



# TOWARDS INCLUSION

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AN INTERVIEW-BASED STUDY AMONG  
FOREIGN RESIDENTS IN NORÐURÞING



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# ABOUT THE PROJECT

In 2024, the Þingeyingar Knowledge Network received a grant from the Immigration Development Fund to conduct a qualitative study on the experiences of immigrants in Norðurþing. The aim of the project was to gather practical knowledge about the situation of this rapidly growing group and to create a more solid foundation for municipalities and institutions to develop services and resources that meet their needs.

The report's findings are based on 30 interviews with immigrants from diverse backgrounds who were living in Norðurþing at the time of the study. The interviews focused on their experiences of daily life, access to public services, and participation in employment and cultural life. The study also explored what obstacles they had encountered and what support or resources had proved helpful. Emphasis is placed on highlighting both the challenges related to social integration and positive examples and solutions that can be applied more widely. This approach seeks to provide 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.

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## SUMMARY

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# 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-Mascareñas (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 Eypórsson (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

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## **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

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A total of 30 interviews were conducted with foreign residents who were permanently domiciled in Norðurþing during the research period. The interviewees resided in all the urban and rural centres of the municipality, and eight of them lived in rural areas.

Data was collected from 18 June 2025 to 15 March 2026. The interviews were conducted in consultation with the interviewees and generally took place in a neutral setting, such as in meeting rooms or at cafés, but in a few cases at the interviewees' homes.

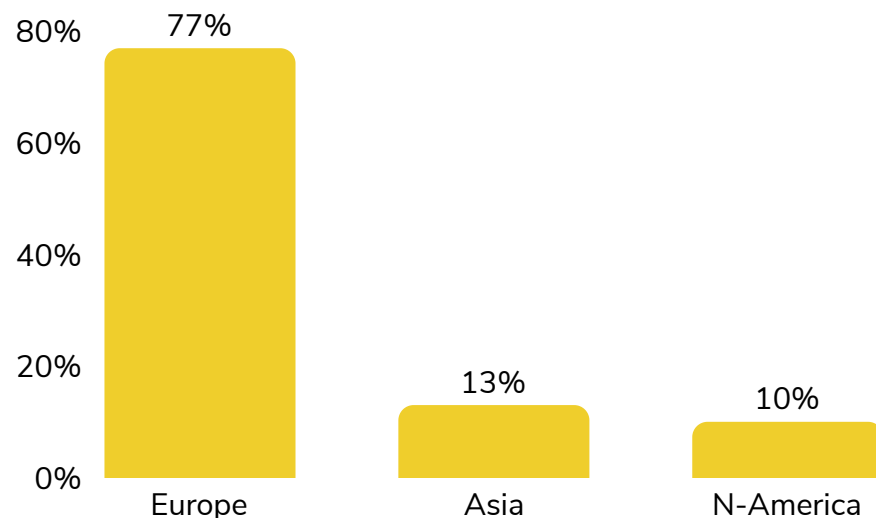


## ORIGIN OF RESPONDENTS

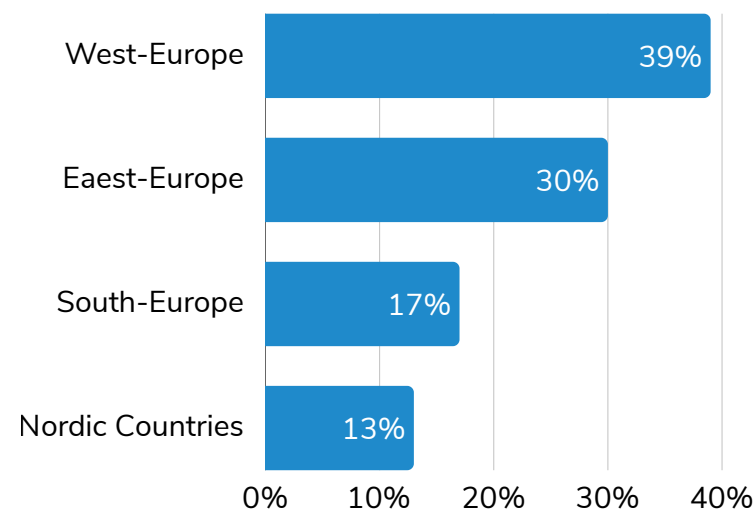
Participants came from 19 countries, with the majority (77%) coming from Europe. Approximately 13% of respondents were from Asia and 10% from North America. Within Europe, the largest group (39%) was from the western part of the continent. Following that, 30% came from Eastern Europe, 17% from Southern Europe, and 13% from the Nordic countries.

When selecting participants, emphasis was placed on achieving a diverse group in terms of origin, while also striving to ensure the group's composition was as consistent as possible with the actual distribution

ORIGIN OF PARTICIPANTS



BREAKDOWN WITHIN EUROPE (73%)

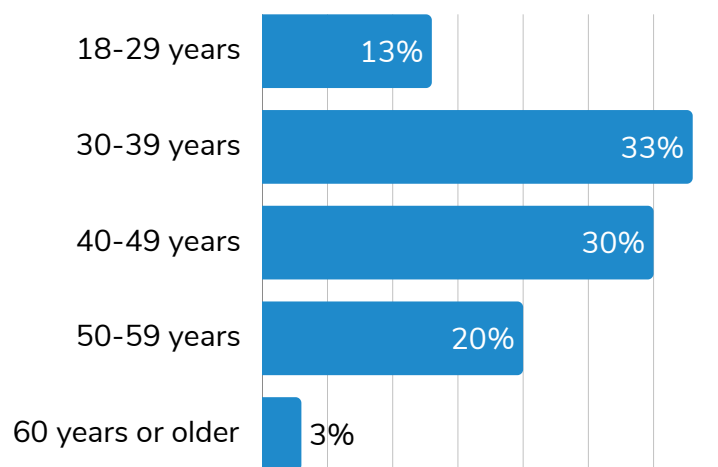


## AGE AND LENGTH OF RESIDENCE

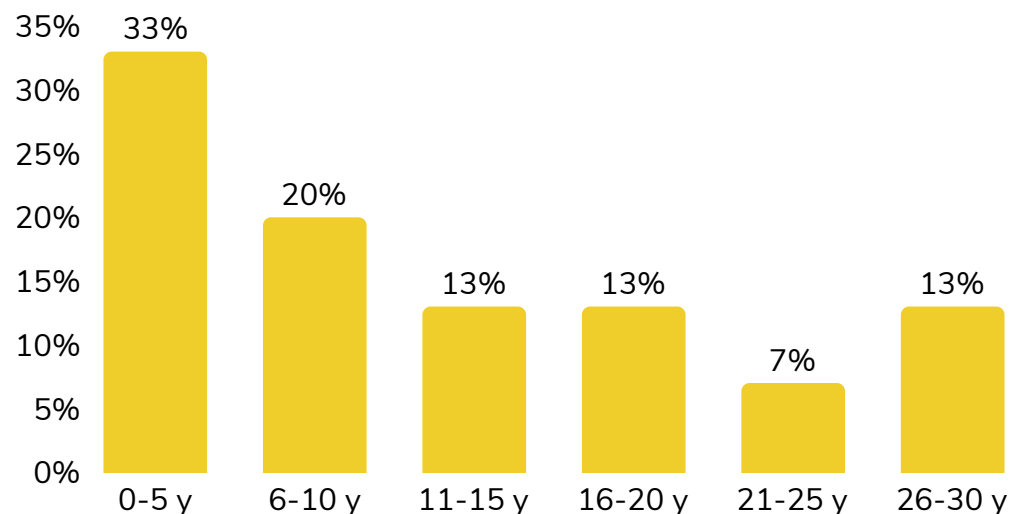
The mean age of participants was 40.3 years and the median age was 40 years. The age composition of the group suggests that these are individuals who are or can be active participants in the labour market and in society. The majority of participants were female, at 59%, while 41% were male.

The mean length of residence of participants in Iceland was 11.4 years and the median was 8.5 years. The length of residence ranged from half a year up to 30 years, which indicates that a large part of the group has extensive experience of living and participating in society.

