



**Public Consultation to inform a national strategy for  
migrant integration: Submission from the Economic and  
Social Research Institute**

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## 1. Introduction

Integration not only allows migrants to contribute to the economic, social, cultural and political life of their host country, but it is also important for social cohesion and inclusive growth. In Ireland, integration is defined as the ‘ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all major components of society without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity’ (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017, p. 11). Importantly, the strategy also acknowledges that ‘as a two-way process, integration involves change for Irish society and institutions, so that the benefits of diversity can be fully realised’. Department of Justice and Equality, 2017, p.11), consistent with the European Commission definition (European Commission, 2005). This shows the importance of understanding integration as a process that happens not just with migrants, but also within the host society, with acceptance and attitudes towards migrants a crucial factor in integration, as well as how migrants are treated.

Census 2022 figures show that 12% of people living in Ireland are now non-Irish citizens, while 20% were born outside of the State (CSO, 2023a). In the year to April 2023, immigration increased significantly, largely driven by increased migration from outside the EU including Ukraine, but also from within the EU and UK (CSO, 2023b).

We know the reasons people migrate are many and varied, with people moving to Ireland to study or work, to join family, or because they are forcibly displaced from their homes. The years since Ireland’s first Migrant Integration Strategy lapsed have been turbulent. The COVID-19 pandemic, international conflicts including the invasion of Ukraine, as well as ongoing domestic housing and cost of living crises, have all impacted migration flows and migrants individually, as well as attitudes towards migrants (Laurence et al., forthcoming). The development of the new Migrant Integration Strategy presents an opportunity to take account of the current environment and to plan for Ireland’s increasingly diverse society.

## 2. ESRI Monitoring Reports on Integration and Research Programme outputs

The ESRI has published eight Monitoring Reports on Integration since 2011. The reports examine how migrants compare to the Irish-born population in four key domains: employment, education, social inclusion and active citizenship using integration indicators proposed at the European Ministerial Conference on Integration held in Zaragoza in 2010 (European Commission, 2010). The Monitoring report series, now biennial, is complemented by in-depth reports on particular topics, forming a major research programme on the topic of integration. Since 2016, the Monitoring Reports and research programme on integration have been funded by the Department of Justice followed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

### 3. Why monitor migration?

Integration has important consequences for the well-being of migrants and their families, with greater integration allowing them to contribute to the economic, social, cultural and political life of their host country (OECD, 2018; Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). Integration also has important consequences for the host society, for example affecting social cohesion, intergroup relations and inclusive growth (Alba and Foner, 2015). It is therefore crucial to gain an understanding of how migrants are faring and to study the degree to which the outcomes and experience differ between migrant groups, on the one hand, and the Irish born majority population, on the other hand.

Mainstreaming is the main policy approach in Ireland and while it can be effective, particularly in the longer term, the specific needs of migrants, such as host-country language provision and other integration services can be neglected (Gilmartin and Dagg, 2021; Scholten et al., 2016), particularly without integration monitoring highlighting where gaps exist (Collett and Petrovic, 2014). Keeping an ongoing record of differences in outcomes between the foreign-born and Irish-born population across key domains provides both policymakers and the general public with important information to assess integration outcomes and to respond to policy challenges.

### 4. Monitoring Report on Integration 2022: Key Findings

Monitoring Reports provide an overview of the most recent data on migration, placing Ireland in an EU context. An overview of key policy developments and challenges in four key domains - employment, education, social inclusion and active citizenship - is presented, along with the integration indicators compiled with the most accurate and up to date data available. Tables 1-4 below show the main integration indicators presented in the 2022 Monitoring report.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1: Employment

Employment, working age population (2022)	Irish-born	Foreign-born
Employment Rate	71.6	76.4*
Unemployment Rate	4.6	5.9*
Activity Rate	75.0	81.2*

Source: Labour Force Survey Q1 2022

\* Denotes that the estimates for this group are statistically significantly different from Irish nationals at  $p \leq 0.05$

Migrant labour market outcomes were more affected by the pandemic than those of Irish natives, with larger falls in employment and a bigger rise in unemployment between Q1 2020 and Q1 2021. Nevertheless, since then employment rates among the foreign-born population have risen remarkably. By Q1 2022, at 77 per cent, the migrant employment rate exceeded both migrant employment rates in Q1 2020 (71 per cent) and the Irish-born employment rate in Q1 2022 (72 per cent). Particularly notable is the increase in employment rates among the African-born population which requires further investigation, and which, if it persists, shows considerable progress by this group.

