



Issues and Challenges in the Recruitment and Selection of Immigrant Workers in Ireland

Executive Summary

Prepared for the Employers' Diversity Network
of the Public Appointments Service

by WRC Social and Economic Consultants



An tSeirbhís um Cheapacháin Phoiblí
Public Appointments Service

Oifig an Aire d'Imeachtha
Office of the Minister for Integration



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Final Report

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1. The Aims and Objectives of the Research


In April 2008 the Employers' Diversity Network, which is coordinated by the Public Appointments Service, commissioned research into the recruitment and selection of immigrant workers in Ireland. This research aimed to gain insight into the experiences of job seekers from a range of immigrant communities of seeking work in Ireland in addition to exploring the practices and experiences of a sample of employers (both public and private sector) in relation to the recruitment and selection of employees from immigrant communities.

The exploration of the issues from the immigrant/job seeker perspective involved qualitative and quantitative research with key immigrant communities in Ireland to collect information on their experience of seeking employment in Ireland, including their knowledge of the job opportunities available in different sectors, their job seeking strategies and methods and the difficulties and challenges encountered.

Exploring the issues from the employer perspective involved collecting information from a sample of employers in relation to how they approached recruitment and selection of candidates in general and specifically candidates from immigrant communities. This strand of the research also focused on exploring any challenges employers have experienced in attracting and selecting candidates from immigrant communities and on identifying examples of innovative practice in responding to those challenges.

2. Methodology

The research focused on three groups of immigrants: East Europeans and especially Polish; Asians and especially Chinese; and people from Africa. In addition, the views of organisations that support immigrants, labour market service providers in the public and private sectors and the Social Partners were sought. Given the short time frame, the focus was confined to employers and workers in the Greater Dublin area. The main elements of the methodology used to address the terms of reference were as follows:



A Literature Review drawing on official statistics relating to immigrants' engagement with the labour market and employment; Irish and international research into the experiences of immigrants in the labour market and at work; critiques of policy as well as relevant policy documentation; and international best practice with a focus on those countries with an acknowledged track record in attracting and integrating migrant workers.

Qualitative Research involving consultation with key stake-holders, including: six semi-structured interviews with organisations representing and / or working on behalf of ethnic minorities; eight interviews with labour market service providers in both the public and private sectors; in-depth interviews with five private sector and four public sector employers; interviews with representatives of ICTU Congress Centres Network, IBEC and SIPTU; and three focus groups with participation from each of the three groups that were the primary focus of the research.

Quantitative Research involving two surveys as follows: an email survey of 30 labour market service providers in the eastern region; and a postal survey of a sample of employers within the Construction, Health and Hospitality sectors in the Dublin region.

3. The Structure of the Report

The report is structured around four chapters. Chapter 1 presents the terms of reference for the research and the methodology employed as well as the findings from the review of relevant literature. Chapters 2 and 3 respectively present the findings of our primary research into (i) the experiences of immigrants in seeking work in Ireland and (ii) the practices and experiences of employers in recruiting immigrant workers. Chapter 4 presents a discussion of the overall conclusions of the research.

4. The Recruitment of Immigrant workers in Ireland: The Context

Chapter 1 prefaces the findings of the report with a number of key points as follows:

- Despite the current economic downturn, Ireland as a developed economy will continue to be a country of destination for immigrants and the ongoing management of immigration, diversity and integration will



continue to grow in importance as a policy area for Government and as an area of practice for employers and Trade Unions.

- Notwithstanding a number of unique features of immigration to Ireland (such as the scale of recent immigration), it appears that the Irish experience of immigration and particularly economic migration is not atypical of international experience. As such, Ireland can learn from those countries that have put in place effective policies and structures to manage immigration and facilitate integration and, equally importantly, can avoid the pitfalls of those which have not.
- Labour market well-being is central to promoting the social integration of immigrants, yet the mechanisms of labour market integration are poorly understood, particularly as regards the diversity that exists amongst immigrants and their interaction with an, in turn, diverse mix of employers.