AGE DISTRIBUTION



LENGTH OF RESIDENCE IN ICELAND

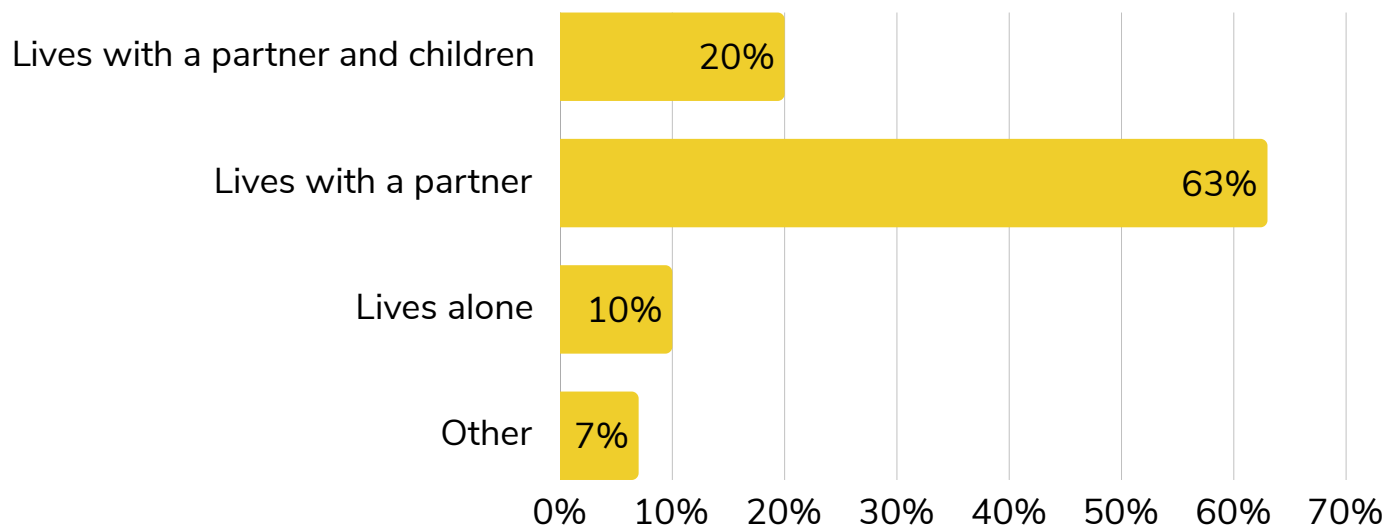


## LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

The participants' living arrangements were varied. The majority (63%) lived with a partner and were either childless or had grown-up children. About a fifth (20%) lived with a partner and children, 10% lived alone, and 7% had other living arrangements.

The results indicate that most participants share a home with someone, although some live alone or in other circumstances. Living arrangements can affect immigrants' social status, networking, and their experience of participating in society.

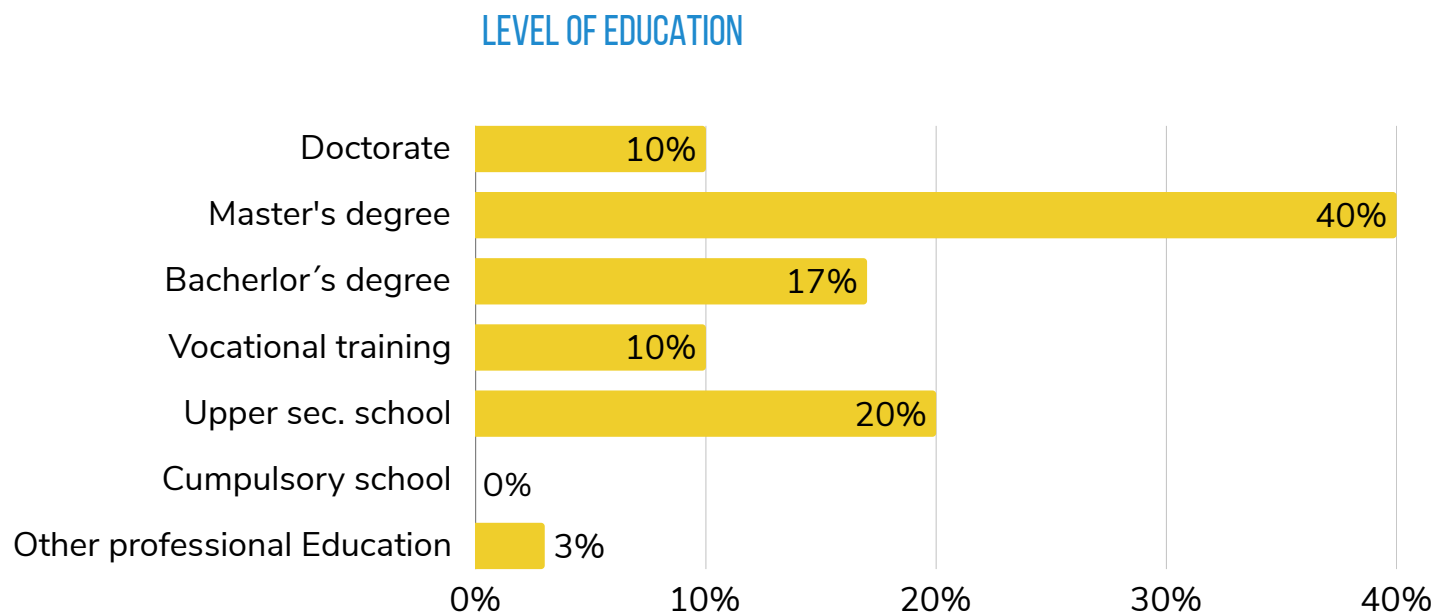
### LIVING ARRANGEMENTS



## EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Particular emphasis was placed on analysing the interviewees' level of education and whether their current job corresponded to their education. It proved difficult to reach individuals with a lower level of education, and despite repeated attempts, the results were limited. For this reason, the educational level of the sample was rather high, which may have affected the results of the study.

In total, 10% of participants held a doctoral degree, 40% a master's degree and 17% a bachelor's degree, making a total of 67% with a university education. In addition, 10% had completed vocational training, 20% had completed upper secondary education and 3% held other professional qualifications.

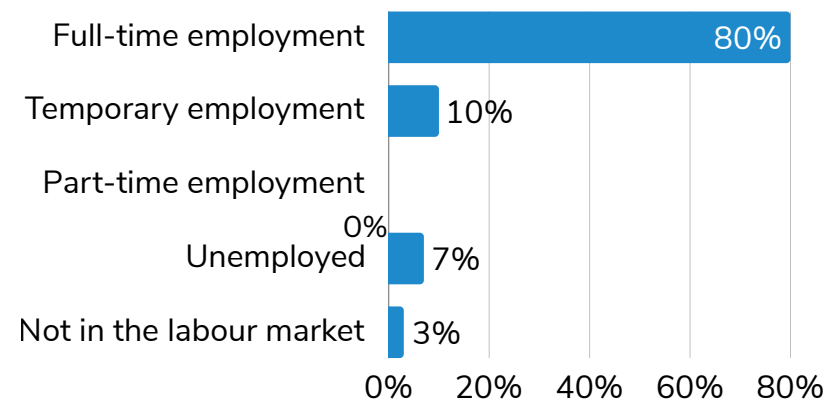


## EMPLOYMENT STATUS

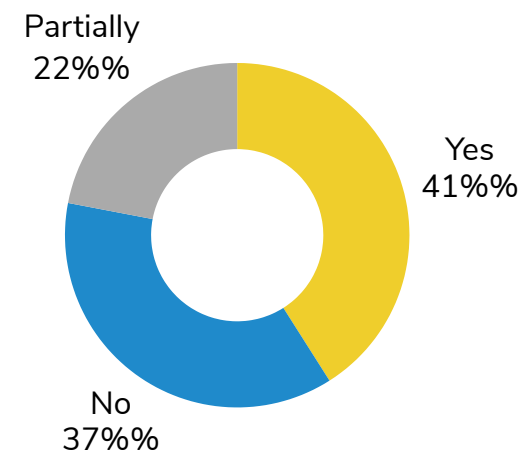
The vast majority of participants were active in the labor market when the interviews were conducted. In total, 80% were employed full-time and 10% part-time. About 7% were unemployed and 3% were outside the labor market. None of the respondents said they were in temporary employment.

