



TOWARDS INCLUSION

INTERVIEW STUDY AMONG FOREIGN
RESIDENTS IN NORTHEAST ICELAND





ABOUT THE PROJECT

In 2024, Þekkingarnet Þingeyinga received a grant from the Immigrant Affairs Development Fund to conduct a qualitative study on the experiences of immigrants in Norðurland. The project's objective was to gather practical knowledge about the situation of this rapidly growing group and create a more solid foundation for municipalities and institutions to develop services and resources that meet their needs. At the request of the Samtaka sveitarfélaga á Norðurlandi eystra (SSNE), the scope of the study was expanded to cover the association's entire operational area, with SSNE funding the addition.

The report's findings are based on 30 interviews with immigrants from diverse backgrounds who were living in Northeast Iceland at the time the study was conducted. The interviews focused on their experiences with daily life, access to public services, and participation in professional and cultural life. Additionally, the study explored what obstacles they had encountered and what support or resources had proven useful. Emphasis is placed on highlighting both the challenges related to social integration and positive examples and solutions that can be applied more broadly. With this approach, the aim is to present a comprehensive picture of the situation and needs of immigrants from their own perspective, thereby supporting policy-making and improvements in the services provided by municipalities and institutions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Method	3
Key concepts	5
Research Area	6

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Origin of Respondents	7
Age and Length of Residence	8
Household Circumstances	9
Education and Employment	10
Employment Status	11
Social Activities	12
Icelandic Lessons	13
Confidence in Icelandic	14
Information	15
Discrimination in Society	16
Elections and Influence	17
Connection to the Local Community	20
Access to Services	21
Quality of Services	22

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Main Themes	23
Language	24
Services	26
Employment and Education	27
Social Participation	28
Discrimination	30
Democratic Participation	31
	32
	33

SUMMARY

REFERENCES

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Útgefandi: Þekkingarnet Þingeyinga - Hafnarstétt 1-3, 640 Húsavík

Netfang: hac@hac.is

Veffang: www.hac.is

Titill: Í átt að inngildingu: Viðtalsrannsókn meðal erlendra íbúa á starfssvæði SSNE

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Öll réttindi áskilin. Óheimilt er að afrita skýrsluna, í heild eða að hluta, með nokkrum hætti, s.s. með ljósmyndun, prentun, hljóðritun eða öðrum hætti án skriflegs leyfis útgefanda.





METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a mixed-methods approach, where qualitative and quantitative methods are used in parallel to shed light on the integration and social participation of immigrants in Northeast Iceland. The aim is to analyze both the experiences of individuals and to identify measurable patterns that can be useful for policymaking and service development.

The theoretical framework of the study is based, among other things, on the integration model of Ager & Strang (2008), which emphasizes key areas of integration such as employment, education, health, social connections, rights, political participation, and language skills. It also draws on the ideas of Penninx & Garcés-Mascreñas (2016) regarding integration as both an analytical concept and a policy issue. In developing questions about social participation and the experience of social inclusion, research by Buckingham et al. (2018) was also considered, as well as research on the democratic participation of immigrants in Iceland, such as that by Eypórssson (2019). Furthermore, Icelandic studies on the status of immigrants in more rural areas were taken into account, including those by Ragnarsdóttir et al. (2020).

The core of the data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, which allowed researchers to follow a predefined topic guide while also providing space for personal narratives and deeper insight into the participants' experiences. The interview framework covered topics such as language learning, labor market status, access to services, social connections, experiences of discrimination, and participation in the local community. The qualitative analysis was based on thematic analysis according to the method of Braun & Clarke (2006), where patterns and themes in the participants' responses were systematically identified.



Alongside open-ended questions, standardized questions were used to collect quantitative data on language skills, labor market participation, access to services, and democratic participation. This data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to highlight proportions and general patterns in the responses. Purposeful sampling was used, in the spirit of Palinkas et al. (2015), with the aim of achieving diversity in terms of origin, age, length of residence, family status, and labor market position. This approach sought to ensure that different voices and experiences were represented. The results from the quantitative questions describe the composition of the interviewees and provide insight into the interview findings, but one should be cautious about drawing too many conclusions from them, as the number of respondents was only thirty.

Special emphasis was placed on ethical considerations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymity and secure data handling. The interviews were conducted in Icelandic, English, and Polish, and interpretation services were offered but declined in all cases. This approach aimed to create a trusting and safe space for discussing sensitive topics such as discrimination, marginalization, and experiences with access to rights and services. By integrating qualitative depth and quantitative overview, the study strives to provide a comprehensive picture of the situation of immigrants in the region.



KEY TERMS

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

Social participation generally refers to an individual's involvement in activities that include communication or interaction with others in their community or immediate environment. This can be through formal and informal interactions, social activities, hobbies, community events, or other activities that connect people.

INCLUSION

A policy that ensures everyone can participate, regardless of origin, gender, ability, or disability, in school, the labor market, or other settings, and are recognized as full participants.

PREJUDICE

Unjust or prejudiced treatment of different groups of people, for example, due to nationality, age, gender, or disability. It manifests in everyday situations.

EVERYDAY PREJUDICE

Manifests in everyday situations. Dominant groups have more power, and their unconscious habits can negatively affect minority groups, often without anyone realizing it. Everyday prejudice refers to ingrained and "taken-for-granted" practices that perpetuate discrimination, both in daily behavior and in societal systems.

RESEARCH AREA

A total of 30 interviews were conducted with foreign residents in the operational area of the Association of Municipalities in Northeast Iceland (SSNE). The interviewees lived in all municipalities in the area except for two, Tjörneshreppur and Svalbarðsstrandarhreppur. The sample should therefore reflect a fairly broad geographical distribution among foreign residents within the operational area.

The interviews were conducted from June 24, 2025, to January 21, 2026. They were carried out according to an agreement between the interviewer and the interviewee, usually in a neutral location such as a meeting room or a coffee shop, but in a few cases at the interviewees' homes.