The literature review draws out a number of themes as follows: the global context of immigration in Ireland; migration and labour market segmentation; Irish labour migration policy and broader social policy; the well-being of immigrant workers; and barriers to finding appropriate work. These are discussed below:

The Global Context

Whereas the economic boom was instrumental in attracting immigrants to Ireland it is important to note that immigration is a function of global forces that include world demographic growth, processes of globalisation, economic inequalities between the northern and southern hemispheres and the enlargement of the European Union. As such, the more relevant context in which to locate an assessment of immigration in Ireland is not the national economy but its incorporation into international economic processes.

Migration and Labour Market Segmentation

One of the key labour market phenomena that arise from the interaction of globalisation and migration is labour market segmentation characterised by widening gaps both between immigrants and non-immigrants, and among different immigrant categories. The degree of segmentation depends on a whole host of factors including ethnic and national background, gender, recentness of arrival, legal status, education and training. There is a consensus within the



literature that labour market segmentation has become a defining feature of contemporary immigrant employment, most evident in the clustering or concentration of immigrants in particular jobs, industries and economic sectors, influenced in the main by the following three key factors: the attributes of immigrants themselves, especially in relation to social capital; employers' recruitment practices and processes; and government policy.

Irish Labour Market Policy

Irish immigration policy and particularly labour migration policy has already seen a number of distinct phases. The first, 'employer led' approach placed few restrictions on employers in hiring non-Irish workers and allowed the widespread use of work permits to fill low-skilled positions (NESC 2006a). In 2003 / 2004 a distinction between European Economic Area¹ (EEA) immigrants and those from non EEA countries was introduced whereby low skilled employment was to be sourced from the enlarged EU and the work permit system re-focused on high skilled occupations where there was an evident skills shortage. Later, in 2005, a more managed approach to labour migration became evident in such developments as the establishment of the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) (NESC, 2006a). Criticism of the current scenario focuses mainly on the lack of policy and legislation to adequately support the integration of immigrants and the limited recognition of the permanency of immigration.

Labour Market Well-Being

In relation to the labour market well being of immigrants, the literature shows that while the overall rate of unemployment amongst immigrants is higher than amongst the indigenous population, it is particularly high amongst those of Black origin, of whom over one quarter were returned as unemployed in the 2006 Census. It has also been argued that the majority of new entrants into the Irish labour market have taken up predominantly low skill jobs which Irish workers have tended to avoid. This clustering is not driven by the skill level of immigrants; rather it reflects under-employment, where immigrants are employed below their skill level (Barrett et al, 2006).

¹ The EEA comprises the member states of the European Union, in addition to Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. Swiss nationals also have rights which are similar to those of nationals of EEA countries



Barriers to Employment

Finally the literature highlights barriers to employment on both the supply side (e.g., lack of proficiency in the English language or a lack of understanding amongst immigrants of the cultural norms applying in the host country) and demand side (e.g., the requirement of some Irish employers that recruits should have Irish experience; the experience of racism and discrimination; and the failure of some recruitment practices to conform to labour market standards). Other barriers to labour market mobility can arise from policy constraints, for example, policy governing entitlement to work can have a significant impact on the employment mobility of immigrants that increases their vulnerability.

5. The experiences of Immigrant workers in seeking work

Our findings echo issues raised throughout the literature, particularly as regards finding work. Almost all of the immigrant workers involved in the research, and also most of the organisations consulted with, were of the view that immigrants per se experience difficulties in the labour market and that some groups of immigrants (notably Africans) experience severe difficulty. In some respects, the difficulties they identify and the views they express could have been articulated by other groups who experience disadvantage in the Irish labour market (e.g., lack of information; distance from service providers; or employers' negative mindsets). This commonality suggests that in addressing the labour market needs of immigrants, particularly the most disadvantaged, lessons can be learnt from labour market inclusion measures more generally. However, the fact that immigrants share certain labour market difficulties with other groups should not detract from what is specific to their situation or from the heterogeneity of immigrants themselves.

The key findings relating to the personal circumstances and motivations, awareness, decision making and job search strategies of immigrant workers are presented below in addition to key points relating to their experience of the recruitment and selection process and experiences in the workplace in terms of retention and advancement.