As previously mentioned, the educational level of the respondents was high, yet there seems to be a considerable underutilization of their education. Well over half of those in the labor market were either not working in their field of education or only partially so. Such a situation can affect job satisfaction, earning potential, and long-term integration into society.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS



IS THE JOB IN LINE WITH YOUR EDUCATION



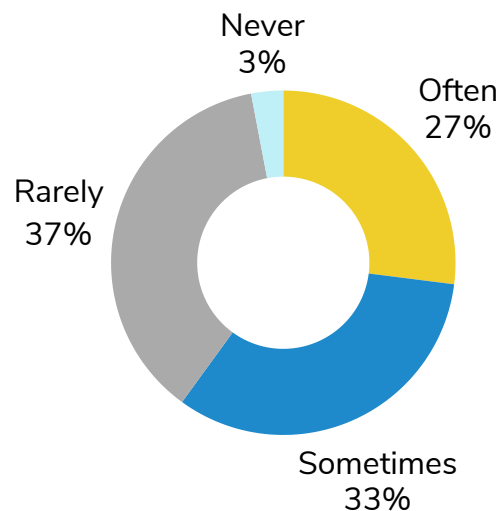
## SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Participants were asked how often they take part in social activities. About 27% said they often participate and 33% said sometimes, while 37% said they rarely participate and 3% said never.

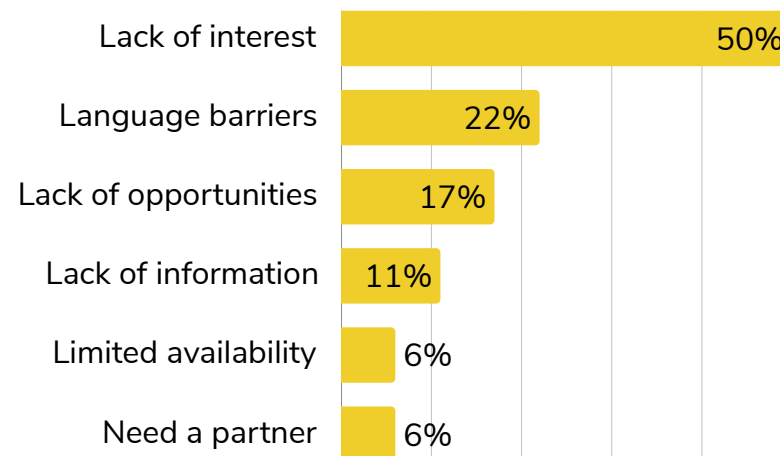
Those who said they rarely or sometimes participate were asked to specify the main reasons why their participation was not greater. The most common reason was a lack of interest, which 50% mentioned. The next most common were language barriers (22%), and 17% mentioned a lack of opportunities. Others mentioned a lack of information (11%), lack of time (6%), and 6% said they lacked company.

The results thus indicate that the main barriers are related to both individual factors and external circumstances.

### HOW OFTEN DO YOU TAKE PART IN SOCIAL ACTIVITIES



### WHAT ARE THE MAIN REASONS YOU DO NOT PARTICIPATE?



## ICELANDIC LANGUAGE COURSES

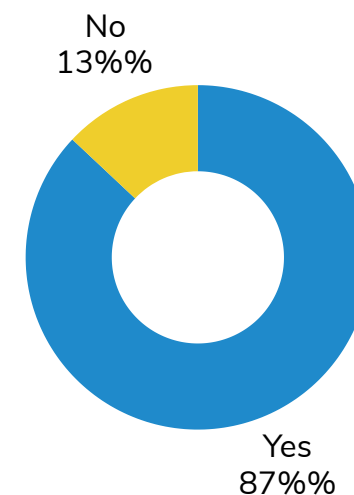
The majority of respondents (87%) had attended an Icelandic course after settling in Iceland.

When asked about their satisfaction with the course, the attitudes were generally positive. About 23% expressed great satisfaction and 54% said they were satisfied, which means that a total of 77% of those who took a stance were satisfied or very satisfied with the courses.

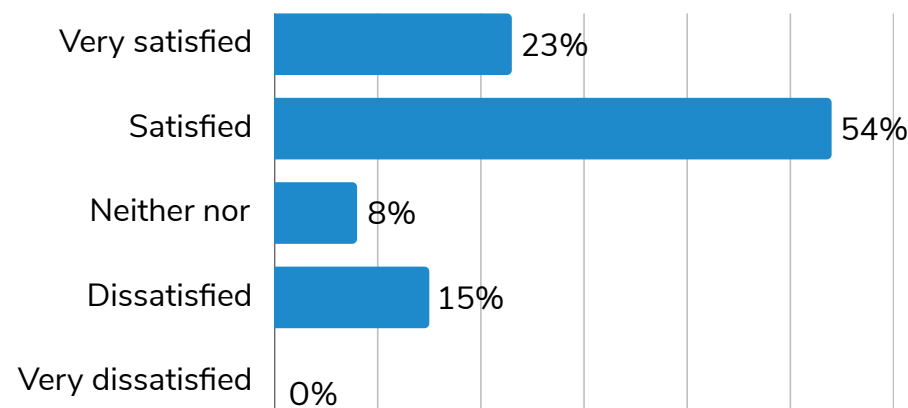
On the other hand, 15% said they were dissatisfied, but no respondent was very dissatisfied. About 8% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. The results therefore indicate that the Icelandic studies were successful for most, although there is still room for improvement to better meet the different needs of the participants.

Among the reasons for dissatisfaction with the courses was that there was too much emphasis on grammar and that there should have been more emphasis on practicing 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 in four areas: comprehension, reading, writing, and speaking. In the analysis, an average score was calculated where 1 represented no confidence and 5 represented very high confidence. The results indicate that participants generally feel quite confident in their comprehension but less so when it comes to expression, particularly in writing.

The highest average score was in reading (3.8), which suggests that most believe they can handle written language well. Confidence in understanding spoken language was similar (3.7), indicating that participants can follow conversations and information in Icelandic with some certainty. As might be expected, confidence increased with a longer period of residence.

### MAT VIÐMÆLENDNA Á SJÁLFTAUSTI Á SKALANUM 1-5



Confidence in spoken language measured 3.3, which is somewhat lower than in comprehension and reading. The lowest average was in writing, 3.0, which indicates that written expression in Icelandic is the aspect that most people find the most challenging.

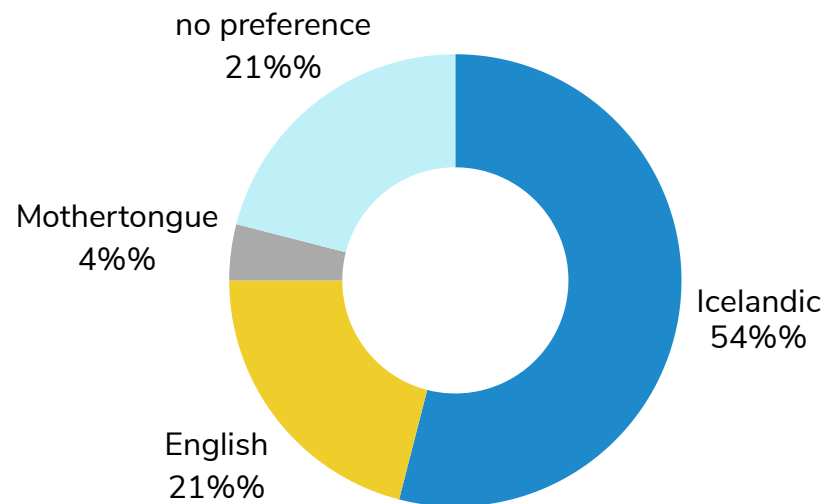
The overall picture shows that respondents generally rate their confidence in Icelandic as decent, but that there is a difference between skill components. Active expression, particularly writing, appears to be the weakest link, while reception and comprehension are stronger.

## INFORMATION

Participants were asked which language they would prefer to receive information from the community about services and events. The results indicate that the majority (54%) want to receive such information in Icelandic, while 21% prefer English. Additionally, 4% said they would prefer to receive information in their native language, while an equally large group, 21%, stated that the language did not matter.

These findings suggest a need for diverse information dissemination, where both Icelandic and English play important roles. It is also necessary to consider those who prefer to receive information in their native language or are flexible regarding language choice.