<sup>1</sup> Sources for tables 1- 5LFS Q1 2022 for employment indicators; LFS Q1 2020-2022 (pooled) for education indicators; EU-SILC 2020-2021 (pooled) for social inclusion indicators. Citizenship and long-term residence indicators: Irish Naturalisation and Citizenship Service, Eurostat. The ratio of non-EEA nationals who acquired citizenship since 2005 to the estimated immigrant population of non-EEA origin at end-2021 is adjusted for naturalised persons leaving the State (see Chapter 5 for details). Political participation indicator: Immigrant Council of Ireland. See Appendix 2 for further details of sources. \* non-EEA adults who acquired citizenship in 2021 as share of non-EEA nationals holding 'live' immigration permissions

While migrant employment rates are very high, the quality and wages of those jobs tend to be lower among migrants. Laurence et al (2023) found significantly lower wages and working conditions for some non-Irish national groups, in some cases substantial and persisting over time. Where available, evidence strongly suggests that English language skills are important for labour market integration in Ireland. Migrants with better English language skills are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to work in a professional/managerial occupation (McGinnity et al., 2020). Laurence et al (2023) find the lowest wages and poorest working conditions among some of the national groups shown to have the weakest English language skills.

Table 2: Education

Education (2020-2022, pooled)	Irish-born	Foreign-born
Share of 25-34 age group with third-level education	56	67*
Share of early leavers from education (20-24 age group)	3.3	4.6

Source: Labour Force Survey Q1 2020-2022 (pooled)

\* Denotes that the estimates for this group are statistically significantly different from Irish nationals at  $p \leq 0.05$

Young migrants in Ireland have early school leaving rates that are similar to those of Irish-born students. Even though the Irish population is one of the most highly educated in the EU, the level of education among the foreign-born population tends to be higher than among Irish-born: in the age group of 25-34, 67 per cent of those born abroad to has a tertiary degree compared to 56 per cent of those born in Ireland. English language skills are important in the education system too. While there are no differences in mathematics or science scores at age 15, PISA data reported in the *Monitoring Report on Integration* series consistently shows English reading achievement lower for migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (McGinnity, Enright et al., 2020).

Analysis from the *Growing Up in Ireland '98* cohort, all living in Ireland since age nine, finds no difference in the proportion of migrant-origin and Irish-origin young people sitting the Leaving Certificate examination (around 95 per cent of both groups), and no significant difference in mean leaving certificate points between migrant-origin and Irish-origin young people. McGinnity et al (2023), analysing this birth cohort at age 20, also find no differences in transition rates to third-level education, either from migrants from English speaking backgrounds or non-English speaking backgrounds. Recent research which has found that children of migrant origin enter primary school with lower levels of English language skills but similar levels of non-verbal skills (Sprong & Skopek, 2022) and that language gaps seem to narrow over time, though at age nine, children from non-English speaking backgrounds still perform worse in English reading (Darmody et al., 2022).

### Social inclusion

Social Inclusion (2020 and 2021 pooled)	Irish-born	Foreign-born
Median annual net income (needs adjusted)	25,107	22,802*
At risk of poverty rate	11.6	16.8*
Consistent poverty rate	4.1	5.3*
Share of population (aged 16+) perceiving their health as good or very good	81.9	84.9*
Proportion of households that are property owners	76.6	42.8*
Proportion of households spending more than 30 per cent of their income on housing	8.5	29.3*
Share of households at risk of poverty after housing costs	19.2	30.8*

Source: EU-SILC 2020-2021 (pooled) for social inclusion indicators.

\* Denotes that the estimates for this group are statistically significantly different from Irish nationals at  $p \leq 0.05$

The foreign-born population had a lower median annual net income than the Irish-born population and higher 'at-risk of poverty', deprivation and consistent poverty rates: non-EU migrants were particularly disadvantaged. While the foreign-born population tended to be healthier, migrants overall were also less likely to own their home and faced more issues relating to housing affordability than the Irish-born population. In additional research, McGinnity et al (2022) found that while private renting was particularly high among recent migrants, also that migrants are more likely to be in overcrowded accommodation and living in homeless shelters. The high rates of private renting and associated affordability issues mean many migrants are particularly exposed to current problems in the private rental market, characterised by limited availability, insecurity of tenure and affordability issues.

### Active citizenship

Active citizenship (end 2021)	
Annual citizenship acquisition rate*	4.1
Ratio of non-EEA nationals who acquired citizenship since 2005 to the estimated immigrant population of non-EEA origin at end-2021	38.7
Share of non-EEA adults with live residence permissions holding long-term residence	0.7

Source: Citizenship and long-term residence indicators: Immigration Service Delivery, Eurostat.