5.1 Immigrants' personal goals/orientation and job seeking strategy

The research found that the personal plans and aspirations of immigrants, sometimes referred to as the mode of orientation, can potentially have a significant bearing on how they operate on the labour market and what type of work they want or will accept. In that regard, a distinction can be made between immigrants who intend to make a life in Ireland and who will therefore have career aspirations commensurate with their skill and qualification level; those who want to upgrade their skills (including language skills) for a planned return home and who will seek work which facilitates this, and those who want to accumulate savings as quickly as possible and who are likely to accept any job that allows them achieve that aim.

Regardless of their orientation, however, most immigrants face a severe financial imperative to find work immediately and consequently have to balance career and longer term aspirations with the need to generate income. As a result, under-employment is a very frequent part of the immigrant labour market experience and is considered by those we engaged with as a normal part of the process of 'finding ones feet' in a new country. Such underemployment was perceived to be a problem only if it coincides with segmentation in the labour market and / or if those affected cannot find more appropriate work in a reasonable period of time.

Although there is economic pressure on immigrants to find work quickly, there is still a decision making process regarding which companies to apply to or in what sector to look for work. In that regard there is a range of factors that influence decision making including:

- the English language skills of the immigrants themselves;
- their own competencies and capacity to have these recognised;
- the information provided to them by personal networks; and,
- the signals, intentional or otherwise, given by employers.

5.2 Awareness of the labour market

The level of labour market information amongst immigrants and their job search skills have been identified in previous research as contributing to their difficulties in seeking work and these factors were again referenced as part of this research. In that regard issues such as the lack of awareness of available supports and the adequacy of such supports were raised.



Immigrants saw the public sector as particularly inaccessible and they were unlikely to target this sector when looking for employment. Reasons for this included current policy restricting entry to the Civil Service General Service Grades to EEA nationals only, the lack of visible diversity amongst public sector employees that immigrants have encountered, the perception that entry into many public service jobs can only occur at a junior level and the misperception amongst many immigrants that proficiency in the Irish language is required for a wide range of public sector roles. Some immigrants, particularly Eastern Europeans planning to work here for a fixed period felt that it was less appropriate for them as 'guest workers' to aspire to jobs in the public sector.


5.3 Experience of the selection process itself

The experience of seeking work itself varied but, in general, the focus group discussions tended to focus on negative aspects of that experience such as: the failure by employers to acknowledge applications and the failure by employers to provide feedback on the reasons for the rejection of an application.

The initial screening of job applications was perceived by focus group participants to be a very significant stumbling block in their efforts to find work. In general, the dominant perception was that applying to an open recruitment process was not likely to lead to positive outcomes. Such was the frequency of negative outcomes at this stage, that the lack of success in getting through the initial screening process was widely interpreted as an anti-immigrant bias on the part of employers, and in the case of African applicants, as racism.

Immigrants participating in the focus groups and representatives of their peer led organisations identified a wide range of challenges that immigrant workers have experienced within the interview and assessment process that included issues relating to language proficiency and cultural differences in communication (e.g., eye contact, assertiveness). Other issues mentioned included the use of assessment tests that made no allowances for non-native English speakers, the issue of qualifications recognition, the frequent requirement of Irish employers for Irish based work experience and references and the discounting of relevant experience in the home country. Employer prejudice and confusion concerning the legal status and right to work of immigrants were also referenced as presenting significant difficulties for immigrants.

In summary, the research indicates that immigrants encounter the Irish labour market first and foremost as immigrants. That is, their labour market experiences are shaped and determined by:

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- their own cultural capital (or lack of);
 - difficulties in finding employment at the level at which they were employed in their home country;
 - what they see as the reluctance or hesitancy of some Irish employers to recruit immigrants; and by
 - their legal status.

Some immigrants have developed personal strategies to overcome these issues, e.g. through voluntary work in the community sector in order to acquire work experience; through deliberately omitting qualifications from their CVs and seeking access to lower level jobs in the sector they subsequently hope to advance in; and, through becoming self-employed. More generally, though, it appears the dominant immigrant response to the difficulties in finding work and in particular in finding work at the appropriate level is to accept work at a lower level.