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



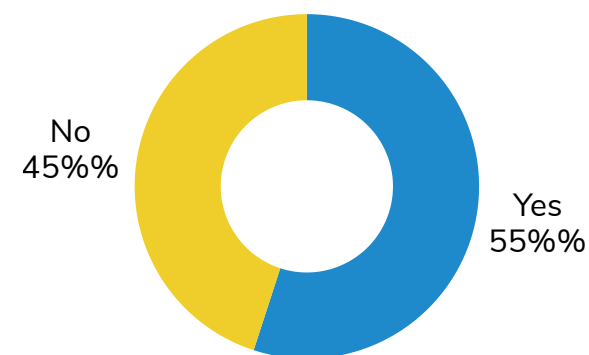
## DISCRIMINATION IN SOCIETY

A majority of respondents (55%) reported having experienced discrimination in the municipality. When asked for more detail about the circumstances where discrimination had primarily occurred, 63% of those who answered mentioned that it was related to the workplace or employment. About 56% pointed to social interactions, 31% to access to services, and 6% mentioned everyday prejudice. Everyday prejudice refers to behavior in daily situations that can be ingrained in society and often occurs without the person necessarily being aware of it.

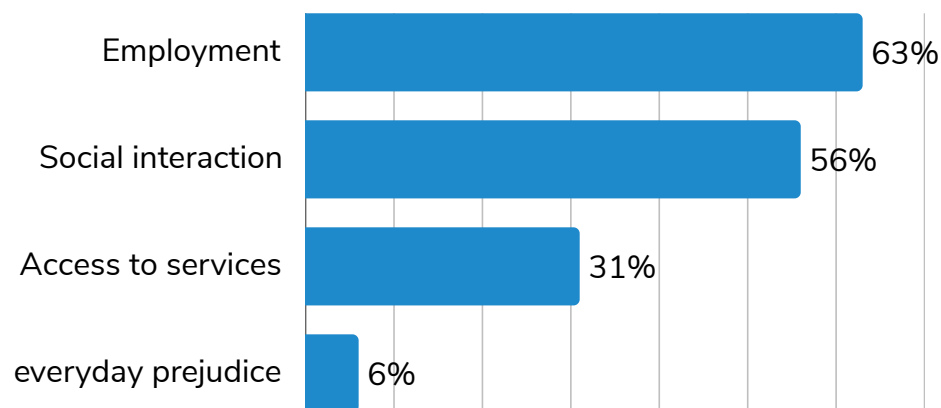
The results indicate that discrimination can manifest in various areas of daily life, both in formal contexts, such as in the labor market and in relation to services, and in informal situations in social interactions. It is particularly noteworthy how large a proportion of participants link their experience to employment and social connections, which are key factors in integration, well-being, and active participation in society.

The findings therefore point to the importance of working systematically against discrimination, both within the labor market and in social interactions in general, with an emphasis on education, awareness-raising, and clear ways to respond to such experiences.

### HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY?



### IN WHAT CONTEXT DID THAT DISCRIMINATION OCCUR



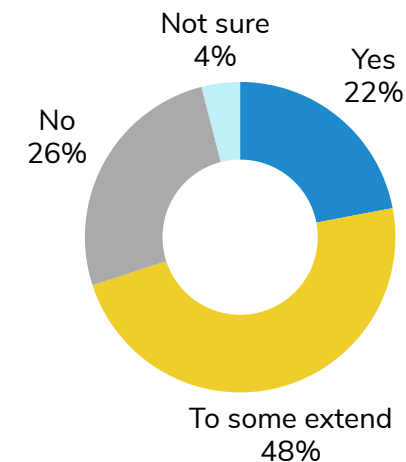
## ELECTIONS AND INFLUENCE

Participants were asked if they felt their voices were taken into account by the municipality and the local community when it came to decisions that specifically affect them. Only 22% felt that this was the case, and 48% felt it applied to some extent. However, 26% said their voices were not considered, and 4% were unsure.

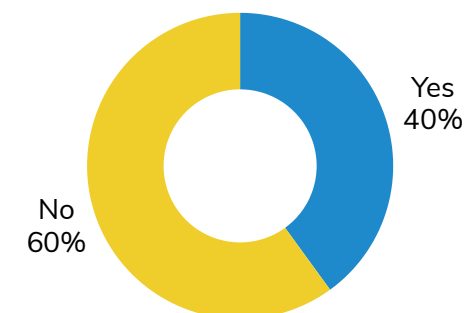
Regarding participation in municipal elections or other democratic processes, it was found that 40% had participated, while the majority (60%) had not.

The results suggest that many people feel they have limited influence in their own local environment. Although some participants feel heard, the proportion of those who feel they have little or no voice is relatively high. This is also reflected in the rather low participation in formal democratic processes. Taken together, this indicates that there are opportunities to enhance participation and strengthen the connection between residents and authorities, for example, through increased information sharing, more accessible consultation channels, and targeted measures to activate more people to participate.

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?



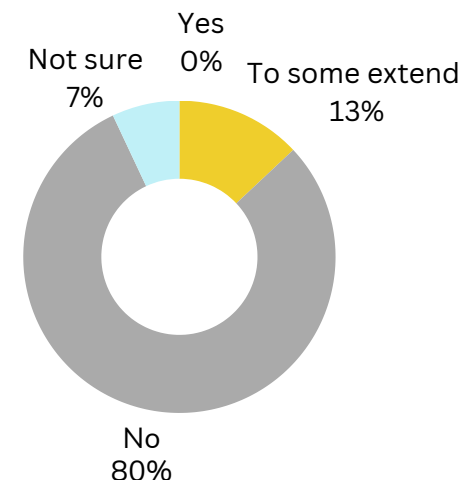
Respondents were asked if they believed immigrants had a spokesperson or representative in the local government. No one answered with a definitive yes, but 13% believed this to be the case to some extent. The majority (80%) felt they did not have such a representative, and 7% said they were not sure.

These results indicate that a clear majority of respondents experience a lack of representation for immigrants within the local government. Such an experience can affect trust in the political system and reduce the feeling of belonging and having a real influence in the local community.

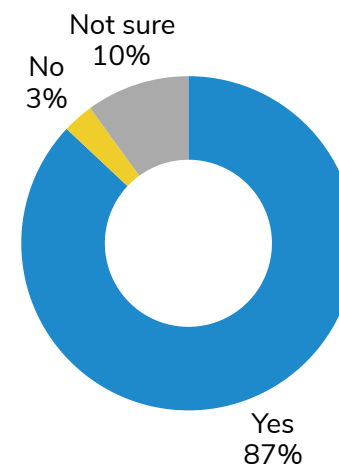
Despite this, the attitude towards participating in the upcoming local elections was more positive. A total of 87% said they intended to vote, 3% said they would not, and 10% were undecided.

This difference, on the one hand, a lack of faith in spokespeople within the local government and, on the other hand, a strong willingness to participate in elections, suggests that interest in democratic participation is nonetheless present. This can be interpreted as an opportunity for the municipality to promote dialogue, increase visibility, and strengthen 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?



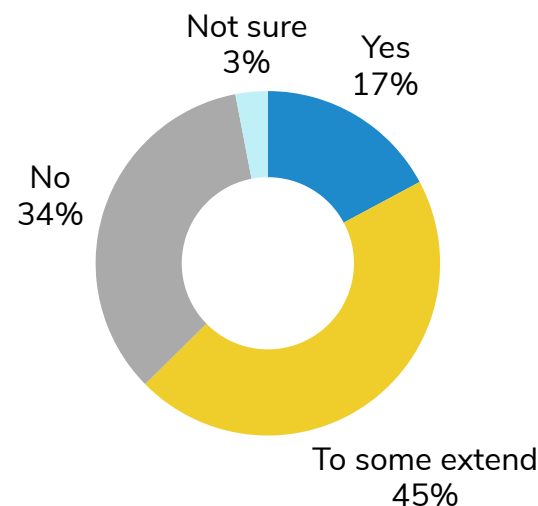
Participants were asked if they felt they received enough information about local issues and administrative processes. Only 17% felt they did, 45% said this was true to some extent, and 34% felt they did not receive enough information. 3% said they were not sure.

The results indicate that a significant portion of respondents experience a lack of clear and accessible information about the municipality's operations and decision-making processes. This can affect participation, trust, and residents' ability to monitor and influence matters that concern them.