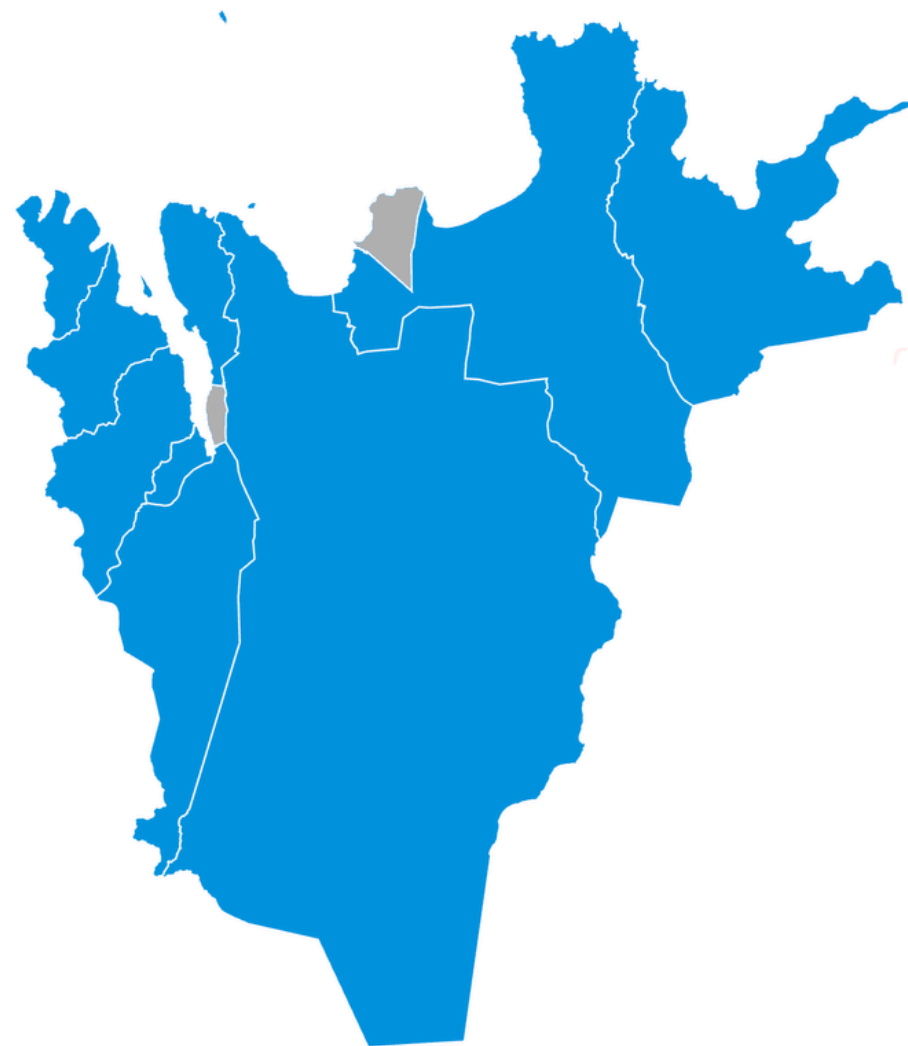


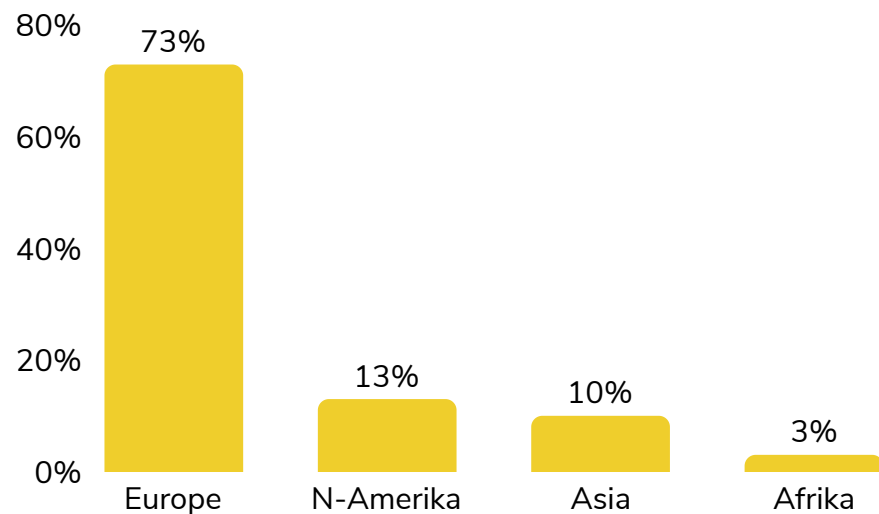
Photo: Icelandic Association of Local Authorities

ORIGIN OF RESPONDENTS

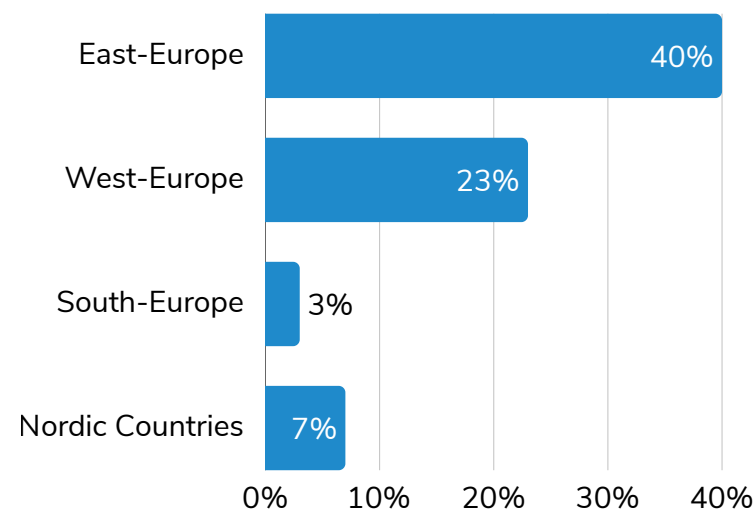
Participants were from 18 countries, and most (73%) came from Europe. About 13% of respondents were from North America, 10% from Asia, and 3% from Africa. Within Europe, most (40%) were from the eastern part of the continent. Then, 23% came from Western Europe, 3% from Southern Europe, and 7% from the Nordic countries.

An effort was made to achieve the greatest possible diversity within the group regarding the origin of the participants, while at the same time ensuring that the composition of the group was as consistent as possible with actual proportions.

ORIGIN OF PARTICIPANTS



BREAKDOWN WITHIN EUROPE (73%)

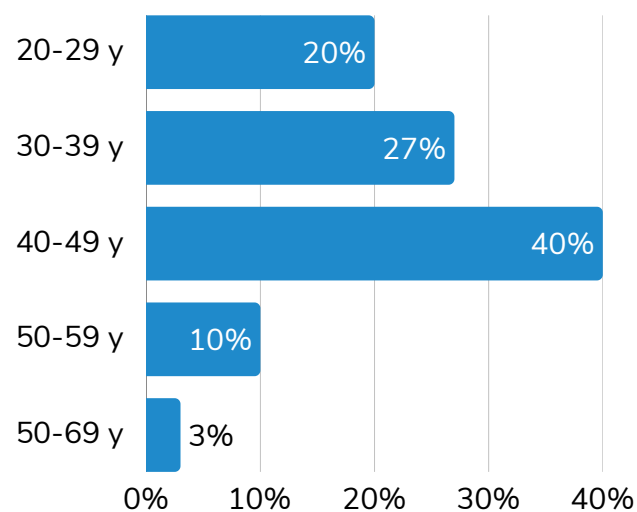


AGE AND LENGTH OF RESIDENCE

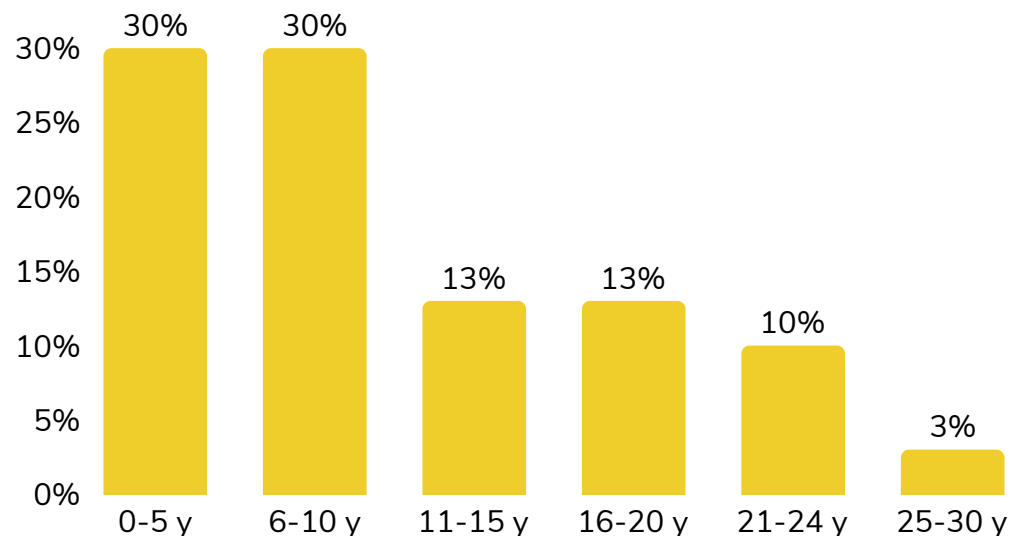
The average age of respondents was 39.7 years, and the median age was 40. Based on the age composition of the group, it can be assumed that these are people who can participate in the workforce and society. Most of the respondents were female, at about 67%, 30% were male, and 3% defined their gender in other ways.

The average length of residence in Iceland for respondents was 10.2 years, with a median of 9 years. The distribution of the length of residence was quite even, spanning from half a year up to 26 years, which indicates that a large portion of the participants should have considerable experience with residency and community participation in the area, although the voices of newer residents were also heard.

AGE DISTRIBUTION



LENGTH OF RESIDENCE IN ICELAND



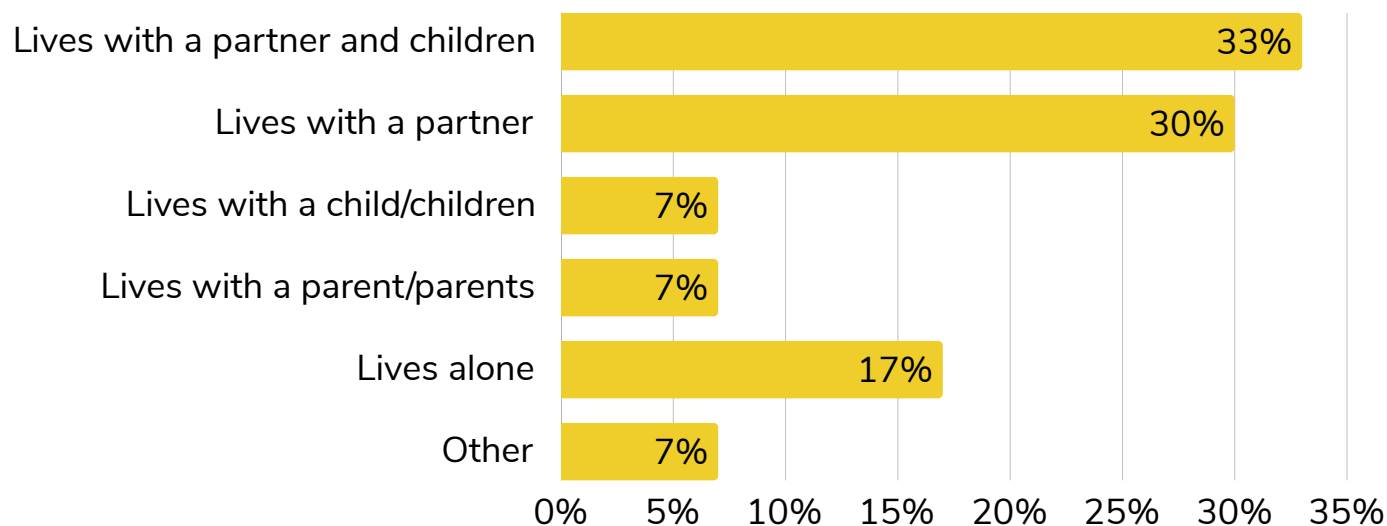
LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

The participants' living arrangements were varied. About a third of the respondents (33%) lived with a partner and children, which was the most common household type in the group. The next largest group, 30%, lived with a partner but without children in the home.