Note: The ratio of non-EEA nationals who acquired citizenship since 2005 to the estimated immigrant population of non-EEA origin at end-2021 is adjusted for naturalised persons leaving the State (see McGinnity et al., 2023). \* non-EEA adults who acquired citizenship in 2021 as share of non-EEA nationals holding 'live' immigration permissions

It is estimated that 4.1 per cent of the non-EEA population holding immigration permissions acquired Irish citizenship in 2021. Between 2005 and 2021, the total number of non-EEA nationals who had acquired Irish citizenship since 2005 represents 38.7 per cent of the resident adult population of non-EEA origin at end 2021. This assumes those naturalised in the period did not leave Ireland, so is likely to be an upper bound estimate. Significant increases in processing delays for citizenship applications (to 30 months on average) impede access to naturalisation, though multiple reforms have now been implemented to tackle this. McGinnity et al (2020) find that for non-EU nationals, being an Irish citizen is associated with lower unemployment and higher occupational attainment.

## 5. Data Needs

Monitoring is crucial for migrant integration and depends on the availability of adequate data. It is essential that we have more and better data on migrants and their situation in Ireland. Existing surveys could be improved by the inclusion of immigrant and ethnic minority boost samples to overcome inadequate sample sizes and to allow differentiation between different groups of migrants .. Collecting good data on ethnicity is also increasingly urgent as documenting the extent of discrimination and disadvantage over time forms an integral part of any anti-racism strategy. A new question on parents' country of birth included in standard social surveys (LFS, SILC) since 2021 will allow future research to distinguish and compare first- and second-generation migrants. This is important as the how the second-generation fare in their host society can be seen as the 'litmus test' for the success (or otherwise) of integration (OECD, 2018).

Some indicators of integration are specific to the migrant population - such as intentions to stay, sense of belonging, feelings of exclusion. These are not usually collected in national surveys, nor are they available from administrative data signalling a need for a large representative survey of the migrant population as is common in many other European countries, yet still lacking in Ireland. Additionally, exploiting administrative data sources in areas such as education, health and social welfare would enhance our understanding of migrant integration from survey data. The forthcoming equality data strategy has much to offer in terms of monitoring integration and outcomes for different national and ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup> Using administrative data, potentially combined with survey data, could be particularly helpful for tracking the integration of refugees into Irish society. In addition, the lack of ongoing national data collection on attitudes of the population, such as the *Northern Ireland Life and Time Survey* or the *British Social Attitudes Survey*, means that information on attitudes to immigration and to different immigrant groups is not routinely collected. This means researchers and policymakers need to rely on international surveys on the topic, which are often not designed with the Irish context in mind, or ad-hoc surveys, which do not facilitate ongoing monitoring.<sup>3</sup>

## 6. Implications for Policy

This section presents policy conclusions arising from the 2022 Monitoring Report as well as from other studies in the ESRI/DECDIY programme of research on integration.

- Given high qualification levels among migrants overall but lower wages, one potential driver is that foreign qualifications are not receiving equal recognition by employers in Ireland. **Thus, greater efforts are needed to improve qualification recognition among employers, along with raising awareness, and adaptation more effective implementation of the NARIC system of foreign qualifications recognition to be more responsive to employer needs<sup>4</sup>.** This would ensure migrants' skills are being used to their full potential in the Irish labour market. A detailed analysis of overeducation of migrants in Ireland could inform any changes.
- Higher unemployment rates in 2022 among some non-EU groups (non-EU Eastern Europeans, Africans, and Rest of the World, mainly composed of Central/South Americans) show that it is important that the jobseeker engagement and labour market activation policies are appropriate to the needs of migrants and are effectively implemented.
- A group that particularly struggles with incorporation into the labour market is those who are likely to have come to Ireland seeking international protection (Privalko et al., 2023). Evidence suggests that **refugees and protection applicants may need targeted supports**. In the context of an unprecedented increase in refugees and protection applicants in Ireland in 2022, this places considerable demands on resources, but is likely to yield benefits for the integration of these migrants, and Ireland, for years to come.
- Previous research on the Irish labour market has also documented ethnic discrimination in recruitment, particularly towards the Black ethnic group (McGinnity, Grotti, et al., 2018). While racism and discrimination had not been prominent on the policy agenda for years in Ireland, with little focus on it in the current Migrant Integration Strategy, the current National Action Plan Against Racism represents a significant opportunity, as long as it is effectively

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/5a7f4-minister-ogorman-announces-the-development-of-a-national-equality-data-strategy/>

<sup>3</sup> For example McGinnity, Grotti et al (2018) use European Social Survey data. Laurence et al (forthcoming) use Eurobarometer data combined with a recent one-off survey of attitudes in Ireland.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-academic-recognition-information-centre>

implemented and monitored (McGinnity, Quinn, et al., 2021). **Specific measures to combat racism and discrimination may be required** (IHREC, 2019) such as diversity initiatives in the workplace or measures to address online misinformation and hate-based content, either as part of the new Migrant Integration Strategy or in coordination with the National Action Plan Against Racism.

