



## Summer 1 Reflective Report

In the face of contemporary immigration dynamics in Ireland, my research journey delved into the complexities of integrating Ukrainian refugees within the context of the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine. While the influx of immigrants into Ireland is not new, the surge of refugees from Ukraine due to this geopolitical crisis has added a unique layer of challenge. The coexistence of welcoming sentiments and discriminatory experiences highlights the need to understand the intricate adaptation process of Ukrainian refugees in Irish society. With this focus, I embarked on a journey to unravel their experiences.

### **Methodology**

My approach involved engaging with the narratives of those who support refugees directly—interviewing six dedicated professionals who offered diverse perspectives on the integration process. These experts hailed from various sectors related to integration, such as language acquisition, mental health support, basic services access, discrimination and racism, cultural separation, government aid, and education/employment. By individually interviewing each support worker, I aimed to gain comprehensive insights into the integration experiences of Ukrainian refugees in Ireland.

### **Adapting Research Focus**

My research trajectory was not initially as conceived. Originally, I had intended to directly interview Ukrainian refugees themselves to glean first-hand experiences. My prior experience working directly with refugees led me to believe that mastering the intricacies of interview techniques and assembling a group of six participants for individual interviews and a focus group of six would be relatively straightforward. However, reality proved to be quite different. My supervisor, a mentor who ignited my interest in refugees and research, steered me towards an alternative path. Her wisdom derived from her fieldwork experience made it clear that ethical research approval for direct refugee interviews would be a considerable challenge given my novice status. This setback propelled me to revise my approach.

The initial feeling of disappointment was undeniable. It seemed as though the very foundation of my project had crumbled, leaving me uncertain about how to proceed in a way that both ignited my motivation and faithfully represented the essence of the Laidlaw scholarship. Yet, a pivotal moment during my engagement with refugee support workers within Trinity's English conversational classes for refugees and asylum seekers brought a transformative realisation. Their collective wealth of experiences, unified by their dedication to enhancing the integration of refugees in Ireland, sparked a new perspective. In consultation with my supervisor and Trinity's Laidlaw coordinator, Joel McKeever, I embarked on a surprising yet invigorating shift in approach. While this was far from the streamlined experience I had envisioned, the decision to pivot towards interviewing support workers resonated profoundly. As I gained ethical approval, a new phase of preparation started, not without its own set of challenges.

### **Navigating Challenges**

#### Ethical Approval

Navigating the ethical approval process proved to be a more arduous and time-consuming endeavour than I had initially anticipated. Confronting this challenge required a significant shift in my mindset – acknowledging that, once all the required materials were submitted, the outcome was beyond my direct control and necessitated a patient waiting period. This process, although tedious, underlined the critical significance of meticulously establishing the right protocols for my interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and the proximity of my interviewees to these issues, ensuring their comfort in sharing their experiences was essential. Equally important was ensuring they understood the context in which their information would be stored and employed, further emphasising the need for a carefully crafted approach.

This alignment resonated deeply with the core values I had identified in my Personal Development Plan (PDP) – specifically, the commitment to upholding principles of fairness and equality in all interactions, irrespective of individuals' backgrounds. These values became particularly pronounced during the ethical approval process and remained steadfast throughout the entirety of the interviews.

### Cross-cultural Perspective

As a woman from Peru, I faced the struggle of recognizing the natural boundaries of my capacity to completely understand the refugees' experiences. This difficulty highlighted the importance of developing an understanding of different cultures and approaching the task without any preconceived biases, in order to ensure an accurate grasp of their narratives.

### Intimidating new experience

Another significant challenge I encountered was the fact that I had never conducted interviews before. Suddenly, I found myself in direct conversations with these inspiring individuals, sharing their remarkable experiences and insights. Moreover, these individuals were professionals within the very field I was researching, and they possessed a considerable amount of life experience compared to my own. During this juncture, a meeting with a former scholar proved necessary. She reminded me that my role as a researcher commanded respect, and rather than viewing my youth as a weakness, I should regard it as a strength that I could conduct these interviews at a young age. To track my progress and personal growth, I adopted a practice of writing reflective journal entries after each interview. These reflections allowed me to appreciate how far I had come and affirmed my genuine enjoyment in participating in these meaningful conversations. This endeavour was closely aligned with one of my PDP goals: to enhance my skills in reflection. The journal became an effective tool in fulfilling this objective.

### Time management

Undoubtedly, the journey demanded adaptability. Struggling with time management and missed deadlines, I discovered the unique advantages of my independent research setting. After Action Learning Sets (ALS) I realised that, unlike peers who depended on lab schedules, I had the autonomy to align tasks with my own pace. I found inspiration and resilience through the guidance and support of scholars in my cohort. In these conversations I also noticed that while some scholars were done with their research, others were just starting. This helped by reminding me that each one of us is on their own journey and timeline.