A total of 7% lived with a child or children without a partner, and another 7% lived with a parent or parents. Additionally, 17% reported living alone, which indicates that a portion of the participants did not have immediate family in their household. About 7% of the responses fell into the "other" category, which could, for example, refer to living with friends, siblings, or in other household compositions.

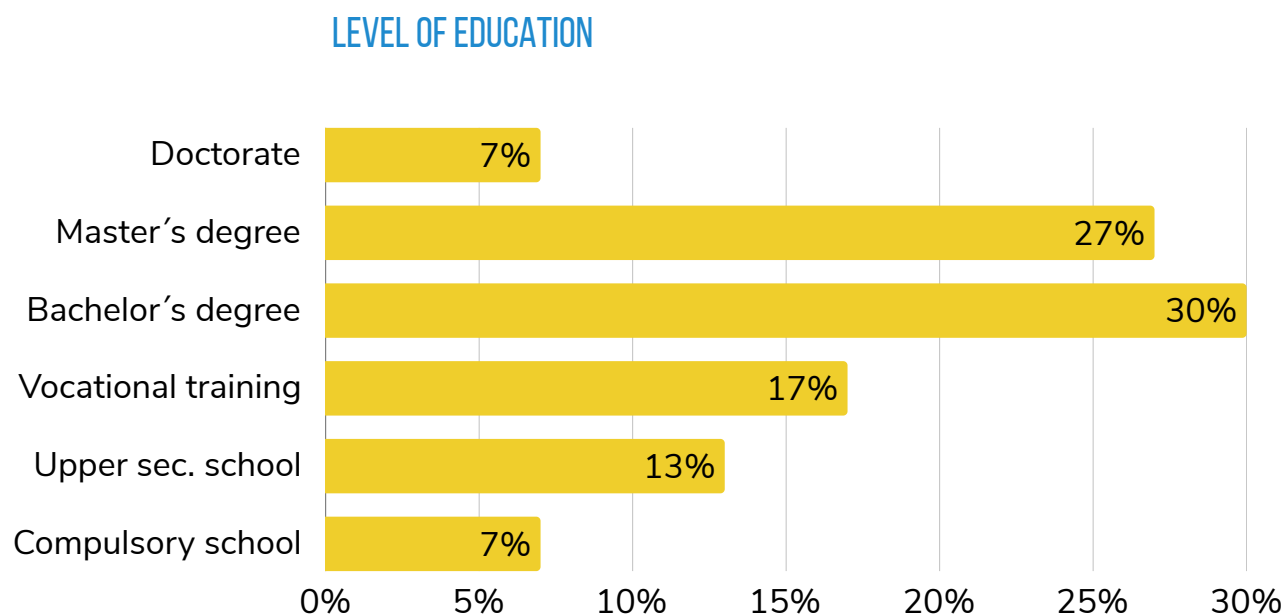
The results show that the majority of participants lived with a family member of some kind, but at the same time, a significant portion lived alone or in other circumstances that can affect social status, relationship building, and the experience of community participation.

LIVING ARRANGEMENTS



EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

A specific question was asked about the interviewees' level of education and whether their current job was in line with their education. It proved more difficult to reach people with a low level of education, and repeated attempts were made to do so with limited success. The educational level of the participants was therefore quite high, which could affect the results. In total, 7% held a doctorate, 27% a master's degree, and 30% a bachelor's degree. Thus, a total of 64% of participants had a university education. Furthermore, 17% had completed vocational training, 13% upper secondary school, and 7% compulsory school as their highest level of education.



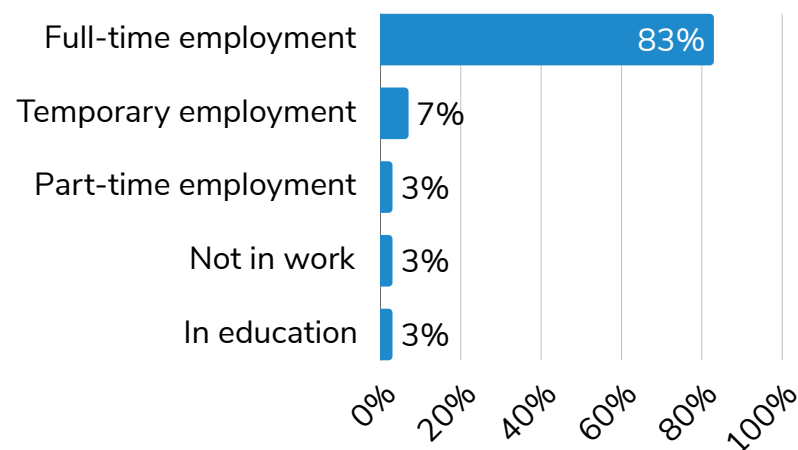
EMPLOYMENT STATUS

The vast majority of participants were in the labour market when the interviews took place. In total, 83% were in full-time employment, 3% in part-time employment, and 7% in temporary employment. Only 3% were not in work and 3% were in education.

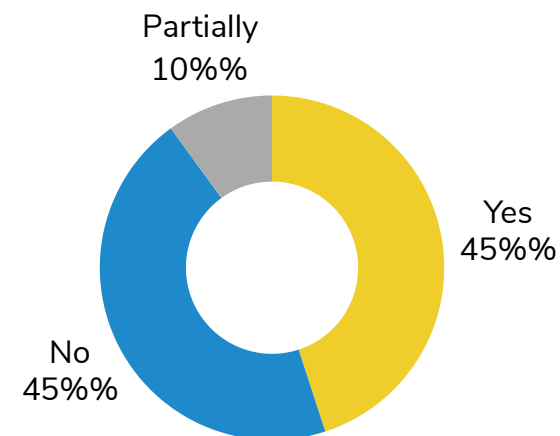
A significant proportion of respondents were highly educated, as has been mentioned, but there appears to have been considerable underutilisation of education, as half of the respondents were either not working or only partially working in a field corresponding to their education.

This can affect job satisfaction, earning potential, and long-term integration into Icelandic society.

ATVINNUSTAÐA



IS THE JOB IN LINE WITH YOU EDUCATION



SOCIAL ACITIVITIES

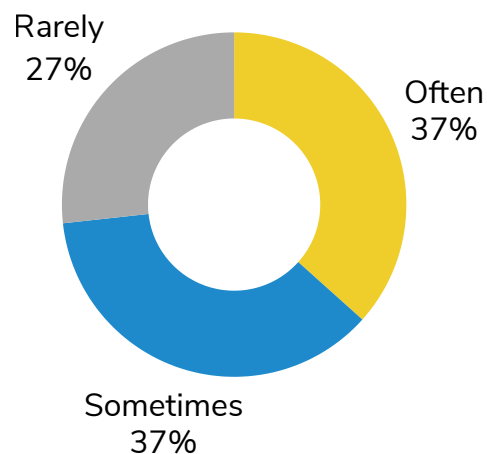
Participants were asked how often they take part in social activities. Around 37% said they often participate, and another 37% said they sometimes do. About 27% said they rarely take part in social activities.

Those who answered that they rarely or sometimes participate were asked to specify the main reasons why they do not participate more often. The most common reason was language barriers, which 50% mentioned. This is consistent with previous findings that active expression in Icelandic, especially speaking and writing, is a challenge for part of the group and can affect participation in social life.