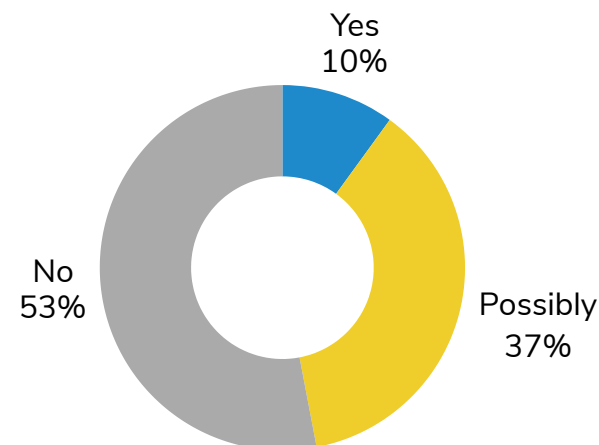
When asked if they would consider running in the next municipal elections, if such an opportunity arose, 10% said they would, 37% considered it possible, and 53% said no.

These results show that although a majority rules out running for office, there is nevertheless a significant group, nearly half, who are either willing or open to considering such participation.

### 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?



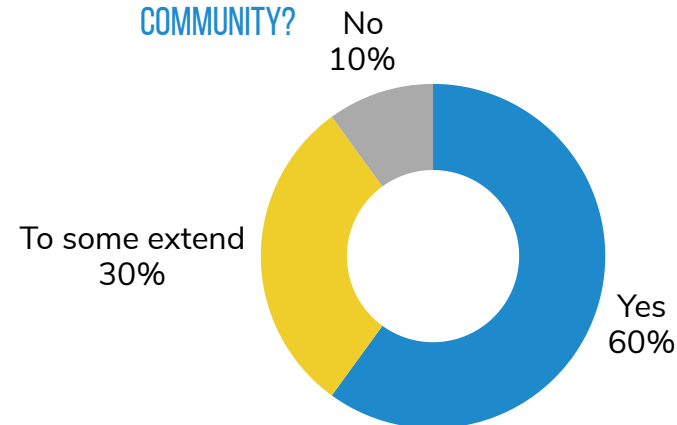
## CONNECTION TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Respondents were asked if they felt a connection to the local community. About 60% answered yes, 30% felt a connection to some extent, and 10% said they did not feel such a connection.

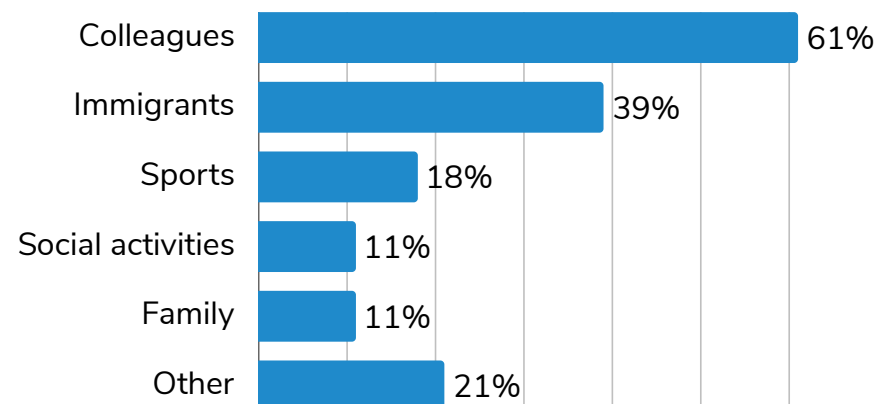
Those who answered “yes” or “to some extent” were also asked to specify where these connections were most present. Of those who responded, most (61%) said the connections were formed through colleagues, which underscores the importance of the workplace as a social platform. Then, 39% mentioned connections with other immigrants and 18% mentioned connections through sports activities. Additionally, 11% referred to social activities and an equal portion to family ties.

In total, 21% mentioned that their connections were based on factors other than those specifically listed, such as a religious community, a farming community, or connections through school activities. The results indicate that social connections can be 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?

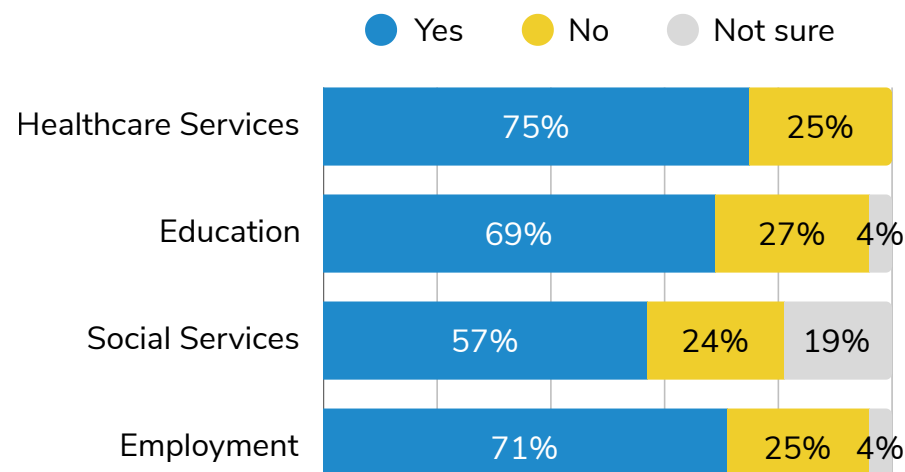


## ACCESS TO SERVICES

Respondents were asked to describe their experience with access to key services in the municipality, such as healthcare, education, social services, and employment-related services. They were also asked if they had encountered any barriers or challenges, what they had found particularly helpful, and whether their experience with the services had changed since they moved to the area.

The results show that most considered access to key services to be rather good. Healthcare services received the highest rating, with 75% considering access good and 25% not. Access to education was rated as good by 69% of participants, while 27% considered it insufficient and 4% were unsure. Regarding social services, 57% considered access good, 24% did not, and 19% said they did not know. Then, 71% believed that access to employment-related services was good, while 25% did not and 4% were uncertain. Overall, the results indicate that access to public services is generally decent in the area. It is noteworthy that a portion of the respondents are not familiar with social services, which could indicate both a lack of information and that the individuals simply have not needed the service and therefore have not specifically looked into it. The results provide a reason to examine more closely what barriers are faced by those who rate access as poorer, as well as how to ensure that information about services is accessible to those who need it.

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 elements on a scale of 1 to 5, the results were generally above the median, indicating a rather positive experience. The results indicate that the majority of participants perceive the service as accessible and professional, but that there are still certain areas where the experience and quality can be improved.

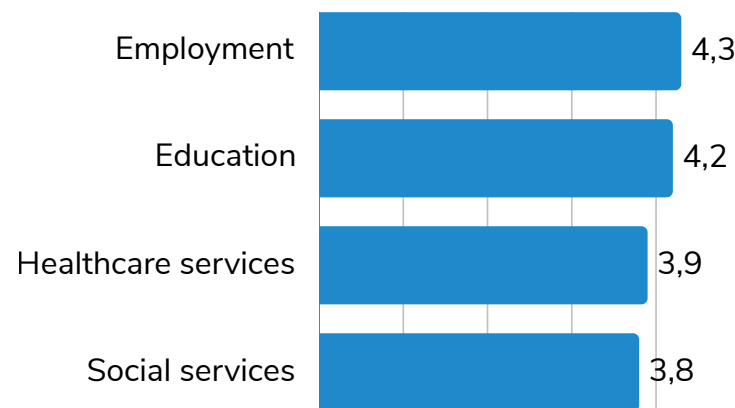
Employment-related services received the highest average rating, 4.3, which indicates that participants were generally satisfied with the quality of that service.

Educational services received an average rating of 4.2 and also seem to be quite satisfactory among respondents. Health services received a 3.9, which is slightly lower, but still above the midpoint of the scale and could indicate certain challenges, for example, regarding access, waiting times, or communication.

The lowest rating was given to social services, 3.8, which is still above the middle of the scale.

Overall, these results show that foreign residents generally rate the quality of services positively, but also that there are certain opportunities to strengthen the services, especially with an emphasis on consistency, accessibility, and a user-centered approach across service systems.

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 adaptation process, status, and experience of immigrants in Icelandic society. The themes primarily relate to language, access to services, labor market position, social connections, length of residence, the emotional dimension of adaptation, and experiences of prejudice.

## MAIN THEMES



The results show that participants' experiences of residence and adaptation are shaped by the interplay of learning Icelandic, access to information, experiences with public services, labor market position, and social connections. Although many describe positive attitudes and a good reception, it is repeatedly stated that formal access to services and rights does not automatically ensure understanding, participation, or a sense of belonging. Throughout all the themes, it is evident that language and information are interconnected factors that affect most other areas, such as independence, communication, employment, social life, and trust in systems.