- Housing and homelessness were not identified as issues in Ireland's first Migrant Integration Strategy. Yet, findings from Monitor series suggest that migrants are much more likely to be in private rented accommodation than Irish-born, and also more likely to experience affordability problems associated with housing.. Finding suitable and affordable accommodation is particularly challenging for those moving out of direct provision centres who have been granted international protection status. ESRI research **underscores the importance of including housing in the successor to the Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2021 as a matter of urgency**, though addressing major challenges more broadly in the Irish housing market will benefit migrants too (see also McGinnity et al., 2022).
- Learning the host country language is the key skill for facilitating economic, social and cultural integration(OECD, 2020). The lack of a coordinated approach to English language provision for adult learners in Ireland has been raised as a policy issue in Monitoring Reports on Integration since 2012 and has yet to be addressed (McGinnity et al., 2013). Given the evidence of the importance of English language skills, **facilitating co-ordinated, accessible, well-advertised adult ESOL provision is crucial**.
- Evidence on how migrant children fare in the Irish education system suggest that **maintaining language support for migrant students is very important**. In order to plan effectively, policymakers need to know what proportion of students at primary and secondary level require English language tuition, what the budget requirement is and how effective English language tuition is.
- It is crucial to see integration as a two-way process, with immigrants integrating towards society and society accepting towards immigrants. Social attitudes towards migrants are therefore highly relevant. Laurence et al. (forthcoming) shows that Irish attitudes towards migrants in 2023 are overall very positive, and do not reflect the attitudes of vocal minorities. However, attitudes are more negative towards certain groups, in particular asylum seekers, and survey data indicates immigration has significantly increased in importance as an issue for people ('salience') in recent years, which can be a risk factor for worsening attitudes. In addition, the authors found that while support for refugees is high when asked on its own, it drops significantly when questions specify costs such as pressure on services or increased taxes. **It is crucial for the maintenance of public support for refugees and migrants that they are not perceived to be burdening services, therefore investment in local areas that are hosting migrants and ensuring strong provision of mainstream services is therefore also important for integration**. The positive net economic contribution made by migrants, along with the potential costs of failed integration, underlines the prudence of such investment. Consultation with communities about specific challenges are a key part of investment in local areas.
- Recent ESRI research (McGinnity et al., 2023) has also found that important factors in explaining different attitudes to migrants in Ireland and Northern Ireland found that having a sense that their voice counts in politics, people's optimism for the future, and having more migrants in their social networks is all associated with more positive attitudes. This echoes findings by McGinnity et al (2018) that casual, positive contacts with migrants was also

associated with more positive attitudes in Ireland. The finding on social contact suggests that providing greater opportunities for inter-ethnic contact and increasing the diversity of people's social networks in Ireland could be an effective means of both improving attitudes and fostering the social integration of migrants. This could involve equality of access to employment and workplaces to foster greater workplace mixing and investing in the civic engagement opportunities such as volunteering, which can help bring groups together from different backgrounds in common cause.

## 7. Conclusions

The policy gaps and areas of concern highlighted here underscore the importance of renewing the *Migrant Integration Strategy* to keep up the momentum built by the previous one and to enhance it so it can be even more effective at meeting the changing needs to the migrant population in Ireland.

Policy vision is insufficient if it is not implemented. Any strategy will fail its stated aims without effective implementation. Monitoring, indicators and evidence are a therefore a core part of any strategy. Indicators ideally identified in advance, along with additional evidence and feedback from stakeholders about whether goals are being achieved or targets met. Clear communication of the aims and effectiveness are an integral part of this positive feedback loop, as well as the flexibility to adapt policies or measures where evidence suggests they are not working or are having unintended consequences.

A migrant integration strategy needs to speak to other strategies to avoid duplication and learn from successes in other policy areas. Ideally the strategy would also be flexible enough to respond to policy issues arising during its lie.

A core part of any migrant integration strategy is ensuring that migrants are included in the institutions and the communities and society they live in. At a policy level, this means ensuring migrants' needs are being accounted for across a range of government departments and agencies. Thus migrant integration is not the responsibility of one government department: buy-in, 'ownership' and co-operation is needed across government. By providing information on the likely impact of budgetary measures across a range of groups, including migrants and ethnic minorities, the equality budgeting initiative could usefully complement the migrant integration strategy.<sup>5</sup>

Civil society and migrant organisations also have a crucial role to play in implementing any strategy, both to make sure the actions meet the needs of the communities they serve, to respond to issues on the ground and to feedback any areas where issues are emerging.

Integration is not just the role of government or civil society organisations – integration is as much about everyday interactions at work, in public places and the community as it is about inclusivity in institutions. Every individual and community needs to play a part, and understanding the concerns of those communities may be a crucial part of facilitating this.

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5 <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/aec432-equality-budgeting/>



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