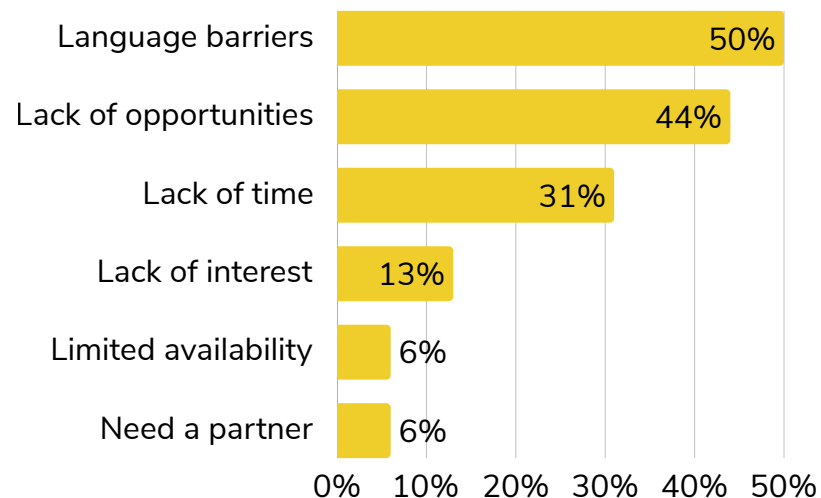
A lack of opportunities was the second most common reason (44%), which suggests that the availability of or access to suitable events and activities may be limited, at least in the participants' experience. Then, 31% mentioned lack of time as a barrier, which could be related to workload, family circumstances or other commitments.

Fewer mentioned lack of interest (13%), limited availability (6%) or not having a companion to go with (6%). The results indicate that the main barriers are external circumstances, especially language and access, rather than a lack of will or interest to participate.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU TAKE PART IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES?



WHAT ARE THE MAIN REASONS YOU DO NOT PARTICIPATE?



ICELANDIC LANGUAGE COURSES

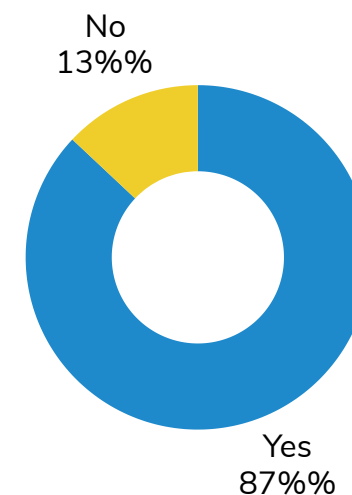
The majority of respondents, or 87%, had taken an Icelandic course since settling in the area.

When they were asked how satisfied they were with their Icelandic studies, it emerged that attitudes were generally positive. A total of 31% expressed great satisfaction and 54% said they were satisfied with the course. In total, 85% of those who stated an opinion were satisfied or very satisfied with their studies.

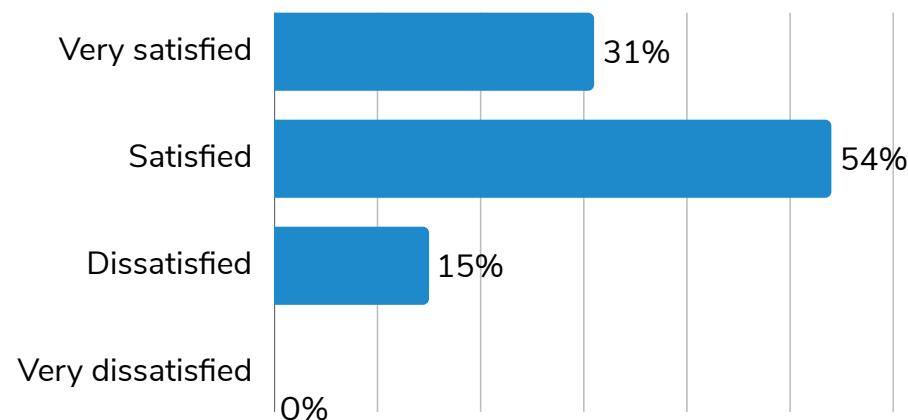
On the other hand, 15% said they were dissatisfied, but no respondent expressed great dissatisfaction (0%). The results therefore indicate that the Icelandic studies were beneficial for most, although there is room for improvement to better meet the needs of all participants.

Among the reasons for dissatisfaction with the courses were that they were held at inconvenient times, they were too easy, and respondents would have preferred an advanced course. There could also have been more emphasis on practising spoken language.

HAVE YOU TAKEN AN ICELANDIC COURSE



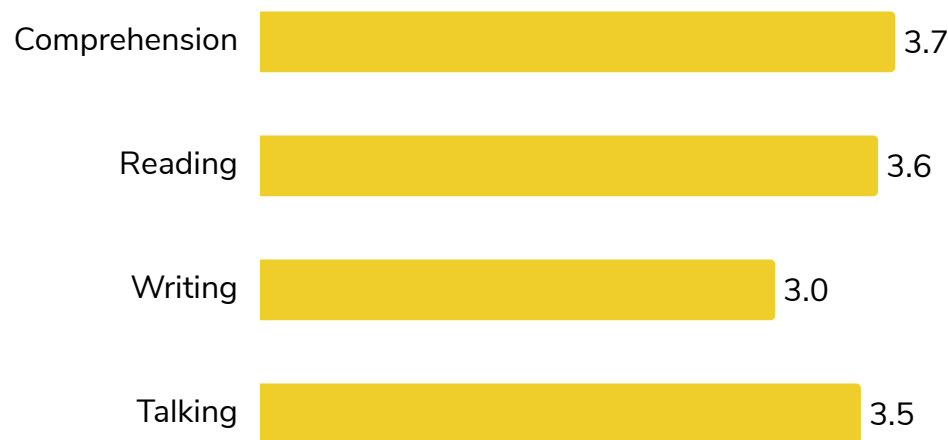
SATISFACTION WITH ICELANDIC LANGUAGE COURSE



CONFIDENCE RELATED TO ICELANDIC

Respondents were asked to rate their confidence in Icelandic based on four main factors: comprehension, reading, writing, and speaking. When evaluating the results, a score was calculated where 1 represented no confidence and 5 represented very high confidence. The results indicate that the study participants generally feel quite confident when it comes to comprehension, but less so in expression, especially writing. The highest average was measured in the skill of understanding spoken language (3.7), which suggests that most believe they can follow conversations and information in Icelandic with some confidence. Confidence in reading was similar, at 3.6, indicating that the majority feel they can handle written language reasonably well. Understandably, the score increased with the length of residency.

RESPONDENTS' ASSESSMENT OF CONFIDENCE ON A SCALE OF 1-5



Confidence in speaking was measured at 3.5, which is somewhat lower than in comprehension and reading, but still above the midpoint of the scale. The lowest average was in writing, at 3.0, which suggests that written expression in Icelandic is the aspect that most people find most challenging.

The overall picture thus shows that respondents generally believe they have a decent level of confidence in Icelandic, but that active expression, particularly writing, is a weaker area than reception and comprehension.

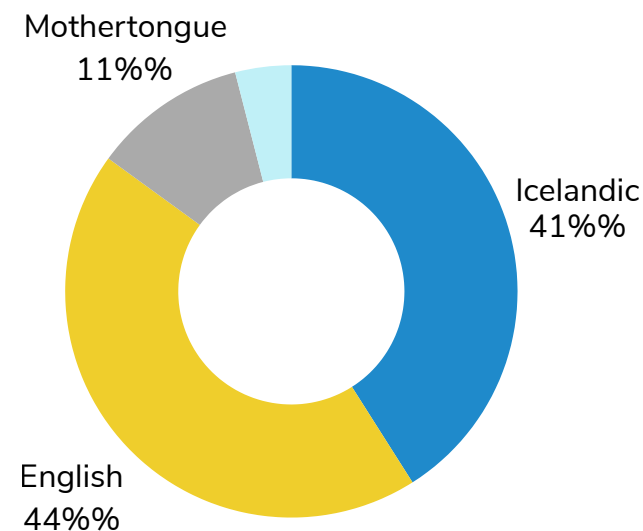
INFORMATION

Participants were asked which language they preferred for receiving information from the community about services and events. The results show that 44% of respondents prefer to receive information in English and 41% in Icelandic. Furthermore, 11% said they would prefer to receive information in their mother tongue and 4% mentioned another language.

These results indicate that there is a need for information to be provided in at least Icelandic and English, as a combined 85% of participants prefer one of these two languages. The results also show that 15% of respondents need information in their mother tongue or another language.

Language and targeted information can be a key factor in promoting participation, improving access to services and strengthening residents' connection to their local community.

DO YOU PREFER TO RECEIVE INFORMATION FROM THE COMMUNITY ABOUT SERVICES AND EVENTS IN ICELANDIC, YOUR MOTHER TONGUE, ENGLISH OR ANOTHER LANGUAGE?



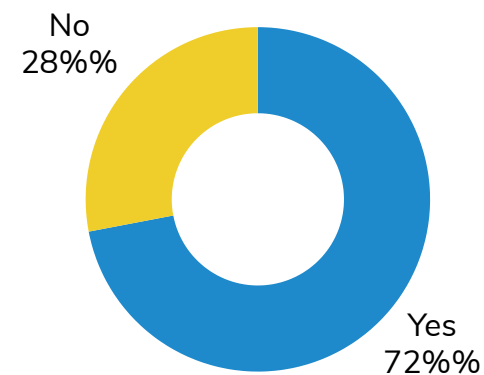
DISCRIMINATION IN SOCIETY

A majority of respondents stated that they had experienced discrimination in their municipality. In total, 72% said they had been subjected to discrimination, while 28% felt they had not experienced it.