## LANGUAGE AS A KEY FACTOR IN INTEGRATION

Learning Icelandic emerged as one of the most important, yet also most complex, topics in the interviews. Participants described how proficiency in Icelandic had a direct impact on their independence, connection to the community, position in the labour market, and experience of respect in interactions. However, the path to better skills is neither simple nor equally accessible to all. The results show that success in learning Icelandic is shaped by the interplay of teaching methods, the quality of teaching, circumstances in daily life (working hours, social opportunities, family situations), and the attitudes of those around them towards language use and mistakes.

Some interviewees described a very positive experience of learning Icelandic and felt it had helped them both to learn the language and to get to know the community. One said that the course had “gone very well” and that he had learned a lot and got to know the municipality. In such accounts, learning Icelandic appears not only as language instruction but also as a social platform where people get to try things out, form connections, and gain more confidence in a new environment.

It was repeatedly mentioned that support from the immediate environment could increase the likelihood of success. Having an Icelandic partner or a strong Icelandic social network was mentioned as a factor that “helped a lot,” both because there were more opportunities to practise and because the person received more social feedback and corrections in a safe space. Tolerance seems to reduce pressure and make it easier for people to continue using Icelandic in daily interactions.

At the same time, it is clear that not everyone experienced learning Icelandic as successful. Some felt they had received little assistance, learned little, and that too little emphasis had been placed on spoken language. There were also examples of an individual who had paid for an Icelandic course before moving to the country but found it of little use. This diversity suggests that “learning Icelandic” is not a uniform phenomenon but varies greatly in content, quality, and access, and that social circumstances play a major role in whether the learning is beneficial.

“BECAUSE YOU GET THIS FEELING, YOU KNOW, FROM SOCIETY, THAT THE ICELANDIC LANGUAGE IS JUST PART OF ICELANDERS’ IDENTITY AND THAT ICELAND IS SUCH A TERRIBLY NEW NATION AND NATIONAL PRIDE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY ARE INCREDIBLY STRONG IN SOCIETY. SO YES, EVEN TODAY – EVEN, YOU KNOW, AS I SIT HERE TALKING, I START TO THINK, AM I SAYING THIS RIGHT? AM I MAKING A LOT OF MISTAKES?”

“THE REASON I SPEAK ICELANDIC IS JUST BECAUSE I HAVE PARENTS-IN-LAW WHO SPEAK NOTHING BUT ICELANDIC. OTHERWISE, I WOULD SPEAK TERRIBLY LITTLE ICELANDIC.”

“IT DEPENDS A LOT ON THE TEACHER. SOME FOCUS ON GETTING YOU TO SPEAK, BUT OTHERS ARE MORE INTO THE RULES AND THE GRAMMAR.”

## LANGUAGE AS A KEY FACTOR IN INTEGRATION

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One of the clearest patterns in the interviewees' accounts is the tension between communicative-based teaching and grammar-based teaching. The first level or the first few courses were often described positively. There, vocabulary is built up, along with communication and a sense of progress. One interviewee noted that the first course was good because he acquired “a lot of vocabulary”, it was fun to meet people, and he started to speak and understand how Icelandic works. When moving to a higher level, the experience changes for some. Grammar then becomes the main focus, and the effects can be negative. People start to think too much about whether something is “right or wrong”, become more insecure, and may even stop trying to speak. This is clearly described in the account of an interviewee who said that a teacher was very interested in grammar and that it “prevented him from learning” because he was constantly preoccupied with how he spoke. The result was less activity and a temporary giving up.

This finding underscores that teaching methods can have a direct impact on self-confidence. When the emphasis shifts from communication to “correct language”, the learning process can unconsciously send the message that mistakes are serious, and the language is no longer a tool for communication but a test that people are afraid of failing. In that light, communicative-based learning, with an emphasis on use and understanding, seems to support social inclusion, whereas excessive prescriptivism can increase anxiety and reduce participation.

Interviewees also described that language use was not only a matter of knowledge but also of circumstances and emotional state. One interviewee described being very relaxed when communicating with people he knew well but becoming much more self-conscious in formal situations. There, he felt that if he knew he was making a mistake, “another tape was always running”, meaning he was thinking about the declension at the same time as he had to think about the content. He linked this to stress and felt that he spoke worse Icelandic in those situations.

The interviews also revealed criticism of the heavy emphasis placed on grammar in Icelandic teaching. One interviewee said that Icelandic was a fun language that he wanted to learn, pointing out that he spoke six other languages and had generally found it easy to acquire them. However, he believed that teaching methods in Icelandic could be more targeted and based more on how languages are actually learned. In that context, he mentioned that methods should be used where the emphasis is on learning a language through use, listening, and communication rather than formal grammar instruction. He pointed out that young children acquire language and speak quite “correctly” without having formally learned grammar rules and believed that too much emphasis on grammar could make language learning more difficult than necessary. In his opinion, therefore, more emphasis should be placed on using the language in communication rather than on grammar.

## TUNGUMÁLID SEM LYKILPÁTTUR Í AÐLÖGUN

This description highlights that language proficiency is intertwined with social status and the fear of being judged by others. Formal situations seem to provoke more self-criticism and can thus reduce performance. A safe space, where mistakes are normalised, can be key to people daring to speak, especially in situations where they feel they are being judged by others.

Many examples in the interviews indicate that participants find it easier to understand written language than spoken language. It emerges that some can read Icelandic relatively well but find it harder to understand spoken language. Others specifically mention pronunciation as the main challenge. This imbalance is also reflected in how people learn in daily life. Emails, messages from their children's school, advertisements and written information help to build comprehension, but listening and conversations prove more difficult.

**“WHEN I HAVE TO RUN ERRANDS IN THE SOUTH AND PEOPLE SEE MY NAME, THEY IMMEDIATELY START SPEAKING ENGLISH. I TELL THEM THEY CAN SPEAK ICELANDIC, BUT THEY STILL CARRY ON IN ENGLISH.”**

This finding suggests that Icelandic courses that focus primarily on reading, writing or grammar rules do not lead to the results that most people want to achieve in their language learning, which is to understand spoken language and be able to express themselves orally. A lack of this ability was what most people considered the biggest obstacle in daily life. This further reinforces the conclusion that speaking-oriented exercises, listening and pronunciation need to be at the forefront, especially if the goal is social participation.

One recurring pattern in the interviews was that Icelanders seem to switch quickly to English, especially young people. This was described as a major obstacle to speaking practice because it reduces opportunities for practice. Although English can temporarily facilitate communication, the interviewees felt that it was “very difficult to get people to speak Icelandic.” For some, this also had an emotional impact: when someone switches to English, it can confirm insecurity and create the feeling that the person is “not good enough” at Icelandic.

**“WHEN SOMEONE LAUGHED AT ME IN FRONT OF OTHERS WHEN I SPOKE ICELANDIC, I STOPPED TALKING TO THEM. I FELT THEN THAT IT WASN'T A SAFE SPACE TO MAKE MISTAKES.”**

## LANGUAGE — ACCESS TO LEARNING

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This is directly related to participants' ideas that the community needs to share responsibility with newcomers. That integration is not just a task for immigrants but also for the host community. Several said it would help if locals showed more patience in holding conversations in Icelandic.

Interviewees mentioned various obstacles related to accessing Icelandic language courses. One of the most common obstacles was the timing of courses alongside work. At least one person was unable to complete a course due to a clash between their work hours and the course schedule. This shows that even when courses are available, practical access can be limited, especially for people in shift work or jobs with unpredictable hours.

It also emerged that the availability of courses is often greatest at the beginner level and that there is a lack of options for more advanced learners. One person described a “big leap” from understanding basic Icelandic vocabulary to “correct language use” and said it was difficult to find courses for that group. This creates a certain stagnation: people reach a certain level but then cannot find ways to progress further.

It was also mentioned that cost could be a barrier. There was satisfaction with the reimbursements from trade unions where applicable, but these payments only extend to those who pay into the unions, which does not apply to everyone who wants to attend an Icelandic course. Thus, learning opportunities become unequal.

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Many described proficiency in Icelandic as a key aspect of living in Iceland, linking it to respect, independence, and participation. In one account, using Icelandic was presented as a moral and social duty to show respect for the place and its people, even though English is often sufficient. For others, the emphasis was more on practical aspects, as it was stated that without Icelandic it was harder to get information and to participate in events. It was also harder to reach people and be heard.

