



# MIGRANTS AND EDUCATION IN ABERDEEN/SHIRE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is part of a 2017 series of papers related to migration in Aberdeen/shire, encompassing healthcare, education, language learning, employment, and housing. It is based on wider research findings from interviews with over 200 migrants and 60 experts across Scotland, with a special focus on our work in Aberdeen City and rural Aberdeenshire.

The findings draw on interviews with an ethnically and nationally diverse cohort of migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (as detailed in the below table). As well as housing, migrants were asked about a range of topics including: their reasons for settling in Scotland; their experience of local services (from healthcare, to education, to libraries); their working life; their experiences of welfare provision; their families; and their social lives.



## OVERVIEW OF SSAMIS RESEARCH

<b>Locations</b>	Aberdeen (n27); Glasgow (n37); Peterhead (n41), Fraserburgh (n9), other rural locations in Aberdeenshire (n25); Arbroath (n39), Montrose (n12), Brechin (n9), other rural locations in Angus (n8)
<b>Employment sectors</b>	beauty and hairdressing; care industry; cleaning services; hospitality & catering; construction; farm work; food processing; interpreting/translation; IT; office work; oil industry; retail; third sector
<b>Employment status</b>	Agency workers; employees; professionals; self-employed; stay-at-home parents; students; unemployed
<b>Gender</b>	Women (n129); men (n78)
<b>Age group</b>	18-24 (n13); 25-34 (n66); 35-49 (n91); 50+ (n36); unknown (n1)
<b>Country of origin</b>	Azerbaijan (n2); Bulgaria (n8); Czech Republic (n6); Estonia (n1); Hungary (n18); Kazakhstan (n1); Kyrgyzstan (n1); Latvia (n42); Lithuania (n28); Poland (n83); Romania (n5); Russia (n5); Slovakia (n4); Ukraine (n3)

## INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of education and skills was a theme running through many SSAMIS interviews, and was one of the key reasons cited by migrants in their decision to settle in Aberdeen/shire. This was firstly because many migrants either brought children with them, or had had children since coming to Scotland, and in both cases were keen not to disrupt their education once they had entered the Scottish system. As detailed below, migrants had mixed opinions about Scottish schools, and were not always confident enough to engage with their children's education due to their unfamiliarity with Scottish language and cultural norms.

Secondly, Scotland was appealing to many in terms of adult education: EU migrants could enrol on college courses fairly easily at NESCOL in Fraserburgh or Aberdeen, where they acquired new skills or improved their English language. Some went on to higher education or were working towards a new degree. However, because of a wider problem with deskilling amongst migrants, many were forced to depart from their previous specialisms: even if they had been highly qualified in their countries of origin, they often found that qualifications were not accepted in Scotland or were limited in terms of employment by their level of English. Gaining a Scottish qualification was thus one way of moving out of unskilled and low-paid work, even if migrants were not always able to stay in sectors they had previously worked in.

Below, we consider migrant experiences of schools and of adult education in more detail and provide examples from our interviewees.

## SCHOOLS

- For migrants with children, **schools were key considerations in deciding to settle in Scotland:** they often expressed worries about uprooting children who were born in Scotland or who had moved with their parents at a young age. Scotland was seen to offer better long-term prospects for children who wanted to further their education or find good jobs.

I had a job and my daughter was at school here, I thought: 'maybe I'll be fine here – after all, I have money.' Well... I was thinking after a year I'll go home, when my little girl needs to be at school in Lithuania at seven years old. One year [came and went], then a second year, then a third – and that was it. Because now it would be difficult for her if she went back, she can't read very much in Lithuanian.