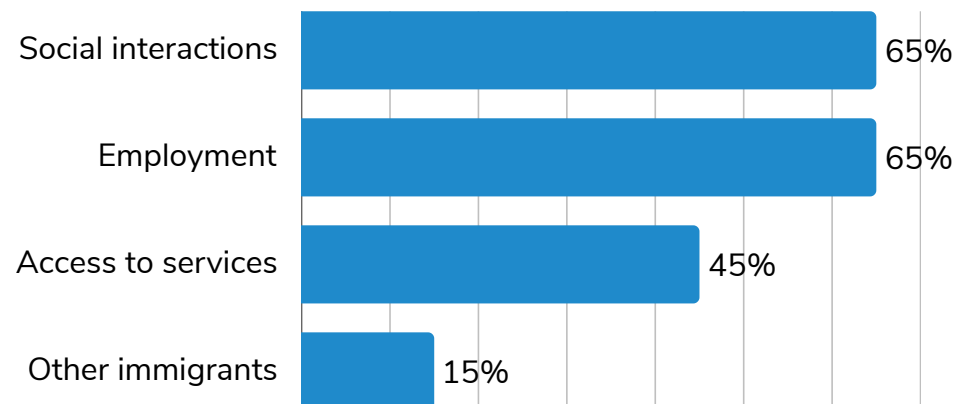
Those who said they had experienced discrimination were asked in what context it had occurred. It was most common in social interactions (65%) and in the labour market (65%). Additionally, 45% felt they had experienced discrimination in relation to access to services. Finally, 15% mentioned that discrimination had occurred in interactions with other immigrants.

These findings suggest that discrimination has manifested in many areas of daily life, in both formal and informal contexts. It is particularly noteworthy how large a proportion of participants mention experiences related to employment and social interactions, which are key factors in integration and social participation.

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY?



IN WHAT CONTEXT DID THAT DISCRIMINATION OCCUR?



ELECTIONS AND INFLUENCE

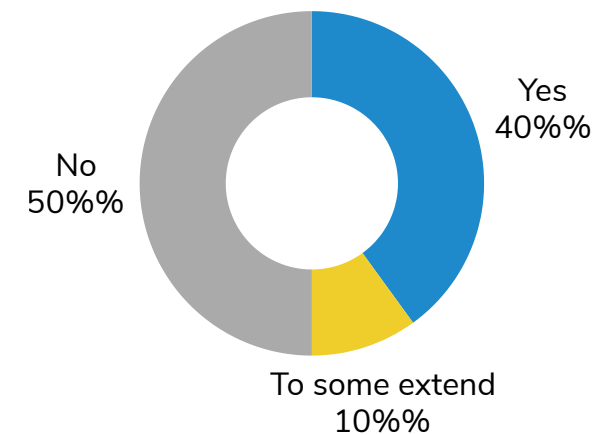
Participants were asked whether they felt their voice was taken into account by the municipality and the local community when it came to decisions that specifically concerned them. A total of 40% believed this was the case, 10% said it applied to some extent, but half of the participants (50%) felt their voice was not taken into account.

According to this, a significant portion of respondents experience limited opportunities to influence matters concerning their own lives and position in society. Although half of the participants feel their voice carries at least some weight, it is clear that trust and a sense of genuine participation are not widespread.

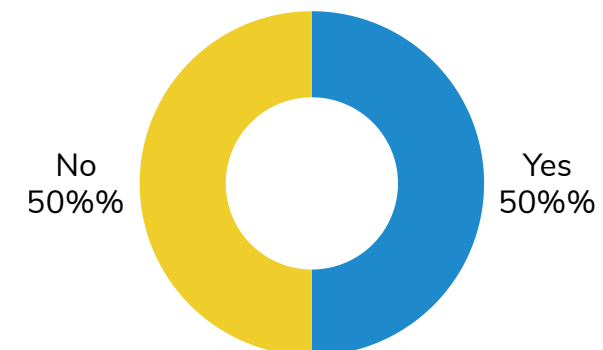
When asked about participation in local elections or other democratic decision-making processes in the municipality, it was revealed that participation was evenly split: 50% had participated, while 50% had not. This result shows that formal participation was present among half of the group, but also that a large proportion did not make use of the democratic channels available to them.

Taken together, these findings indicate that although some respondents have actively participated in formal democratic processes, many feel that their influence on decision-making is limited. This suggests that it is important to examine how to enhance both the actual influence and the residents' perception that their voice matters in the local community.

DO YOU FEEL THAT YOUR VOICE IS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT BY THE MUNICIPALITY AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY WHEN IT COMES TO DECISIONS THAT SPECIFICALLY CONCERN YOU?



HAVE YOU PARTICIPATED IN LOCAL ELECTIONS OR OTHER DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IN THE MUNICIPALITY?



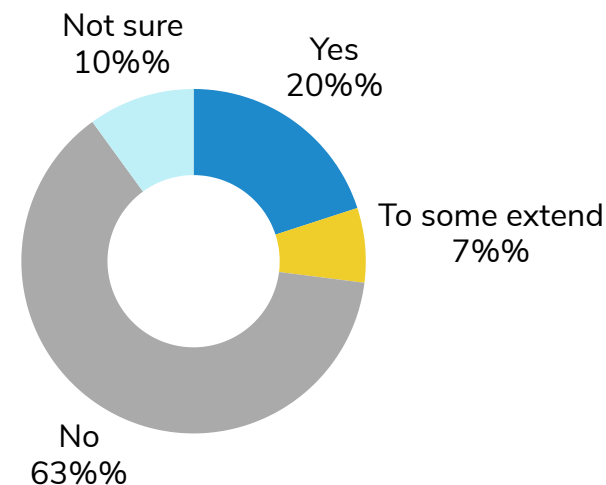
Participants were asked whether they felt that immigrants had advocates and representatives in local government. The results show that only 20% believed this to be the case, 7% said it was true to some extent, but 63% felt that immigrants did not have advocates in local government. 10% said they did not know.

These results indicate that a clear majority of respondents felt a lack of representation for immigrants within local government. Such an experience can affect trust in the system of government and people's sense of belonging and having a real influence in their local community.

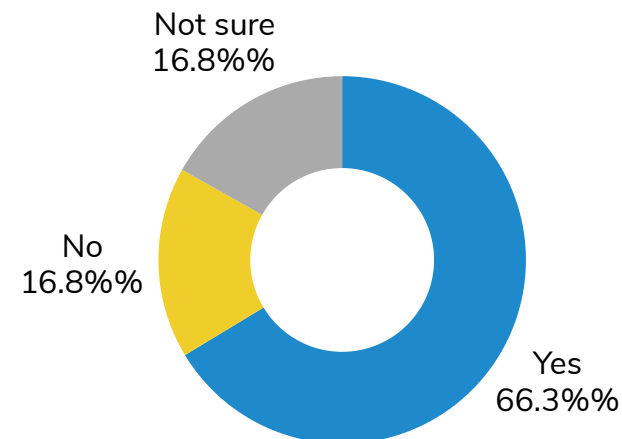
Despite this, answers to a question about intended participation in the next local elections paint a more positive picture. A total of 67% said they intended to vote, 17% said no, and 17% said they did not know if they would vote.

This difference, between a low belief in advocates within local government on the one hand and a relatively high willingness to participate in elections on the other, indicates that there is nonetheless an interest in democratic participation. This can be interpreted as an opportunity for municipalities to promote dialogue, visibility, and the real involvement of immigrants in decision-making.

DO YOU FEEL THAT IMMIGRANTS HAVE ADVOCATES AND REPRESENTATIVES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT?



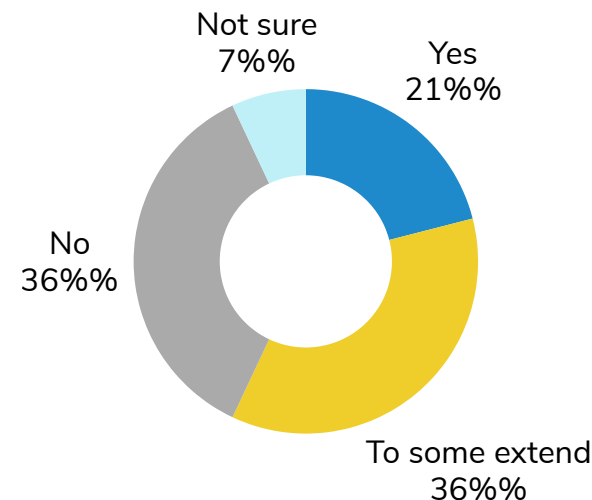
ARE YOU GOING TO VOTE IN THE NEXT LOCAL ELECTIONS?



