

Laidlaw reflection essay

Intro

I began thinking about this project almost two years ago, when working as a poll clerk at the local and European elections. Seeing the amount of people from a local Direct Provision centre who were interested in voting in the local elections got me wondering whether refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland had the opportunity to be informed on Irish politics. As my 16-hour shift continued, it soon became clear that many did not, with some asking for assistance in understanding the complicated proportional representation system and asking myself and my colleagues about the policies of various politicians. Anecdotally, it appears that to Irish politicians reaching out to refugees and asylum seekers as constituents is a low priority. I believe that this could change if there are wider efforts to integrate refugees and asylum seekers into Irish political life. I had wanted to investigate how this might be achieved ever since, and when I applied for Laidlaw it seemed like the perfect opportunity.

I really enjoyed the research process, and I feel as if I have made a start on my contribution to this issue in both an academic and personal capacity. I have learned a lot along the way: I have gained both hard academic research skills like qualitative thematic analysis, and soft skills such as time management and networking-adjacent skills through taking on a project that had a strong interpersonal focus.

Research process

When submitting my research proposal to Laidlaw I had intended to conduct six interviews with various people who work with refugees on a daily basis. I had hoped to interview people from a range of organisations: political, community-based and religious. Due to a variety of circumstances I was only able to conduct 4 interviews, but I believe that there is merit to the results that I was able to produce from my analysis of these interviews.

The first step of my research process involved getting ethics approval, which took more time than I care to admit. Because of the amount of time I procrastinated this, I started the project a good deal later than I had hoped to. I then moved on to conducting interviews. I prepared a guide to semi-structured research interviews involving the themes I wanted to ask participants about, such as how information is passed on among the refugees and asylum seekers they work with, the level of political engagement they have witnessed among the people they work with, and the support they receive from local and national authorities to both formally and informally impart political education. Interviews proved quite difficult to arrange given that many people

were on holiday, so I was interviewing some participants and reaching out to others simultaneously. This proved to be somewhat beneficial, as I refined my interviewing skills over the course of the project. It also forced me to be creative with the people I reached out to, and to find participants who had valuable perspectives I had not originally thought to include.

After conducting interviews I transcribed the recorded Zoom calls and used the software Taguette to create codes for the transcripts. This was a new process for me, and it took some getting used to. As I got more confident with it, I had to go back over the first transcripts I'd coded to analyse them again using the new tags that I'd created. This was quite an enjoyable process, as was going back over the coded transcripts searching for patterns. I took notes during the analysis part of the project which served as the base for my final poster.

Results

Diversity in refugee/asylum seeker population in Ireland

The diversity of the refugee and asylum seeker community was highlighted by participants in this research, who had worked with people from a wide range of nationalities, family circumstances and educational backgrounds. The range of accommodation models and financial allowances provided by the Irish state also contributed to the broad spectrum of experiences observed. This variety in lived experiences greatly affects the capacity of individuals to participate in community or educational activities, and in turn the possibilities for obtaining information about Irish political life.

Benefits of local connections in community building & information sharing

Interviews with local service providers highlighted the advantage of using local connections to widen inclusion and political education opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers by sharing local information and events and relying on locals to run community activities. Participants spoke of using local connections as “how [volunteering is] done in a small town”. Support workers also found it helpful to be strategic in recruiting volunteers, looking for people who had knowledge in areas such as housing and education. These trends establish locals as a trusted source of information and advice. In addition, participants working in formalised programmes mentioned the benefits of sharing information about political education workshops by reaching out to local organisation, not necessarily political ones. This allows for wider outreach through word of mouth and through social and traditional media.

Variable engagement and enthusiasm for local politics

Participants reported interest in local politics, both from refugees and locals as being extremely variable. While all reported some instances of discussing local politics, the

level of willingness to discuss these topics varied across the diverse refugee/asylum seeker population. Education, preference for global politics and lack of time and energy were commonly suggested reasons for a lack of interest. One participant noted that political refugees might be more likely to engage with Irish local politics, while another suggested that the institutional nature of an isolated DP centre was a barrier to accessing political education workshops. Some participants admitted reluctance to discuss these topics with refugees and asylum seekers in the community, due to the local political climate, having experienced indifference from local politicians towards their volunteer work and hostility from far-right actors.

Research takeaways; implications for in-field application of research LiA

These results suggest that to effectively deliver political education to asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland, service providers need to think locally and take into account the diverse nature of the refugee/asylum seeker population in Ireland. Local initiatives will probably be most effective when they use local connections to establish trust and spread the word about their services. Efforts to increase refugees and asylum seekers' political engagements could also benefit from greater support and attention from local authorities and in particular elected officials, helping to establish trust in the political system both among refugees and asylum seekers and locals.

I hope to take on an in-field application of research which expands on these takeaways. Hopefully this will look further at creating trust and efficient collaboration between local volunteers, NGOs and local authorities. These bodies frequently overlap, creating administrative issues and costing valuable opportunities to combine resources and experiences. I also hope to be able to more closely investigate how religious and social groups and diaspora communities play into information sharing and political education. Given that I have more time and a better understanding of how to recruit participants I hope that I will obtain more detailed and varied results.