**Jadvyga, 42, Lithuanian, fish factory worker**

- **Schools functioned as a key form of integration into the local community** for children arriving in Aberdeen/shire. There were examples of younger children picking up English very quickly, even where their parents were struggling to find the time or resources to improve their own English.
- Parents appreciated the extra help their children had been given help as new arrivals to local schools.
- Some parents in rural areas mentioned internal migration within Scotland/the UK as something they were considering when their children were nearer school-leaving age (i.e. to be nearer to urban areas with greater educational and employment opportunities).
- Pre-school/nursery education was perceived quite negatively: not due to the standard of care, but mainly in the context of there being much less state provision in Scotland than in migrants' countries of origin.
- **Parents, relatives and carers had very mixed views about the quality of Scottish schooling.** Initially some aspects of the Scottish education system could provoke criticism, as they differ greatly to systems in Central and Eastern Europe: e.g. less homework is given in Scotland; there is more emphasis on learning through play and less rote learning; and there is more emphasis on 'soft skills' such as leadership and team working, etc. However, opinions improved over time as migrants gained more experience and understanding of teaching in Aberdeen/shire.

Education, it's not as broad here as in Hungary, which on the one hand is not good, but on the other it's very, very good. I don't know why we have to create little professors in Hungary. Why do we need historians, mathematicians, chemists? I don't know - for someone to become a nurse, or to become a doctor, why do they have to be a physicist, or a historian, or for them to become a chauffeur, why do they need to solve mathematical equations? [...] They don't do this here.

**Judit, 41, Hungarian, Cook/Small Business Owner, Aberdeen City**

I actually forced her to do a couple of maths and physics exercises from Russian books, and she said 'mum, I can't because I cannot understand'. But that is her level, her age, for Russian schoolchildren. Obviously she couldn't do that. I was astonished. [...] But what I must say, I'm really happy with the education she's got at the moment, at the end. [...] Almost three years ago when she left school, the knowledge she got from this Scottish school – her knowledge was far higher, better and more solid than the knowledge her mates got from Russian school.

**Alisa, Russian, ESOL teacher, Aberdeenshire**

- Some found the lack of constant grading and assessment at Scottish schools difficult to understand and thus engage with – this had been standard in many CEE countries. However, there were positive comments on feedback methods such as parents' evenings and individual parent-teacher meetings. This was especially in comparison to the CEE norm of whole-class meetings, where students could be negatively assessed in front of peers and other parents.
- Some migrants also liked that children were treated less harshly in Scotland than they themselves had been at school (e.g. no corporal punishment). However, others had concerns about a lack of discipline and respect for authority as compared to their country of origin.
- Community workers and teachers mentioned **migrant parents' lack of engagement with schools**. Whilst part of this can be attributed to cultural differences, migrant parents were also likely to be working long hours or in shift patterns that affected the amount of free time they had. Furthermore, they were not always confident that they would be able to communicate with teachers effectively in English, or would not be following the 'right' social norms.

**ESOL Tutor:** You weren't very confident about speaking to the school staff, were you? You remember, when you wrote the letter about injections, the population's flu jabs. Because [Ada] did not want her daughters to have them, because one daughter sometimes has convulsions. And you were worried about it, but you wrote the letter and then rushed down to school with it, and they did stop the girls, didn't they? It was actually going to happen, even though you said no on the form [...] You called in to speak to the headteacher. And you did fine, very well.

**ADA:** Yes, because before I was scared. I didn't want to try and speak with anybody.

**Ada, 36, Fish factory worker, Aberdeenshire**



- However, there were instances of effective community engagement via schools which migrant parents attended. One example was of a mini gala day at a Fraserburgh primary school where stalls were held by various welfare bodies such as Grampian Women's Aid, the NHS, and relationship advice services.
- Happily, there were few stories of migrant children being singled out by bullies for their nationality/race: younger children tended to be well assimilated at school and mixed with local children.
- However, migrants who arrived as teenagers had more difficulty fitting in at school:

I think it's okay [to fit in if] you're little or if you're adult; but if you're a teenager, I don't think it's fine. Especially, let's say, in school. [...] For some [local] people it's just too much; these foreigners are here, and they're not excited about that anymore.

**Giedre, 20, Lithuanian, retail worker**

There was a lot of situations [at my school where] Scottish people bullied immigrants, but it's because it's teenagers. [...] I was bullied in my country as well, so, I was used to it! When I started to fight back, they was my friends.