The research suggests that while labour market disaffection is not prevalent amongst immigrants, reinforced self-exclusion may be, that is, repeated failure to secure appropriate employment or the perception that their applications are not welcomed by some organisations may lead to a degree of fatalism, the abandonment of effort and the perception that the space within the Irish labour market that is accessible to immigrants is limited.

6. The Experiences and Practices of Employers in Recruiting Immigrant Workers.

Chapter 3 of the report presents the views of employers regarding their practice and experiences in relation to the recruitment of immigrant workers. Among the employers consulted with, several did specifically address the needs of immigrant job applicants and developed innovative approaches to removing barriers to their recruitment and selection. Other findings also provide insights into the type of practices, provisions and policies that could improve the well-being of immigrants on the labour market and ensure their access to appropriate employment.

Mechanisms of recruitment (e.g., informal, formal, outsourced) varied considerably across organisations depending on the size of the organisation, the sector in which it is located and the level at which positions were available. The principle distinction arises however between large organisations where recruitment follows a formal and highly structured process usually implemented by specialist HR teams with little input from managers, and small companies where informal and more personalized approaches are implemented by the employer. In general this enables smaller companies to be more flexible in recruiting but also means that they tend to use more subjective judgment.



Employers we consulted with said they had recruited immigrant workers for a variety of reasons including, for example: difficulty in getting Irish workers in sufficient numbers; difficulty in getting specific skill sets among Irish workers; and because a multi-cultural workforce enabled better product / service in a global market.

The recruitment process, particularly as implemented by large organisations was found to be comprised of a number of key elements or stages that we summarise as follows:

Elements of Recruitment Process	
<p>1. Pre-recruitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing job description • Establishing eligibility criteria • Advertising 	<p>2. Identifying the most suitable applicants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Screening • Short-listing
<p>3. Assessment/ Selection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews • Testing • Reference checking/Vetting 	<p>4. Post recruitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Induction programmes • Other supports

In the body of the report we look at how the organisations consulted with implement these various elements and the implications of these for the recruitment of immigrant workers. Some key issues arising include the following:

- No special efforts were made to attune the job description to the particular circumstances of immigrants or to accommodate cultural or national differences in the professionalisation of some occupations.
- Among the most common key criteria for determining eligibility were: qualifications; proficiency in English; and entitlement to work in Ireland.
- In general, there were no attempts to recruit through specifically immigrant avenues, except where immigrant workers were explicitly being sought.

- Almost all organisations said they relied heavily on CVs as part of the application / preliminary screening and shortlisting process. Organisations that use application forms were satisfied that their application forms per se did not include anything that could prejudice applications from immigrants (for example, in most cases the forms do not require information on nationality).
- In large scale recruitment processes, the short-listing stage appears to be a crucial stage in terms of the applicant's chance of securing a job, and is the hurdle that many immigrant applicants find difficult to pass. However due to the nature of short-listing it is difficult to determine with any accuracy what the most common basis for assessment is.
- Psychometric tests or other forms of aptitude testing (generally written) are frequently used by larger organisations and in respect of recruitment for technical positions. It was felt that these tests, while they can be challenging for all candidates cause particular difficulty for people whose first language is not English. While many employers recognise this fact, they view these tests as an essential means of selecting fairly and objectively in situations where large numbers of candidates apply.
- In all instances, interviews formed a crucial part of the recruitment process and in almost all cases these are competency based interviews where interviewers have received appropriate training; however, training in intercultural interviewing appears to be quite rare.

When asked to indicate the barriers to good performance at the interview stage for immigrant candidates, the employers surveyed responded as follows:

- 89 per cent cited inadequate proficiency in English
- 69 per cent cited poor communication skills
- 41 per cent cited poor personal presentation
- 21 per cent cited lack of confidence
- 18 per cent cited lack of eye contact
- 13 per cent cited lack of assertiveness

In general, employers consider the recruitment process to be robust, demanding and difficult to get through, and that this is the case for Irish workers and immigrant workers alike. They also perceive that it is essential that the robustness of the process is maintained in order to retain the high standard of employee / productivity / customer service etc.