Personal development learning outcomes

The biggest things I learned during the research process was the importance of reaching out to people early, and repeatedly. I began my research with a 'maybe' from a number of people, and at the beginning of the summer I started to contact a number of other organisations to get more participants. This was a daunting task for me, as I was initially uncomfortable reaching out by phone and even to follow up by email. I got very few responses initially, which prompted me to start sending follow-up emails and eventually calling people as well. Unfortunately, I think I left this a bit too late, as a lot of people were away by the time I realised the importance of sending follow-ups and of reaching out personally with a phone call, and I only got three interviews in this manner. I was able to get a fourth through a personal contact which ended up being quite insightful

and adding a lot of nuance to my study on the integration of Ukrainians in Ireland. I also heard back from several county councils who were able to give me detailed information on their own programmes for political integration, via Zoom interviews and supplementary written reports.

Overall, the practicalities of conducting interview-based research will stick with me more than anything else. Between the not-ideal time I contacted people, my initial reluctance to reach out or follow up for fear of bothering people and the difficulty of arranging interviews around busy schedules I managed to get only 4 interviews. Nevertheless, I learned a number of skills that proved helpful and I believe will be helpful again in further projects. First was phone call and email etiquette. Through sending out so many emails and looking at the responses I received I started to get a feel for the structure of an email. I could understand where the balance was between friendliness and assertiveness that best encouraged people to take part. I also earned the value of following up with a phone call. I got several participants through following up in this manner.

Although the sample size was smaller than anticipated I learned the advantage of looking for participants in unexpected places. Although I didn't initially intend to approach county councils for interviews I ended up doing so after turning up a number of dead ends while searching for participants. These interviews ended up being extremely insightful and provided nuance on how local authorities can collaborate with NGOs to increase refugee political participation. Additionally, I learned the benefits of using in-person contacts to acquire deeper knowledge on the topic. I was able to get a contact to interview through a family friend who volunteered in a DP centre. I was even able to visit the centre and get to know both staff and residents there, which allowed me to connect with staff who I later interviewed and incorporate insights on the DP system into my final project. To sum up what I learned from my struggles with small sample size, I learned how quality is better than quantity when it comes to interview-based research.

I also learned the importance of effective time-management and being flexible. Finding participants was the biggest struggle for me in this project, and I feel that managing my time well is something that I struggled with. I tend to procrastinate on doing tasks that I don't feel confident in my ability to achieve (case in point, this essay). During this project I came to understand more about my own working process. I found it hard to set up a routine which allowed me to be flexible around participants' schedules while also accomplishing goals in a timely manner. I realised during this project that making a routine that has room for flexibility is something I struggle with more broadly in my life. I did acquire some tools that I found helpful. I used spreadsheets to keep track of the organisations I'd reached out to and who had responded, which helped to keep sight of how much work I'd done even if it didn't feel that way. This helped a lot to keep me

motivated. The project also forced me to let go of the all-or-nothing attitude I have to routine and schedule, partly due to the deadline-based nature of the project. I realised that I need a daily plan or at least a to-do list in order to work on a larger project and can't leave big tasks to chance or 'I'll do it at some point today'. I also found breaking big tasks down into smaller sections extremely helpful for getting work done, as working on an element of a task for a smaller amount of time is a lot less daunting than spending the whole day on one big, vague project.

Ultimately, the most positive thing I discovered during this research project was that things do generally work out, even if not in the way that I envisioned. While I originally hoped to get more participants in my project the participants, I did get provided detailed insights that suited the qualitative nature of the project quite well. I also was able to establish a rapport with the participants I did have, allowing me to view supplementary reports and data on the participants' work with refugees. This informed the direction of the analysis that I conducted, and I believe it enriched the final results that I achieved.

This project helped me to develop a deeper appreciation for the practical applications of social science research. The results documenting the importance of local connections and the varying situations of refugees and asylum seekers across Ireland gave me a deeper understanding of how qualitative research can capture the nuance of a broad topic beyond just numbers. I developed a lot of empathy not only for the people coming into the country without an understanding of the Irish political system, but also for the support workers who are attempting to integrate them, and even local authorities who go the extra mile to welcome refugees and empower them to participate in Irish politics. While there was an academic basis to this research, the human connection that I was able to experience through one-on-one interviews gave me an understanding of how the abstract in the social sciences affects real people. It has given me a lot of new threads of interest to pursue as an academic but has also reminded me of the faces behind the Irish international protection system.

In addition, it was heartening to know that academic study can have positive consequences, when research conclusions are able to inform policy at a local and national level. Seeing what worked well within local authorities, in NGOs and for individual volunteers, I am convinced that political participation can effectively be made a part of refugee and asylum seekers' integration into Ireland with adequate support and care. I am eager to pursue this vein of research further, potentially through LiA or through further study at Trinity or in a masters.

This project has instilled a lot of confidence in me that I can design and implement a project and not mentally caving to the pressure of a task. I hope to carry this forward into further work that I do both within Laidlaw and outside of it. I hope to do more work in this field both as a researcher and in a volunteer capacity. For example, I am organising a session of the European Youth Parliament in March at which I hope to get

refugee students participating. I am particularly excited that I can use connections made through my research project to directly reach out and find participants as well as to understand how best to make refugee participants welcome at the event. I also will be able to use the project-management skills that I've gained through this research project to conduct this project. In particular, the experience I have gained in reaching out to participants in my research will be very valuable in looking for sponsorships. I have a much better grasp of the etiquette of networking since doing this project, and I also feel I am more assertive in how I reach out to better, better enabling to to accomplish my targets. I also believe the time-management and scheduling skills I have gained will be incredibly useful, and I am quite relieved that I have had the opportunity to test-drive these new skills before I am in charge of a team of people.