**Gabriels, 19, Latvian, unemployed**

## ADULT SKILLS AND FURTHER/HIGHER EDUCATION

- **Access to further/higher education was seen as a plus point for many migrants settling in Aberdeen/shire.** A couple of participants had gone on to a Scottish university since their arrival, and college courses in particular were very popular. Migrants with children also perceived that they would have more opportunities in Scottish higher education than may have been possible in their countries of origin, especially as funding was available to help with living costs while studying.
- **Occupational mobility was significantly increased with the gaining of language skills and/or Scottish qualifications:** typically this was done via part-time or compressed hours courses at local colleges, which were better suited to migrant lifestyles than full-time study. Those of our participants who were studying or had studied at such courses had usually needed to combine study with (often full-time) employment.
- There was more chance of gaining further qualifications if individuals (particularly working mothers) had a partner whose income was high enough to support the household, meaning they could devote more time to their studies.

I worked because I needed to have money, things, etc, but I wanted to get back to the same position I had in my country. I used to work in a notary's office - it's similar to your solicitors. But because my law degree isn't acceptable here, because you have a different legal system, I can only be a paralegal here. For this I need to go to university, but because I don't have money, it's another problem... you have to be here three years if you want to get funding.

**Katya, 31, Lithuanian, local authority worker**

- Practicalities and a lack of transferability of existing qualifications meant that **migrants often took courses in different subjects compared to their previous educational or work experience** in Central and Eastern Europe. For example, migrants (particularly women) who had worked in professional roles would re-train or update their skills in hairdressing/beauty, cake decorating or accountancy in order to work more family-friendly hours or escape low-skilled employment.
- **Both further education and ESOL classes often served a wider role in integrating migrants**, expanding their social networks (with both locals and other migrants) and helping to familiarise them with Scottish life and local customs.
- In Peterhead, free ESOL classes provided by the Workers' Education Authority (WEA) were popular and provided cultural as well as language education. However, these were only available to those in employment.
- Less formal evening ESOL meetings run by church groups were especially helpful for newly-arrived migrants to gain a footing in very basic English language skills and cultural norms. Activities were also provided for children at these meetings, which meant that migrants with families did not need to find childcare.
- Since 2016, a joint participatory action research initiative by SSAMIS, local arts group MODO and the WEA has been ongoing in Peterhead. The 'Make it Happen' Language Café tackles issues of loneliness and social isolation, as well as migrants' lack of opportunity to improve English language skills, all of which were highlighted by our research. Through focusing on everyday English and alternating evening and daytime classes, a wider group of migrants has been able to attend and stronger social bonds have been built, supported by an active Facebook page. (For more information, see SSAMIS report *Migrants and Language Learning in Aberdeen/shire.*)
- Help with a range of issues, including IT skills and English, was also given in Peterhead at the local (now closed) Hot Spot café, which also employed local migrants, and at the Here for You centre in Fraserburgh.
- However, there was often **a lack of knowledge of other help available locally** for individuals to develop skills and education. For example, only 2 out of 41 Peterhead interviewees had used Skills Development Scotland (e.g. to help with CVs) facilities in the town – one with positive experiences and one who found it less helpful.

## OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Education, particularly in relation to schools, has been an important factor in influencing migrants from Central and Eastern Europe to settle permanently** in Aberdeen/shire and in Scotland more generally. It forms part of a wider perception amongst migrants that more opportunities are available for themselves and/or their children in Scotland compared to in their countries of origin.
- Schools, colleges and ESOL providers should continue to recognise the role they play in integrating migrants into the local community, particularly in rural areas where there are less cultural and social spaces and opportunities to socialise. Ongoing attention could be given to **facilitating the interaction of migrants with other local community groups.**
- Although many migrants acknowledged the support given to younger children settling into Scottish schools, it did seem that migrants who arrived as teenagers had more difficulty fitting in, even if their English was good. **More targeted help could be given to the high school age group.**
- **Help for newly arrived migrant parents** (e.g. informal groups, online groups, leaflets) at their children's schools could be a valuable resource in aiding understanding of how they can better support their children at school, and explaining concrete ways they are able to get involved in school life if they wish to do so.
- Finally, more **signposting of migrants towards skills-focused agencies** that provide help with job hunting and CVs, such as Skills Development Scotland, would be beneficial.