7. Divergent views of Employers and Immigrant Workers

This research identified quite divergent views of employers and immigrant workers in relation to some key elements of the recruitment and selection process. Table 7.1 summarises how views can differ and illustrates that processes that employers perceive to be fair and to accommodate immigrant workers may be viewed by immigrants applicants themselves as problematic or as a barrier to them performing effectively during the selection process.

Table 7.1: Divergent views of Employers and Immigrants on the Recruitment Process

Views of Immigrant job seekers	Elements of the Recruitment /Selection Process	Practice and views of employers
Feel it is frequently unclear what the job requires, particularly less specialized jobs. Uncertainty about eligibility exists particularly with regard to qualifications.	Job description	Feel that formal job descriptions make it clear to applicants what is involved and should assist immigrant applicants to determine if they are qualified.

<p>Limited advertising avenues are used especially immigrant specific avenues.</p> <p>Often not clear if their applications are welcome.</p> <p>Believe that advertised jobs are sometimes already filled.</p>	<p>Advertising</p>	<p>Immigrant specific avenues are rarely used but the dominant perception is that mainstream channels are sufficient for attracting immigrants.</p> <p>Rarely indicate that jobs are open to immigrant applicants.</p> <p>Rarely indicate that equality policies extend to immigrants.</p>
<p>Express difficulties with on-line applications.</p> <p>Frequently require assistance in preparing CVs, completing application etc.</p>	<p>Application</p>	<p>Changes to application forms have been made to accommodate immigrants.</p> <p>Employers agree that poorly presented CVs are an impediment for immigrants.</p>



<p>Strong perceptions that immigrants are deliberately screened out both at initial and subsequent screening stages.</p> <p>Feel that many employers have a requirement for Irish references and Irish work experience, and that work experience outside of Ireland is given little consideration.</p>	<p>Screening/ Short-listing</p>	<p>Initial screening based on eligibility criteria. Subsequently short-listing influenced by strong pressure to reduce numbers.</p> <p>Employers are adamant that no anti-immigrant bias is operating, but some agreement that the basis of screening out may be quite spurious.</p> <p>Mixed views were expressed by employers on the need for Irish experience and references, but the majority indicated they did not select or shortlist on this basis.</p>
<p>Perception that employers underestimate the difficulties for immigrants at interview.</p> <p>View that cultural differences in presentation / performance at interview can limit the applicants chances.</p>	<p>Interviewing</p>	<p>Employers generally showed an appreciation of the difficulties experienced by immigrants at interview. Larger companies frequently train interview panels but not always in inter-cultural interviewing. Perception that language and verbal communication are very important, but cultural norms less so.</p>

<p>Perceive written and language based tests as presenting difficulties and sometimes being culturally biased.</p> <p>Little or no accommodation to immigrants for example by providing more time.</p>	<p>Testing</p>	<p>Limited use of tests amongst employers , but a lot of emphasis on such tests as do take place.</p> <p>Few examples of innovation in responding to immigrant issues.</p>
<p>Perception that employers do not understand the legal situation or the qualifications framework and that many employers will not take the extra time to process paperwork etc on these issues.</p>	<p>Vetting</p>	<p>Employers reasonably familiar with legal system and with NQF framework. Experience mixed in the extent to which they use them. The more sought after or scarce the skill set, the more likely the employer will undertake the necessary work to vet immigrant applicants.</p>
<p>Perception of limited promotion or advancement prospects. Some sense that their opportunities are deliberately blocked. Some hesitancy to go forward for promotion.</p>	<p>Promotion</p>	<p>No barriers to advancement perceived by employers.</p>

The vast majority of employers consulted with had not audited their recruitment process with respect to its impact on immigrants, although some had modified elements of it when they perceived a specific difficulty arising. Overall, there was a general willingness among employers to make changes to accommodate immigrant workers, and this was frequently related to a desire to promote diversity within the workplace. Some organisations however did not perceive any need for this.




8. Conclusions

Based on the findings of this research it is evident that there is a wide range of issues that are impacting on the recruitment and selection experiences and outcomes amongst immigrants. The findings point towards a range of measures that could be taken to enhance these experiences and outcomes, as well as highlighting issues that merit more comprehensive and in-depth research.