### **Findings**

The interviews brought about numerous unexpected insights that significantly enriched my understanding. Hearing directly from support workers, instead of relying solely on written sources like papers and journal articles, added an entirely new layer of understanding to how Ukrainian refugees integrate into Ireland. I was pleasantly surprised to find that many of these support workers described the support system for refugees in Ireland as exceptional, well-organised, and characterised by genuine empathy. However, as our conversations delved deeper into specific integration factors like healthcare, accommodation, and employment, certain challenges came to the forefront. While it's clear that Ireland is genuinely committed to establishing solid structures for the integration of Ukrainians, there are several areas that require improvement. This reality became even more apparent as I heard about the direct impact on people's lives.

The interviews unveiled a critical facet of the integration process - the imperative understanding of profound cultural differences between Ukrainian refugees and the Irish population. These disparities spanned various domains, encompassing preferences for communication platforms and approaches to sensitive topics such as mental health and trauma. Recognizing these disparities is essential for promoting cultural sensitivity and enhancing the effectiveness of support services. The existence of this cultural gap can either facilitate a more inclusive approach to integration or hinder the Irish government's efforts to help Ukrainians successfully integrate into Irish society.

In my upcoming results, I intend to emphasise the remarkable efforts of these support workers, who describe their work as both demanding and deeply fulfilling. Interestingly, I would characterise this initial summer experience using the same words: challenging and fulfilling. I gained valuable insights from the conversations I engaged in, both during and after the interviews. This encompassed every stage, from the meticulous preparation of the interviews to the subsequent stages of processing and analysing the gathered data.

### **Personal Growth and Leadership**

This experience taught me a great deal about myself. As a researcher, I discovered my enthusiasm for engaging in meaningful conversations with people and collecting firsthand data. Surprisingly, I found myself drawn to the analytical aspect of the process, even though I generally lean more toward the action-oriented side. I also gained a profound appreciation

for the importance of ethical understanding, a crucial step in safeguarding both the individuals I interacted with and myself. This alignment with my core values, which emphasise equitable treatment regardless of background, became particularly evident during the ethical approval process and remained consistent throughout all my interviews.

In my role as a leader, I discovered my capacity to navigate unexpected twists and turn them into opportunities rather than succumbing to fear and stagnation. While moments of frustration did arise, I constantly reminded myself that the journey would inevitably present challenges that could ultimately yield valuable lessons. Amidst this, I uncovered a newfound sense of self-assurance. Engaging with more seasoned professionals in the field, I not only posed questions but actively contributed to enriching and insightful conversations. Despite initial apprehensions before the interviews, my confidence surged as soon as I began conversing, allowing me to open up and express myself fully. Interestingly, this experience also addressed a weakness I had identified in my PDP - my struggle to deepen relationships. Through the interviews, I successfully overcame this hurdle, honing my ability to forge meaningful connections. The interactions were so gratifying and interactive that all six interviewees extended invitations for me to observe their work in action at their respective centres. This required stepping outside my comfort zone, and the outcome proved rewarding. Identifying this aspect as an area for growth was a valuable realisation that prompted me to cultivate it further.

### **A Future Path**

For me

This research experience has indelibly shaped my future aspirations. It has solidified my dedication to a career in refugee support and has surprisingly kindled an unexpected interest in academia and research. The insights I learned highlighted how crucial it is to keep exploring this topic, inspiring me to take part in upcoming research about refugee integration.

For research

This entire experience made me aware of the importance of gathering more information about how refugees and asylum seekers integrate in Ireland. What I learned from my

research shows there are many areas with room for improvements and positive changes that would have an immense impact in people's lives. Especially when they find themselves in an uncertain and frustrating situation. There are many possibilities for further exploration. For instance, we could delve into how different countries handle specific aspects of integration and compare those approaches to Ireland's. By understanding the differences, we can determine whether changes are needed. Additionally, we could inquire about the integration experiences of refugees from various nationalities, races, and ethnicities, comparing them to the experiences of Ukrainians who are European and predominantly white. This research holds immense potential, and I eagerly anticipate the opportunity to contribute to the academic efforts in this area.

### **Gratitude**

I reserve a significant portion of this reflection to express my deep gratitude to the Laidlaw program, both within Trinity College and beyond. This experience has been truly life-changing. The financing, networking opportunities, and inspiration have instilled constructive growth and character development. This journey has reinforced my commitment to effecting positive change and connected me with a community of like-minded individuals dedicated to shaping a better world.

I too owe an immense debt of gratitude to my supervisor, whose unwavering support and mentorship steered me through the uncertainties. Far from feeling like an accessory to her work, she empowered me to lead my investigation authentically. Her resources, ethical guidelines, and continuous support were instrumental in shaping my journey.