

# ADVERSITY IN DIVERSITY

The EUMARGINS research project is highlighting the experiences young migrants can face when moving to a European country, and how those experiences can affect an individual's chances of being socially excluded

**W**ho is not included? Who can be included? What promotes inclusion and what does not? These questions have been continuously asked by the researchers of the EUMARGINS project in order to discover what contributes to the transition from exclusion to inclusion for young adults with immigrant backgrounds. Having a well-paid job, a high level of education or living in an affluent part of the city is commonly understood to increase your feeling of inclusion, but this is not necessarily the case. Consequently, having a low-paid job or lack of education does not necessarily lead to the feeling of exclusion, although this can often be the case. Instead, throughout a series of interviews, researchers observed that the social positions held by the young migrants and their relation to processes of inclusion and exclusion often questioned and challenged traditional explanations for why somebody may feel 'inside' or 'outside' society.

The three-year research project EUMARGINS, financed by the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), concluded on 1 October 2011. It investigated more than 200 young adult immigrants and descendants, aged between 18 and 26, from seven urban-metropolitan areas. Norway (Oslo), Sweden (Gothenburg), Italy (Genoa), France (Metz/Nancy), Spain (Barcelona), Estonia (Tallinn) and the United Kingdom (London) took part in the research and interviews were conducted with young migrants on their life experiences within those locations. The overall aim of the research was to find out what hinders their inclusion in these countries, and what factors can help it open up for them.

The general trend is that social exclusion is defined primarily in relation to education and work. However, the EUMARGINS project delved deeper by using a more multi-dimensional concept, which included arenas such as family, peer group, various other social settings, religious or ethnic communities, neighbourhoods or even the nation state. In order to grasp the complexities inherent, the project looked for experiences of social inclusion among young people who appear to be 'marginalised' and to look for experiences of social exclusion among young people who, according to conventional standards, are 'integrated'. By focusing on the life span of the individual, the project views social exclusion as a process and can consider the efforts of young immigrants to combat social exclusion as well as those incidences where they accept social exclusion or willingly contribute to it. The premise is that

individuals may be included in some life arenas, but at the same time excluded from other arenas and that these situations can change course over a life time.

## Doubly affected

Young migrants are simultaneously moving to a new country as well as becoming adults. The context of the present financial crisis in the majority of the European countries causes important breakdowns in many dimensions that affect young migrants, such as the rising unemployment rates, higher return migration rates and fewer integration opportunities. These are factors that are generated by the financial crisis and which almost always affect the most vulnerable groups in society. In this instance, individuals are doubly affected: as young people and as migrants.

In the case of migrant young people, the citizenship laws are often preconditions that determine their access to education and the labour market. Illiberal citizenship laws in some European countries form the major restriction to attending school or entering the labour market. EUMARGINS cites the Italian case as an example of a controversial law that is particularly discriminatory towards young adult immigrants. According to the Bossi-Fini law, the eligibility for a residence permit is based on the fulfilment of certain criteria that link the legal right to reside to economic self-sufficiency. All individuals over the age of 18 must apply for their own residence permit even if they have previously been attached to their parents. It also forces the young migrants to work in order to remain in the country, thereby restricting their access to higher education. Several interviewees from Italy reported facing this situation, which led them to take on low-paid jobs rather than having the opportunity to pursue further education. Conversely, in Norway, Sweden and Estonia, language acquisition can be a major barrier in taking higher education for those migrants who have not learned the majority language. The research shows clearly that knowledge of the host society's language is key to integration. In Norway and Sweden reception classes, which include language classes, are provided for new immigrants to overcome any language barriers allowing them to participate in the labour market and in wider society as quickly as possible.

## Aspiration

Significant variations exist between different ethnic groups in terms of educational attainment as with the labour market participation. Additionally, the socio-economic characteristics of



the family and school play a role in early leaving and low grades. A 'lower class background' emerges as a major factor in explaining higher dropout rates amongst immigrant youth when compared to non-immigrants. The aspirations parents have for their children are often based on their relative standing and educational attainment in their country of origin. Haile, one of the interviewees who moved to Norway from Ethiopia, came from a family who valued education and had high educational qualifications in their country of origin. This offers some explanation for the ambition and persistence Haile had in achieving his goals, despite facing many obstacles along the way.

### School choices

Alongside the parents' 'class', socio-economic and educational characteristics, a high incidence of immigrant youth in suburban schools (Norway, Sweden and France) or a total segregation of the school system (Estonia) also contributes to early dropout and low educational attainment. The effect of ethnic school segregation on education outcomes is indisputable, but the effect on performance is not linear. For Isabelle, one of the interviewees from France whose parents are immigrants from Laos, choosing a school was an important decision and she clearly wanted to distance herself from the highly ethnically segregated schools in her neighbourhood.

Overall, the project reveals that in all countries young migrants and descendants experience various forms of social exclusion in the form of being marked as different by other pupils at school. Young migrants and descendants who attend schools where young people with ethnic minority background are the majority feel more included. However, despite their stronger feeling of being included in the peer network, there is a very visible trend of young migrants and descendants who deliberately choose not to attend local schools with high immigrant populations, due to the stigma associated with those minority schools. For instance, in Estonia there are great differences in skills and knowledge acquired between Estonian- and Russian-language schools and ethnic school segregation has contributed to ethnic segregation in many other arenas, such as higher education being taught almost exclusively in Estonian. For this reason, Russian-speaking families are increasingly choosing to send their children to Estonian-language schools in the hope of improving their children's chances in the labour market.

### Legally or illegally

There is a large variation among the available entry points for young migrants into the labour market among the selected countries. Regarding labour market segmentation, the project observed a difference between young migrants working in the

primary labour market and those working in the secondary labour market. In this sense two categories of countries exist; those countries with poor social rights for young immigrant workers with a more developed secondary market often open to illegal migrants (Spain and Italy) and those countries with social protection (the Nordic countries). In comparing these categories, it can be observed that although access to the labour market is easiest in those countries with an established secondary market, integration is best achieved in the countries which provide social benefits and enforce rules for accessing the labour market. While in all the countries the inclusion or exclusion depended on the migrant's status—either they were in the country legally or illegally—the way it manifests in different labour markets determines the paths the young adults take up in their future.

### Not neutral

The EUMARGINS research illustrates how the lives of young people can be shaped based on the aspects of their feeling of belonging (or lack thereof). 'Immigrant' is not a neutral term, but in many national contexts is the mechanism for which hierarchies between categories of people are established in terms of their rights of belonging. 'Immigrant' youth can be socially excluded because they do not speak the host language, are materially deprived, or are subject to prejudices. This is experienced differently by young migrants depending on their national context, structural, socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the young migrant and their parents.

It is in this context that it is important not to forget the asset of diversity that these young people should represent to Europe and the valuable contributions that each of these individuals can and want to provide. Understanding the challenges and opportunities that young migrants face in today's Europe is critical for them to reach their full potential, thereby effectively contributing to the needs of European nations.



UiO : Department of Sociology and Human Geography  
University of Oslo

Dr Katrine Fangen  
Co-ordinator EUMARGINS

tel: +47 228 552 44

katrine.fangen@sosgeo.uio.no  
<http://www.sv.uio.no/iss/english/research/projects/eumargins/>