'... most organisations have huge application forms... They will ask for the qualifications, subjects and the time when you did it. This is extremely hard for people from abroad to fill in, because even if I have a similar thing the grades are not the same ...[so] I just googled everything (laughs), just as much as I can I filled in – I will put in things that I believe are the equivalent. I will say that I have what I believe is the equivalent to something and they can check if they want and if they want to refuse then that's fine'. (Interview 8, Polish female 07.06.13).

In 2012 DEL launched a scheme allowing individuals to have this done via local benefits offices. However this is not well known or widely used. Since its launch it is estimated that 823 individuals have used the service. But employers can create additional barriers around the recognition of qualifications

'they told me that I need English certificates, I'm a lorry driver and he said that I need certificates from Ireland and so I brought him 12 different certificates and one was from a company in Northern Ireland ... He told me again I needed an Irish one and I said this is from Belfast. It's not easy...' (No. 1, FG, Male, Sudanese 15.06.13).

In reality many migrants rely on informal routes into the labour market by using networks and personal connections. Some get jobs through formal applications, but gain knowledge of opportunities through informal networks. This can create co-ethnic groups such as Lithuanians working in mushroom farms, or black Africans working in security positions or Polish working in meat processing. This can result in employers acting with impunity as they rely on the fact that a minority ethnic group may have limited knowledge of labour market opportunities or regulations. Another challenge arising from labour market segmentation is that individuals may have diminished opportunities to speak English and so their prospects of advancing in the labour market are reduced.

'I worked for most of the day, it was my sole preoccupation. I learned enough English to survive, but not enough to fill out documents or whatever...I worked really long hours... so then when I came back home I had no energy to do anything else' (Interview 6, Polish male, 07.06.13).

Community and voluntary sector support

Other research has highlighted the role of the community and voluntary sector in providing support to migrant communities through a range of schemes including cross cultural events and English language training. In a similar way, this study found that the third sector filled a gap in support to recent migrants through a spectrum of activities from cultural celebrations to political lobbying to advocacy and support. Some migrants explained how they lacked confidence to join more formal training courses such as language. The community and voluntary sectors provides a stepping stone that helps them to access the labour market or suitable training and education. Either way individuals are then better equipped to apply for jobs at an appropriate level. The direct words of this Polish woman very ably encapsulate the type of support offered:

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'The centre here is a great place [voluntary resource centre], I remember that my English was really poor and I had a huge problem communicating with people...But still I could come and talk with the people here, leave my children in the crèche...and I had a chance through wee steps to develop my language and then to do other courses, like computer courses...It's very, very difficult and I think that the application forms are like huge books and really a lot of help is needed. Because sometimes we possess some skills and we don't know that they are important and so we need help with the application forms...' (No. 4, FG, Polish female, 20.06.13).

Third sectors groups provide wider advocacy support, helping migrants who are experiencing difficulties within the labour market. Some employers operate poorly as they rely on migrants fear of losing their job and on their lack of knowledge of workplace rights and entitlements. Very complicated stories emerged through the research as described by a Lithuanian support worker:

'Yes, for example tomorrow I am going to interpret for a couple of girls who have been sexually harassed. They are struggling a lot with the work environment, they were harassed by Lithuanians and the owner of the farm speaks English. The problem is that those girls don't speak English and they cannot speak properly to the owner, they cannot speak for themselves and tell him what is going on. They have health issues after the incident, one of them is afraid to work and she has depression and all the problems started. The problem is the work conditions, nobody checks the farms. They work long hours and they have climbed big heights to pick the mushrooms and nobody cares about them and people are afraid to talk because they are afraid to lose their jobs. Psychologically they are struggling a lot and they don't have the courage to ask for holidays. If they receive holidays nobody will pay for them. They don't have the courage to ask for a contract' (Interview 15, 20.06.13).

Government support

Legislation is not just of benefit in protecting against physical harm but it can also provide the framework for the cultivation of positive relations. A raft of legislation advances an equality agenda including The *Race Relations (NI) Order (RRO) 1997* and the Good Friday Agreement. Legislation in Northern Ireland is in contrast to other jurisdictions in the UK where the Single Equality Act (2010) replaced nine major pieces of legislation and addresses discrimination, equality of opportunity and the development of good relations⁶. It is therefore of little surprise that positive outcomes do not always follow from the interpretation of this legislation as evidenced from the research above.

The impact of government initiatives such as DEL's recognition of overseas qualifications is not well known. Government issued guidance on ethnic monitoring the recent past, but organisations have struggled to put these principles into practice as many lack suitable expertise or capacity on data monitoring. Other schemes, such as employability initiatives that provide training towards working in particular roles such as within health and social care, can appear to provide much needed support. However the extent to which these are appropriate longer-term solutions is not clear, especially if such schemes segment different ethnic groups within certain sectors of the labour market or if they do not provide opportunities for progression. This can result in a perception among the majority communities that

⁶ Hepple, B. (2010) The New Single Equality Act in Britain Equal Rights Review Vol.5. pp. 11-24 (<http://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/bob%20hepple.pdf>, last accessed 30 May 2012)

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these are the types of jobs that ethnic minority communities are content to undertake. These are self-perpetuating beliefs where individuals from the majority communities continue to direct people from minority ethnic communities to such jobs, effectively forcing the underemployment of individuals.

'...I am looking for other jobs because I feel that I cannot be a pharmacist here in Northern Ireland. I contacted [employability initiative] and they said that you can work as a care assistant (laughter from the wider group), you can do a course in September' (No. 3 FG, Sudan, female, 15.06.13).

Various associated strategies such as the *Racial Equality Strategy* and the *Together Building a United Community Strategy* seek to promote an agenda of inclusion. The strategies have been delayed but early versions of the documents have raised questions about how issues of ethnicity and race will be addressed within the context of Northern Ireland and a Shared Future that embraces good relations. The Northern Ireland Migration Partnership is developing a migration strategy in an attempt to co-ordinate some of the disparate policy interventions that impact on migration and on migrants. Other strategies such as the Economic Development strategy could present opportunities for migrants. Strong leadership from government would enhance the effectiveness of these different measures by ensuring good co-ordination and connections.

Conclusions

This research has identified the importance of the workplace for migrants as they settle in Northern Ireland. Access to the labour market can be impeded through lack of recognition of overseas qualifications which often results in the underutilisation of migrants' skills and qualifications. Subtle forms of discrimination can also obstruct entry to the labour market or hamper individuals' abilities to progress when in employment. Migrants may not fully appreciate their rights and entitlements and so may be rendered more vulnerable if their employer operates with impunity while exploiting migrants' ignorance and fear to full advantage. Migrants face additional barriers owing to fewer family and other support structures and connected to childcare costs and in-work poverty.

Positive integration is reliant on a range of factors, not least of which is English language proficiency. Support from government and from the community and voluntary sectors is important to help develop language skills. The third sector is able to respond to unfolding needs and to plug gaps in support mechanisms, often providing a bridge towards more formal training or indeed connecting migrants to employment. Government can also assist with integration through various mechanisms. Political leadership would communicate the importance and legitimacy of migrants within society in Northern Ireland, acknowledging that racist attitudes and discriminatory practices are not tolerated. The provision and implementation of coherent and robust legislation and connected strategies, alongside guidance on the implementation of ethnic monitoring would help convey this message.

Finally, it is worth noting that generalisations within and between minority ethnic groups help to identify patterns and to plan for the future. However individual stories matter, differences exist between different ethnic groups:

'See at the end of the day everybody is not here for enhancing our growth from a monetary point of view. We are here for the experience and to see the world also...' (No. 4, FG, India, male 22.05.13).