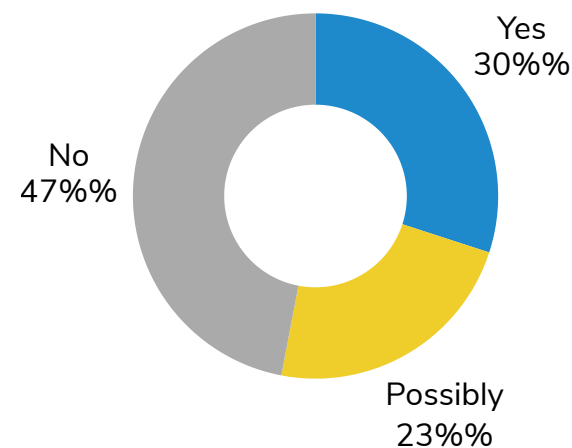
Participants were asked whether they felt they received enough information about local issues and administrative processes. Only 21% felt they did, 36% said this was true to some extent, and an equally large group (36%) felt they did not receive enough information. 7% said they did not know. The results suggest that a significant portion of respondents experience a lack of clear and accessible information about the municipality's activities and decision-making processes. A limited flow of information can affect participation, trust, and residents' ability to monitor and influence matters that concern them.

When asked whether they would consider standing in the next local elections, if the opportunity arose, 30% said they would, 23% said they might consider it, and 47% said no. These results show that although nearly half of the respondents ruled out standing for election, there is nevertheless a considerable group, just over half, who were either willing or open to considering it.

DO YOU FEEL YOU RECEIVE ENOUGH INFORMATION ABOUT LOCAL ISSUES AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES?



WOULD YOU CONSIDER STANDING IN THE NEXT LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS IF THE OPPORTUNITY AROSE?



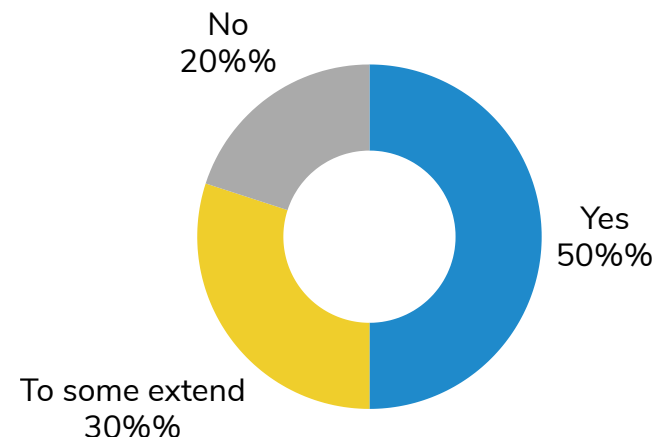
CONNECTION TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Respondents were asked if they felt a connection to their local community. Half of the participants (50%) answered yes, 30% said they felt a connection to some extent, and 20% did not feel a connection to the local community. The results thus indicate that the majority of participants feel at least some connection to the community, although a fifth feel they lack such connections.

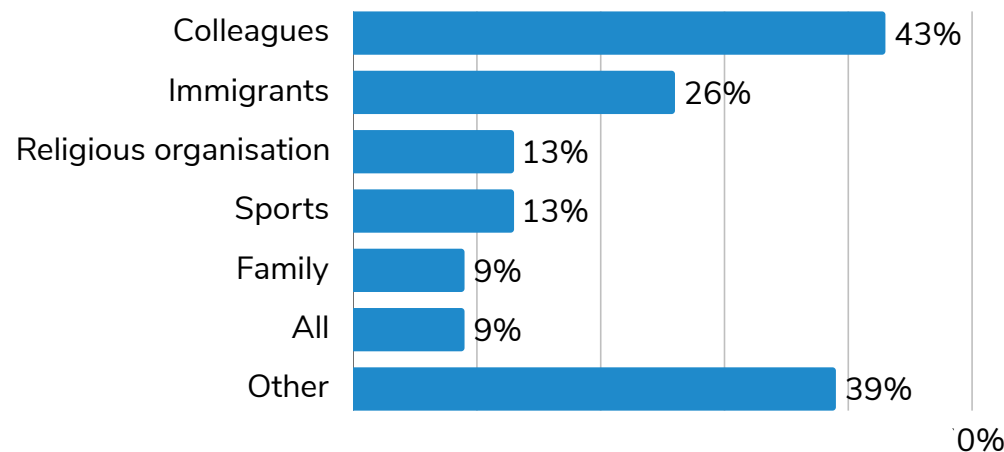
Those who answered “yes” or “to some extent” were also asked where these connections were primarily found. The most common answer was through colleagues (43%), which underlines the importance of the workplace as a social platform. Furthermore, 26% mentioned connections with other immigrants and 13% through religious organisations. Similarly, 13% mentioned sports activities and 9% family. A portion of participants (9%) felt a connection with everyone in the community.

In total, 39% mentioned that their connections were based on factors other than those specifically listed. These included, among others, sewing clubs, the farming community, schoolmates, the queer community, choir activities, and friendships. This shows that social connection is formed in diverse and often informal ways.

DO YOU FEEL A CONNECTION TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY?



ARE THERE ANY SPECIFIC GROUPS IN THE COMMUNITY THAT YOU FEEL A CONNECTION WITH?



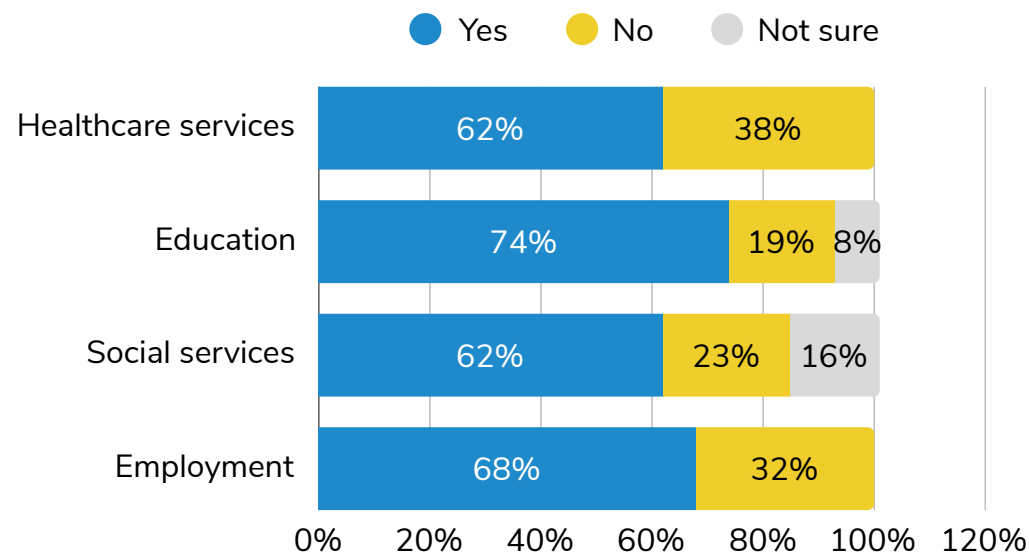
ACCESS TO SERVICES

Respondents were asked to describe their experience of accessing key services in the municipalities, including healthcare, education, social services and employment-related services. They were also asked whether they had encountered any barriers or challenges, what had been particularly helpful to them, and whether their experience of the services had changed since they moved to the area.

The results show that the majority of respondents felt they had relatively easy access to the main services. Access to education was rated the best; 74% considered it good, 19% did not consider it good, and 8% said they could not assess it. Then, 62% considered access to healthcare to have been good, but 38% did not find it satisfactory. A similar proportion, 62%, considered access to social services good, 23% did not consider it good, and 16% said they did not know. Regarding employment-related services, 68% considered access to be good, while 32% did not.

The overall picture suggests that respondents' access to public services in the operational area was generally reasonable, but there is reason to further examine the underlying factors for those who answered in the negative.

DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE EASY ACCESS TO THE FOLLOWING SERVICES



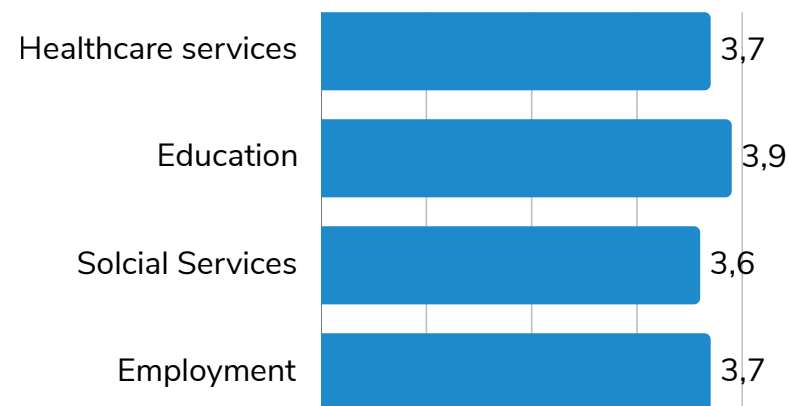
QUALITY OF SERVICES

When respondents were asked to rate the quality of key service areas on a scale of one to five, the results were generally above average, indicating a rather positive but not undisputed experience. Education services received the highest average score, 3.9, which suggests that participants were generally satisfied with the quality of school operations and related services.