The findings of the research suggest a number of key issues that impact on immigrant workers in the Irish labour market. Some of these issues relate to the policy context, others to the provision of labour market services. The role of English language competence in underpinning labour market wellbeing is relevant here as is the provision of more labour market supports to immigrant workers in relation to issues such as information, assistance with job applications (including the presentation of CVs) and assistance with interview techniques. In addition, the problem of labour market segmentation and the lack of research into the longer-term integration of immigrants into the workforce and their advancement in employment are issues requiring attention.

Of more specific relevance to the concerns of this report are those issues that fall within the ambit of employers, in both the public and private sectors. The following, we suggest, are areas that need to be considered by employers:

- There is a need for employers to be more mindful of the signals they send, inadvertently or otherwise, to potential foreign job applicants. The extent to which immigrants seeking work will exclude consideration of organisations they perceive to send negative signals has been highlighted by the research. The implication is that employers, including public sector organisations, should ensure that they are seen to be immigrant-friendly. This is particularly relevant for organisations, including those in the public sector, which wish to attract a culturally diverse workforce
- There appears to be considerable scope for employers to expand the range of media they use in placing job advertisements in order to more explicitly target immigrant candidates. There is also a case to be made for stating on advertisements that applications from immigrant workers will be welcome and / or that being an equal opportunities employer covers the race ground. For larger organisations wishing to attract a more diverse workforce the possibility of consulting with immigrant communities through their peer-led organisations could be considered. This strategy, could help to ensure that advertising reaches immigrant audiences and that advertising and recruiting practices are inclusive.

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- In developing job descriptions and defining requirements and eligibility criteria employers should be mindful of cultural differences across national boundaries in respect of the requirements for some occupations as well as a more general lack of insight amongst immigrants into what a job might entail in the Irish context. Clarity and precision are required in order to minimise confusion and misinterpretations on the part of immigrant candidates. Employers – and especially those which have not thus far succeeded in attracting immigrant candidates – should take greater care to ensure that the descriptions of jobs they provide can be understood by non-Irish workers and in particular that they do not contain implicit cultural assumptions that would not be readily understood by potential immigrant candidates.
 - Screening and short-listing procedures, particularly in large volume situations, can be opaque and driven by pragmatism. Auditing the recruitment process is an effective but costly way of dealing with this issue. However, employers should introduce measures to ensure that no unintentional or implicit biases are at play that could militate against the short-listing of immigrant applicants.
 - Interviewing and to a lesser extent, testing, are hugely significant in underpinning the selection of candidates and both present very real challenges to immigrant candidates, particularly but not exclusively for those for whom English is not their first language. The extent of the difficulty that foreign candidates experience in relation to the interview process may not be fully appreciated by employers. The value of intercultural training of interviewers is indicated here. In general, employers were more aware of the difficulties for immigrants associated with selection tests but few had sought ways to minimise these. The difficulty in finding effective alternatives to testing must be acknowledged and at the level of the individual company, addressing this issue may be costly. However, macro level approaches including ongoing monitoring and experimentation could be considered.
 - Measures to smooth the vetting process – including in relation to references, police clearance, recognition of qualifications and legal entitlement to work – need to be put in place. Greater support for employers in terms of information and assistance is required, as is better communication of ongoing legislative changes and easier access to sources of information.



- If the requirement to have work experience in Ireland is operating as a significant barrier, particularly for highly skilled applicants, it would point to clear remedies in terms of innovative work experience programmes for immigrants (including refugees).

Ireland's experience of inward migration is still a relatively new phenomenon. To date that experience has been largely unproblematic despite the dramatic scale of inward migration and this can in part be attributed to the economic and employment growth achieved over the last decade. However, the national and international contexts have changed and the State (including public sector employers) as well as employers in the broader economy will need to develop and improve on the available expertise to attract, recruit and select immigrant workers with a view to promoting the longer term viability of the economy and of individual organisations. It will also be necessary to demonstrate to actual and prospective immigrants that Ireland is committed to promoting equality of opportunity in the first instance and equality of outcome over time. While good practice amongst certain individual employers and/or groups of employers is certainly evident it would appear that a greater level of pro-activity is required to achieve real equality and fair outcomes for immigrants in the workforce.