Alongside this, some described how a lack of language skills marginalised them. One interviewee, who does not speak the language, said it limited his participation in society and that what weighed most heavily was not the language itself but the fear of making mistakes, the reactions of others, and a lack of patience. There were also indications of a systemic barrier because many immigrants work with other immigrants and therefore have fewer opportunities to practise Icelandic at work. Thus, the work environment can be both a support and a hindrance.

## LANGUAGE- KEY FOR INCLUSION

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However, one point raised by an interviewee is noteworthy: we must not automatically prioritise or give an advantage to people who speak Icelandic, because language alone is not a measure of an individual's worth or contribution. This perspective may indicate a tension in the discussion: on the one hand, Icelandic is linked to inclusion and a sense of belonging; on the other, too much emphasis on Icelandic (as a “condition of entry”) can create exclusion.

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## SERVICES AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

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Many described their first months in the community as a period of confusion and lack of guidance. Information was said to be scattered, often only in Icelandic, and it was difficult to figure out the right way to go. Two quotes describe this directly:

“I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO GO. I JUST HAD TO ASK PEOPLE I KNEW.”

“EVERYTHING IS IN ICELANDIC. IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE LANGUAGE, YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM.”

Thus, social networks became a key factor in finding information. People chose to turn to Icelanders they knew, colleagues, or other immigrants. It was also noticeable that many sought support and advice from their compatriots rather than seeking out formal sources of information. In some cases, people chose to call rather than search on websites, as online information was considered less clear and more difficult. Some used translation tools (e.g. online chat/translators) to understand communications and text.

Specific criticism was directed at bilingual websites, for example, the sites of trade unions and other services. The English version was often considered very brief and superficial compared to the detailed Icelandic version, which meant that people often felt “poorly informed” in English.

## PUBLIC SERVICES

Attitudes towards public services were twofold. Many described staff as friendly and helpful, but also mentioned the complexity of the system and long waiting times.

**“THE PEOPLE ARE VERY GOOD. BUT THE SYSTEM IS COMPLICATED.”**

Language difficulties and a lack of interpreting services were specifically mentioned as barriers in healthcare and schools. This could result in people agreeing to things without fully understanding them:

**“SOMETIMES I DON’T UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING THAT’S SAID. I JUST SAY YES, BUT THEN I DON’T REALLY KNOW WHAT I AGREED TO.”**

Several mentioned that the municipality’s services were slow and that people felt a lack of personal guidance. Some described that an introduction had taken place (e.g. from a multicultural representative) but that little had been heard since, and there was uncertainty about the role or existence of the relevant position. Others associated the multicultural representative more with cultural events than with providing information and said that people were more likely to turn to trade unions for guidance.

It was made clear that personal contact and “one helpful individual” could make all the difference, but that this depended on chance and individuals rather than on the system.

**UNIONS: THEY LOOK AT THINGS AS ICELANDERS, NOT IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT. BY THAT I MEAN THAT YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION OF FOREIGN INDIVIDUALS.**

It was noted that many found it difficult to navigate the healthcare system. Participants described insecurity, stress and mistrust, partly because they were constantly meeting new doctors and had to repeat their story. One person described great disappointment with their experience of the system, which they felt focused on symptoms rather than the bigger picture, and that automated messages and information are often only in Icelandic, which increases stress. In several cases, individuals chose to seek medical services in their home country, especially if they considered the communication, understanding or professional approach to be better there. However, it was mentioned that some things in Iceland proved to be better (for example, a faster process after diagnosis in some cases), but that access to specialists and health checks could be difficult.

Experiences with unions were mixed. Some described good access, especially when the service was personal (e.g. access at an office). Others felt that the unions had not been helpful when assistance was needed (e.g. regarding contracts) and that individuals had to figure things out for themselves. Criticism was also voiced about education and information provision, stating that clearer guidance on collective agreements, better promotion and a greater availability of information leaflets were needed.

Some accounts expressed a feeling that attitudes within systems were too “Iceland first” and that people of foreign origin had to “prove themselves” more, especially in sectors like tourism where education and experience were not always useful for career progression.

## EMPLOYMENT – RECOGNITION OF EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

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Employment proved to be one of the key factors in the participants' experience of their status, independence, and sense of belonging to the community. It held not only economic value but also social and symbolic value as a platform for language learning, networking, and recognition. Those with permanent jobs described greater stability and a stronger social connection. Work was often mentioned as the most important means of integration.

In these accounts, the labour market appears as a bridge into society – a place where individuals build a social network, learn the informal rules of the community, and increase their self-confidence. In some cases, the recruitment process was described as organised and professional, and the recognition of professional licences was quick. One interviewee described how his professional licence was approved in a single day, which was a pleasant surprise. Such experiences strengthened faith in the system and even influenced the decision about future residency.

Networking also mattered; a job was secured through a friend who knew someone within the company.

Alongside positive examples, there were clear indications of education and skills being undervalued. Several described working in jobs far below their level of education:

**“I’M EDUCATED, BUT HERE I’M IN A JOB THAT REQUIRES NO EDUCATION. THAT’S DIFFICULT.”**

This experience had not only economic consequences but also an impact on self-identity and future prospects. Working below one's skill level can create a feeling of stagnation and invisibility, and some said they were considering moving if opportunities for advancement did not improve.

There were also examples of formal requirements excluding people from recognition, for instance, a qualified chef from their home country who could not get their education accredited because they did not have an Icelandic journeyman's certificate, despite their professional experience. This points to systemic barriers where the formal framework is valued over actual skills and work experience.

Conversely, there were also positive examples where the recognition of education went smoothly, including with support from an employer. In one case, being offered the opportunity to work in English and receive professional recognition even influenced the individual's choice of Iceland as a country of residence.

This contrast shows that the experience of having one's education assessed is not uniform but depends on the professional field, the institution, and individual circumstances.

**“WORK HELPED ME THE MOST. THAT’S WHERE I GOT TO KNOW PEOPLE AND LEARNED THE LANGUAGE.”**

## EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

Financial status upon arrival in the country had a decisive impact on the experience of the first few years. One interviewee described the situation as follows:

**“WHEN WE CAME HERE, I HAD NOTHING, NOTHING IN MY BANK ACCOUNT. THIS IS A VERY BIG PROBLEM FOR PEOPLE WHO COME HERE.”**

He pointed out that the tax system and the limited scope to work more than standard working hours could make it difficult for new people to accumulate capital and build security. Although he acknowledged the importance of the tax system, he believed that new people needed an adjustment period and greater flexibility to get on their feet.

One of the clearest examples of a systemic barrier was related to the banking system. An interviewee who had arrived in the country as a refugee described how the bank had been reluctant to grant a loan because of his status:

**“IT’S A PROBLEM TO GET SERVICE AT A BANK. I CAN’T GET A LOAN BECAUSE IT’S AS IF THE BANK THINKS I’M GOING TO LEAVE. I OWN MY OWN HOME AND RUN A BUSINESS; I’M NOT LEAVING.”**

Despite running a business, he experienced a lack of trust that was linked to his origin rather than his actual situation. This suggests hidden discrimination within the system, where assumptions about creditworthiness may be coloured by stereotypes about the mobility or temporary residence of immigrants.

At the same time, his story shows great social mobility. He arrived with a negative balance, but a few years later he had his own business and housing. This development highlights resilience and initiative, but also that systemic barriers can make the process more difficult than it needs to be.

One interviewee mentioned that there was a lack of clear guidance on Icelandic regulations, especially regarding starting a business and the tax environment. The complexity of the system and language barriers meant that individuals had to rely on informal networks rather than formal advice.

This again reflects the pattern seen in other themes. Systems that assume independent information-seeking can be exclusionary for those who are new to the society.

Recognition of education and access to financial services prove to be particularly important factors in economic security and future prospects. Where education is not valued or trust is lacking, it can affect self-image, social status, and the desire for long-term residence.

The overall conclusion suggests that formal participation in the labour market is not enough on its own for full inclusion. True inclusion requires recognition of skills, equal access to services, and clear guidance on the system.

## SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Social connections varied greatly in strength. Some had built up a strong network through work, children, social activities or hobbies and felt welcome and “known” in the community. Others described a social distance, stating that Icelanders were polite but that it was difficult to break into their friendship groups, especially in smaller places where groups were well-established and connections were based on a long, shared history. This was evident, for example, in descriptions of how difficult it was to be invited into people’s homes and that social life was more often tied to work-related events than to personal relationships.