Health services and employment-related services both received an average score of 3.7, indicating that the experience is mostly positive but that there is room for improvement. The lowest score was given to social services, 3.6, which is still above the midpoint of the scale.

Overall, these results show that foreign residents rate the quality of services as average, and the scores suggest that certain aspects may require further examination to ensure that all residents receive equal support and services.

QUALITY OF SERVICES ON A SCALE OF 1-5



QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of the interviews was based on thematic analysis, which sought to identify recurring patterns in the participants' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions. The analysis revealed several main themes that shed light on the integration process, status, and experience of immigrants in Icelandic society. The themes primarily relate to language, access to services, position in the labour market, social connections, length of residence, the emotional dimension of integration, and experiences of prejudice.

MAIN THEMES

Language

Social participation

Services and access to information

Discrimination and societal attitudes

Employment and education

Democratic participation

LANGUAGE AS A KEY FACTOR IN INTEGRATION

The analysis of the interviews clearly shows that proficiency in Icelandic is one of the most important factors in the interviewees' experience of their participation and position in Icelandic society. The language not only affects practical aspects of daily life, such as communication with institutions and workplaces, but also self-confidence, identity, and a sense of belonging. Participants describe that proficiency in Icelandic largely determines whether they feel like active participants or marginalised observers in society.

The majority of interviewees express satisfaction with the Icelandic courses they have attended and feel they have been useful. Those who are less satisfied point out that the organisation and quality of the courses could be more focused. It was mentioned that some felt there was a lack of advanced courses and more speaking practice. The timing of the courses was also highlighted, as they often take place in the late afternoon or evening. For people working shifts or with families, such an arrangement can be a significant obstacle. Families with children pointed out that their opportunities to attend Icelandic classes were limited as courses are rarely offered during standard working hours and childcare options are scarce. Thus, formal access to education does not necessarily translate into realistic access in practice.

Many participants describe their reading comprehension as being better than their speaking skills. They “understand more than they can say,” which leads to insecurity in communication. The fear of making grammatical errors, pronouncing words with the “wrong” accent, or being misunderstood was a recurring theme. In some cases, this fear had an inhibiting effect on participation in both social and professional situations. People avoided speaking up in meetings, asked fewer questions, and even withdrew from social life because they did not feel confident expressing themselves in Icelandic.

English plays an important role as a safety net in communication, especially in complex or sensitive situations. Many describe that it is very easy to use English in Iceland, as most people quickly switch to English as soon as they hear a foreign accent. This facilitates access to information and services in the short term, but can also reduce opportunities to practise Icelandic and build confidence in using it. One interviewee described that when something was important and needed to be said correctly, she switched to English to avoid mistakes. In this way, English becomes both a bridge and a barrier in the integration process.

Examples from interviews show that the interplay of different learning methods can be crucial. One interviewee took a course at a continuing education centre, worked at a nursery, and also used a language app. He believed that online learning provided a good foundation, a formal course helped him get answers to his questions, and the children at the nursery provided essential daily practice. The combination was key. Others pointed out challenges within courses, for example, when a large proportion of participants shared the same native language and communication took place in that language rather than Icelandic. One interviewee described how he had learned more of his own native language than Icelandic in a course where many spoke his mother tongue. He found this very negative, as his goal was to practise Icelandic. In workplaces where English is the defined working language, there is also no clear incentive to learn Icelandic.

Language thus appears not only as a technical skill but as a social and emotional phenomenon linked to identity, power dynamics, and social status. Knowing Icelandic is about more than vocabulary and grammar; it is about being able to participate, have an influence, and feel secure in interactions.

There was a clear demand for more and more accessible language support, including free Icelandic courses, even for those staying in the country only temporarily. Those who come to the country for a short time, for example for summer jobs, are often not entitled to reimbursement from trade unions and therefore face high costs if they want to learn Icelandic. Many believed that at least a basic course in Icelandic should be offered free of charge, as it would be key to both safety and active social participation.

*"I learned Icelandic when I lived in Reykjavík and the teaching was in *my native language*, so I found it very helpful and I learned a lot. I also speak English, but getting instruction in a language that is similar to my native language is great."*

"I'm also looking for community groups and things like that, where people want to practise Icelandic. I think, though, that the courses, the formal courses, appeal to me more because if you're practising with other people who don't know Icelandic, it can negatively affect the outcome. Like the blind leading the blind."

SERVICE AND ACCESS INFORMATION

Regarding access to public services, participants describe mixed experiences. Healthcare services generally come out well in the accounts of those who have used them, but language barriers and a lack of information can create uncertainty. The experience of social services was less clear. Several participants felt they did not have enough information about their rights or where to turn with certain issues. This suggests that formal access, the fact that a service is available, is not automatically equivalent to real access. Knowledge of the system, language skills, and support from a social network are key factors.

Employment-related services were also assessed in different ways. Some experienced support and guidance, while others found the system complex and difficult to navigate. Overall, the analysis indicates that access to services is an interplay of systemic factors and individual circumstances. Many suggest that having a contact person, whether at the workplace or as a community liaison, could prevent a wide range of problems. Such a person could provide clearer information, follow up on cases, and direct people to the right places within the system.

The accounts also show how responsibility can shift to young family members when formal support is lacking.

One interviewee described how, at the age of 18–19, he had accompanied an adult couple to the district commissioner and interpreted for them in a divorce case. He found the situation very uncomfortable and felt he was being put in a role that he had neither the age nor the standing to fulfil. In another account, a young person describes how they act as a daily guide for their parents, answering emails from school on their behalf. Such situations highlight a systemic lack of accessible interpretation and advisory resources. Overall, the analysis shows that language and access to services are closely related phenomena. Language skills increase real access to the system, but a lack of organised support can lead to individuals, even children and young people, taking on roles that the system should be fulfilling.

“Yes, yes, I’m always doing that. Every single day. When an email comes for them or to them from the school, you know, for the little siblings, then I’m the one who answers everything and pretends to be, you know, my dad and my mum, you know.”

“I feel good here and I’m happy with my life and the services here. I’ve bought a house here and I intend to live here in the future.”

EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

The educational level of the interviewees was quite high, which may have influenced the results. However, the participants' educational backgrounds spanned a wide range, from basic education to further and higher education. In about half of the cases, it was stated that their education was not fully utilised in the Icelandic labour market.

Some participants described that their previous education was not valued or that the recognition process was complicated. Others were in jobs that required less education than they possessed. Language skills seem to play a key role in this, both in terms of access to more specialised jobs and opportunities for career progression.

It was mentioned that some interviewees believed that locals had better access to jobs due to connections, even if they had no education for the job. It seemed that relationships with managers were a ticket to better projects.

“Icelanders think they are the best educated in the world. If you have studied elsewhere, then you don't have the right education. You don't get the opportunity to have your education recognised.”

One interviewee described that he now works in a nursery, despite having a university education in another field. He explained that he had applied for numerous jobs in his specialism but had little success in getting a response or an invitation to an interview. In the end, the nursery job was the only one he could get. He thought it likely that the hiring was based on connections rather than a traditional application process, which gave him mixed feelings.

Initially, the interviewee believed that limited Icelandic skills had been the main obstacle in the labour market. Over time, however, that feeling changed, and he felt more that his origin and the fact that he was “not Icelandic” had a greater impact than the language alone. He did, however, emphasise that the nursery respected his education and that he received some recognition there for his professional knowledge. Despite this, he expressed a strong desire to work in a field that was more aligned with his expertise and actual skills.

Another interviewee described a completely different experience of integration. He believed that living in a small village had made integration much easier. In his opinion, the community was open and accessible, and he felt like part of the community almost from the beginning. He specifically mentioned positive interactions with his colleagues and said he had received a lot of help and support. That experience had a decisive impact on his well-being and sense of belonging.

*“Okay, this is a bit of a sensitive subject. I have a university degree and worked in the tech sector in *home country* and I... while I was here I applied for all sorts of jobs but it was very difficult for me to get a job related to my profession. Yes, it was very difficult but I work in a nursery now, not because I want to but because it was the only thing I could find that wasn't like manual labour.”*

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND PARTICIPATION

Social connections emerged as one of the most important factors in integration. The workplace often proved to be the main platform for using Icelandic and for social interaction with Icelanders.

It was noted that connections outside of work were limited in some cases, which could lead to social isolation. Those participants who described positive interactions with Icelanders, where patience and support were shown, felt that this had strengthened both their language skills and self-confidence.

The analysis thus underlines the importance of the host community and its attitudes in the integration process.

Cultural differences in communication styles were clear. One participant described how the lack of conventional “small talk” made it difficult for him to form connections and led to him feeling unpopular. Misunderstandings about what questions were appropriate in conversations reflected different social norms.

Others found it difficult to “get into groups” and described experiences of social exclusion by Icelanders. Language barriers increased isolation and limited participation.

One interviewee described finding it difficult to form closer connections with Icelanders. He felt that people kept a certain distance and that colleagues were primarily co-workers and rarely personal friends. Conversations in the workplace were mostly about projects and daily tasks, but seldom about personal matters or private life. He did mention, however, that good and practical information was provided about events and resources in the community. He specifically mentioned the library as an important platform for forming social connections, as it created a space for informal interaction and participation.

“I’m trying not to express my opinion – it’s just better for me to keep my mouth shut.”

Another interviewee had a different view of the community and considered it generally open to immigrants. He pointed out that there was plenty of work available and that the town’s residents were happy to have more hands to help. In his opinion, this need for labour created a certain positive attitude and made it easier for people to find their feet in a new environment.

One interviewee specifically mentioned his hometown as a positive example when it comes to the reception and integration of immigrants. He compared welcoming new residents to getting a new colleague: it was necessary to welcome the person warmly, show them the environment, and explain where things were and how daily life and activities worked. In his view, good integration involves active, personal support where people receive clear information and assistance from day one.

“I want to be more active in the community, but the language holds me back a bit. I believe that when my Icelandic improves, I will participate more. I enjoy learning and I want to be part of the community.”

A clear link emerged between the length of residence and the perceived social status. Those who had lived in Iceland longer described increased self-confidence, a better understanding of their rights and the system, and greater stability in their employment and social life.

Newer residents, however, described more uncertainty, especially regarding the language and public services. Integration therefore appears to be a gradual process where time, experience and social networks are crucial.

People with refugee status receive more assistance at the beginning of their residency and seem to adapt sooner and learn Icelandic much earlier.

Qualitative data shows that integration is not only a practical or systemic process but also an emotional one. Participants described both pride in their progress in Icelandic and disappointment when communication went poorly. Insecurity in new situations and gratitude for support also emerged.

V: "...And, you know, with citizenship and all that, which I think is fine, you know, I don't mind, but maybe it would be good to give people who have been trying to learn something a little 'reward,' I don't know the word."

S: "So, just so I understand you correctly, you feel that the effort you've put into integrating into society isn't being fully appreciated."

V: "Yes, yes, that's exactly it, in your words, yes."

The interviewee described finding it a challenge to get into the local community, as it was small and very close-knit. In his opinion, being an outsider made it difficult to "get his foot in the door" and form deep connections. He believed that the strong internal bonds of the residents, who had known each other for a long time, could unintentionally create a certain distance towards new people.

He recounted how a colleague had once invited him to an event. The event itself had been pleasant and well-organised, but he still felt like an outsider. He felt some people looked at him with an expression he interpreted as a question: "Why are you here?" That feeling stayed with him and made it harder for him to relax and enjoy the company.

A woman from the group of interviewees also mentioned that she had no one to "drag her along" to events or social activities, which she considered very important in a small community. Without such support, it was harder to show up alone and take the initiative to participate. Despite this, she expressed an interest in forming connections, both with locals and other immigrants. She did point out, however, that language difficulties could also sometimes affect communication among immigrants themselves, as people came from different countries and spoke different languages.

DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIETAL ATTITUDES

Adaptation proved to be an emotional process. Participants described pride in their progress, but also disappointment and insecurity. A sense of belonging, or lack thereof, was a recurring theme.

Some witnessed prejudiced comments about other groups. One participant believed they were privileged due to their origin and skin colour, and therefore less vulnerable to discrimination. Others spoke of everyday prejudice, for example, comments about their Icelandic skills that were not necessarily defined as prejudice but nonetheless affected their well-being and self-image.

The interviewees' accounts revealed different experiences of prejudice and discrimination in Icelandic society. One interviewee said they had heard Icelanders speak negatively about other immigrant groups and expressed surprise that some believed they could determine a person's origin based solely on their appearance. The interviewee thought it likely that they themselves were treated differently from some other immigrants, partly because they come from a country that is generally considered privileged. They said they had not directly experienced discrimination but had witnessed prejudiced comments about others.

One interviewee pointed out that everyday comments, for example about Icelandic language skills, were often not defined as prejudice by those who made them, even though they could affect the well-being and experience of those who were subjected to them. It was also mentioned that having an Icelandic fiancée had an impact on how people were treated; the interviewee noticed that people generally became friendlier when they realised the connection to an Icelander. Several interviewees had experienced discrimination from other immigrants from different countries.

Another interviewee described a similar experience in that he had heard prejudiced comments about others, but had not experienced them directly himself. Yet another interviewee said he had not experienced discrimination in Iceland. He did mention, however, that he sometimes felt “different”, but believed this feeling came primarily from within and not because of how others treated him. He felt that, in general, he was listened to and his opinions were taken seriously.

On the other hand, it was also noted that some experienced a social distance that did not necessarily manifest as direct prejudice, but rather in the difficulty of breaking into established groups. One interviewee specifically mentioned that Icelanders do not let people get close to them easily and that it could be a challenge to become part of social networks, even if no direct discrimination occurred.

DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

The interviewees' accounts revealed that their experience of politics and participation in local government was shaped both by their past experiences and their position in Icelandic society. One interviewee described a bad experience with politics in their home country and said they found it difficult to trust politicians in general. This experience influenced their attitude towards political participation in Iceland. Despite this, they believed it was important for immigrants to have representatives in local councils, as this could increase trust and ensure their perspectives were given weight in decision-making.

Another interviewee said they had a particular interest in a specific issue, which made it easy for them to access information and familiarise themselves with the situation. Their account suggests that access to information is available, but that initiative and interest are very important when it comes to participation.

One interviewee suggested that it would be useful to have a special representative of the municipality in each urban area, similar to a village manager in their home country, where such an arrangement had worked well. In their opinion, such a liaison could increase the proximity of the administrative system to residents and make communication with the municipality clearer and more accessible.

A critical view of how immigrant issues were handled in a political context also emerged. One interviewee said they would look for a political party that placed immigrant issues high on its agenda. They pointed out that it was all too common for people of foreign origin to be placed on electoral lists primarily to attract votes, without any real will to listen to their views or give them influence.

Another interviewee agreed with this criticism, stating that there was no clear political representative for foreigners. In their view, society was somewhat closed, and ideas from foreign individuals were not given enough space. They pointed out that immigrants often see society with “fresh eyes” and could bring useful improvements, but that their ideas rarely resonated or were taken seriously. In their opinion, this made it more difficult for people of foreign origin to gain a foothold in local government or have a real impact on decision-making.

“I’m not sure if my voice is heard – it’s hard to judge, perhaps. But I think there’s some kind of underlying bias, that Icelanders’ opinions are taken more seriously simply because they are Icelanders and I am not. Not necessarily towards me personally, but just in general. As if immigrants might not have the same vision for the country or... I don’t know.”

SUMMARY

The social inclusion of foreign residents is a multifaceted process where language, access to services, position in the labour market, and social connections are intertwined. According to the findings of this study, language was a key factor in the participants' experience of their status and participation in society. Proficiency in Icelandic affected their self-confidence, access to services, and opportunities in the labour market. Many described understanding more than they could express, which created insecurity and reduced their active participation.

Experiences with public services were mixed. Although services were formally available, some experienced a lack of information, language support, and guidance. This suggests that real access is determined not only by availability but also by knowledge of the system and support. In some cases, the responsibility for communicating with institutions was shifted to young people within families, which highlights the need for more targeted support measures.

In the labour market, participants' education was not always fully utilised. Language skills were a major factor, but there were also indications that social networks and origin influenced opportunities and career progression. Social connections, especially in the workplace, were important for both language learning and a sense of belonging, but some experienced social distance and found it difficult to break into established groups.

Democratic participation could be shaped by past experiences, trust in politics, and the feeling that immigrants' voices matter. Some considered it important for immigrants to have representatives in local government but also criticised that they were sometimes placed on electoral lists without having any real influence. Others felt that society was somewhat closed to new ideas and that the perspectives of immigrants were not given sufficient weight.

With longer residency, the interviewees' confidence increased, and people gained a better overview. Prejudice was rarely direct, but everyday comments and social distance could affect their identity and well-being.

Overall, the findings show that integration is not based solely on formal rights or services, but on real access, social connections, and whether individuals feel they belong to society and have a voice and influence within it.

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