“I REALLY ENJOYED GOING TO THE WOMEN’S ASSOCIATION. I’VE MET OTHER WOMEN THERE AND I FIND IT ENJOYABLE. THROUGH THIS WORK, I’VE LEARNT ICELANDIC AND GOT TO KNOW THE CULTURE BETTER, FOR EXAMPLE, THE FOOD CULTURE. I’M IN A FEW ASSOCIATIONS AND AM GENERALLY VERY SOCIALLY ACTIVE.”

Some described connections with other immigrants as an important source of support (providing security, understanding and advice), but that this could also lead to the community being divided into two groups, “Icelanders and foreigners”, who rarely worked together. The interviews revealed both a need for shared social spaces (to chat, mingle and find a sense of community) and criticism of approaches that promote segregation (e.g. “immigrants presenting their own culture”, which separates rather than mixes groups).

“I DON’T TAKE PART IN MANY EVENTS BECAUSE I DON’T REALLY KNOW ANYONE. I HAVEN’T MADE ANY CONNECTIONS WITH SOMEONE WHO WANTS TO MEET UP, FOR EXAMPLE, TO GO FOR A COFFEE TOGETHER. I DON’T QUITE UNDERSTAND HOW PEOPLE CONNECT SOCIALLY HERE AND I USUALLY WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO INVITE ME RATHER THAN TAKING THE INITIATIVE MYSELF.”

It was also noticeable that active participation can improve language skills and a sense of connection. Participation in women’s associations, volunteering and social activities was mentioned as a way into the culture and community. At the same time, it was noted that immigrants’ mental health could be poor, that isolation was a real danger, and that there was a lack of support services and spaces for interaction.

The interviews also showed that age and circumstances upon arrival could affect how easily people integrate into social life. Younger people who attend school often seem to have far greater opportunities to form connections with their peers and build a social network more quickly, both because of the daily routine and because the school environment creates natural opportunities for interaction and participation. One interviewee described the systematic support within the school community. On his third day after starting school, he received a message from a contact person (an individual at the school) who offered assistance if he needed information or guidance. The interviewee took advantage of this and felt it had helped “a great deal”; he regularly received information, encouragement and access to what was happening, such as events, get-togethers and parties. This example highlights that an organised connection into the community (a contact person/guidance and an active invitation into social life) can be crucial for inclusion, especially when a platform like a secondary school provides both a social space and clear channels into social networks.

## DISCRIMINATION AND EXPERIENCES OF PREJUDICE

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The majority of interviewees described generally positive attitudes, but several mentioned prejudice or discrimination, often in the form of microaggressions rather than direct discrimination. Language is again a prominent factor here; not speaking “correctly” can lead to stigmatisation and being underestimated. It was also mentioned that nationality could affect how people are treated. One person pointed out that people from Nordic countries often receive a better reception than others.

“I WORKED IN RESEARCH FOR ONE SUMMER AND AM STILL WORKING ON A PROJECT IN COLLABORATION WITH THAT PARTY, BUT I FELT THAT PEOPLE WEREN'T INTERESTED IN GETTING TO KNOW ME. PEOPLE WOULD SAY HELLO, BUT I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE I BELONGED TO THE GROUP. THE PEOPLE ARE FRIENDLY ENOUGH, BUT THEY DON'T LET YOU IN. I THINK ALL MY FRIENDS WHO ARE OF FOREIGN ORIGIN HAVE THE SAME STORY TO TELL. THESE ARE EVERYDAY PREJUDICES (MICROAGGRESSIONS). I HAVE NEVER EXPERIENCED DIRECT DISCRIMINATION HERE.”

One interviewee described his experience of strangers often switching to English when they saw his foreign name. He said that he then asks people to speak Icelandic, but they continue in English regardless.

“I HAVE MET MANY FOREIGNERS WHO LEFT ICELAND BECAUSE THEY FELT ALONE, EVEN THOUGH THEY HAD TRIED HARD TO ADAPT.”

Everyday comments were often mentioned, for example about proficiency in Icelandic, which were rarely intended as prejudice by those who made them. However, they could affect the well-being and experience of those who were on the receiving end. Several interviewees also reported having noticed discrimination from other immigrants of different origins.

The interviewee reported that he had been bullied at a previous workplace and experienced negative and unprofessional behaviour there. He believed that his manager lacked interpersonal skills and said he had once pointed this out to him. Despite the difficult experience, he said he had decided not to let the circumstances break him down but to carry on. He had received a great deal of support from good friends. He now works at a different workplace where he feels good and experiences a more positive work environment.

Some experienced discrimination in the labour market (a feeling that Icelanders are given priority for management positions) and that complaints were unwelcome. The interviewee also said he felt that his foreign name affected his position in the labour market. He believed he could not get through the “first filter” in applications because of his name. After he added an Icelandic first name, he started getting invited to job interviews. That experience disappointed him, as he felt his CV had not been assessed on its own merits. The individual is well-educated and believed he had repeatedly been considered a strong candidate, even the most qualified applicant, for the jobs he applied for.

## DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

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The interviews reveal that knowledge of immigrants' political rights varies. For example, some did not know they had the right to vote in local government elections. One interviewee specifically mentioned that when he moved to the country in 2014, he had no idea he was allowed to vote. This suggests that information about civil rights does not always reach new residents clearly.

Interviewees also described a lack of a political voice for immigrants and a feeling that their views were taken less seriously than those of Icelanders. One put it this way: he was not sure if his voice was heard and wondered whether there were underlying attitudes that the opinions of Icelanders were “more serious” simply because of their nationality. He mentioned that immigrants might be perceived as not having the same understanding of the country and society, which could affect the weight their opinions carry in public discourse.

Critical views were also expressed on how immigrants are represented in a political context. Several believed it was common for people of foreign origin to be placed on electoral lists primarily to secure votes, rather than out of a genuine desire to give them political weight or influence. One interviewee said they would look for a party that prioritised immigrant issues, adding that “it is all too common for people to get an individual of foreign origin on a list to get votes.” Another described being offered a place on a list but felt that the purpose was more to appeal to a specific group of voters than to ensure he had real influence.

Some believed that no political representative truly spoke for immigrants in local government. In their opinion, the community was rather closed and foreign ideas were seldom utilised, even though immigrants often saw things with “fresh eyes” and could suggest improvements. However, examples were mentioned of individuals who played an important role, such as representatives within trade unions or multicultural representatives, who mediated between Icelandic society and immigrants. They were not, however, elected representatives in local government and therefore had limited formal power.

Views on whether immigrants should have their own specific representatives were not uniform. Some considered it natural and necessary to have a spokesperson who was familiar with the situation and experience of immigrants. Others took the view that “this is not our country” and that immigrants should therefore not necessarily demand special representatives. This position reflects different understandings of belonging, rights and responsibilities.

**“I WAS INVITED TO BE ON THE LIST AND I, UNFORTUNATELY, DID SO. IT WASN'T SO THAT I WOULD GET ONTO THE LOCAL COUNCIL, BUT TO GET THE VOTES OF POLES IN THE ELECTION.”**

## SUMMARY

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The overall picture shows that language skills, access to information and social connections are key prerequisites for people to experience independence and genuine participation in society. Those who master Icelandic or develop strong social connections experience increased security and a sense of belonging:

“WHEN I STARTED SPEAKING ICELANDIC, EVERYTHING CHANGED. THEN I FELT LIKE I BELONGED MORE.”

Conversely, others describe insecurity and shame related to their language use:

“I’M ALWAYS AFRAID OF SAYING SOMETHING WRONG. PEOPLE SOMETIMES SWITCH TO ENGLISH AND THEN I FEEL LIKE I’M NOT GOOD ENOUGH.”

Overall, the findings suggest that systems based on people “reading up on things” or finding information themselves can be exclusionary, especially when information is inaccessible, only in Icelandic, or inadequately translated. Personal guidance, human interaction and clear, practical information (preferably in multiple languages and with real substance, not just a token translation) appear to be key factors in supporting integration.

Finally, participants reiterate advice that relates to both the individual and the community: that people need to dare to speak, make mistakes and start right away, but that this also requires tolerance, patience and conscious support in daily interactions.

“DON’T BE AFRAID TO MAKE MISTAKES, LEARN ICELANDIC STRAIGHT AWAY. ENGLISH IS NOT ENOUGH.”



**PEK KINGAR  
NETID**