

**SHADE BABALOLA****THE CHALLENGES FACED BY EASTERN EUROPEAN STUDENTS  
WITHIN A 16-19 EDUCATION SETTING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM****Abstract**

To examine the challenges encountered by Eastern European students within a sixth form college in the United Kingdom. This paper aims to consider the difficulties encountered by this particular ethnic group examining the impact the challenges may have on their performance, success and achievement. This paper will also highlight equality and diversity implications and examine the social mobility of this particular group.

**Key words:** Eastern European, challenges, attainment, work ethic, European Union, equality and diversity implications, white other, perceptions, English Language, Mathematics

**Introduction**

This paper aims to examine some of the possible and potential challenges faced by Eastern European students within a 16-19 education setting. This paper will further examine the performance and outcomes of Eastern European students and their experience within a college setting. This paper will further address equality and diversity issues and discuss their impact on Eastern European students. The paper will finally set recommendations and strategies to improve the outcome of these students within the 16-19 education setting.

The college in focus is located in London within a borough categorised by high social deprivation; with a population of around 2,000 students aged between 16-19; the prior attainment of students is lower than in many sixth form colleges in the United Kingdom. The ethnicity of students is extremely diverse, the predominant groups being African, Pakistani and of Bangladeshi heritage. However over recent years there has been a gradual intake of Turkish students and as more Eastern European countries have joined the European Union a steady flow of Eastern European students have migrated into schools and colleges in the United Kingdom.

Consequently, the number of white other (a descriptive term used to describe Eastern European Students and other groups classified as white), has risen from 240 in 2011 to 307 in 2014. This figure is set to rise due to growing changes in migration patterns.

**Methodology**

The study that this paper focuses on are the challenges and the educational experience of Eastern European Students within a 16-19 education setting. This paper seeks to shed some light on how their experience and challenges impact on their attainment and performance at college.

Data was gathered from participants at an English Speaking college in the United Kingdom in the form of statistical data, discussions, observations and

questionnaires that have been completed by 26 Eastern European students. Students who participated in the research were from countries ranging from Romania, Poland, Lithuania, Albania, Kosovo and Hungry. 4 teachers were also interviewed and completed questionnaires for the purpose of the research.

## Literature Review

### **European Union**

The European Union (EU) is an economic and political union of 28 countries. In May 2004 Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungry, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia joined the EU. In January 2007 Bulgaria and Romania joined the European Union increasing significantly the number of European migrants moving to settle into the United Kingdom.

### **Attainment**

Department of Education and Professional Studies (2014, p. 11) point out that “the UK government benchmark at Key Stage 4 is for students to pass at least 5 GCSE’s with C or better, including English and Maths, which in 2013 was met by 59.2 per cent of pupils across England”.

However, in reality if Eastern European students in the United Kingdom wish to pursue a competitive career at a competitive university, and gain admission into a good college in the United Kingdom they should be aiming to achieve a B profile or above in their GCSE’s, this includes a B grade in both maths and English. For some students of Eastern European heritage this may prove to be a hindrance for some students who are first generation Eastern European limited grasp of English Language. Many colleges in the United Kingdom now require a G’score of 5.5 before you can be accepted on to an A level programme. A G’score is calculated by averaging out the total percentage of your GCSE grade.

However, for students who do not achieve a b grade profile they may be accepted on to BTEC vocational programme, dependent on their grades they will be permitted to work towards either a level 1, 2 or 3 course. This qualification still enables students to pursue a university degree.

Department of Education and Professional Studies (2014, p. 11) point out that “pupils of Eastern European origins (as a group) performed below the national average in the 2012-13 academic year: 40.1 percent of pupils achieved 5 or more A\*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent including English and mathematics GCSE. This is also lower than recorded attainment in other key ethnic groups except Gypsies, Roma and Travellers”.

### **English Language**

Department of Education and Professional Studies (2014) further argue that teacher’s highlight English Language as one of the main challenges faced by Eastern European students, pointing out how English hinders the performance of these students not only in subjects such as English and humanities but notably in mathematics. They further point out “students feel that their status as an EAL learner could be a barrier to achieving success” (Department of Education and Professional Studies, 2014, p. 4).

### **Mathematics**

Although students from Eastern European backgrounds often struggle with understanding and communicating in English Language, they also face similar

problems with interpreting maths questions which of course will be written in English Language in the United Kingdom. Before students are granted admission into college or an institute of higher learning it is important that they achieve as a minimum a C grade in Maths as well as a C grade in English Language, there are also alternative qualifications that may be considered by institutions as an entry requirement for maths such as FSQM a preliminary qualification before a GCSE in Maths is granted.

However, many universities are now reconsidering their entry requirements, many universities now require at least a b grade in maths for certain competitive courses.

### **Perceptions**

An increase in the migration of many Eastern European Students into the United Kingdom has without a shadow of a doubt created tensions within some communities. In some instances many Eastern Europeans have been described as scroungers who have simply migrated to the UK to manipulate the welfare state. There have also been suggestions that increased migration of European nationals has placed a strain on schools and hospitals in the UK as well as the benefit system. In a recent article Robinson (2014) points out that Lord Sugar has called for an end to Britain's benefit culture claiming Eastern European immigrants see the country as a land filled with milk and honey, he points out that "hard-working people found that abuse of the benefit system is demoralising and that it needed sorting out" (Robinson, 2014, p. 1). He suggested "that Eastern European immigrants should live and work in Britain for three or four years having worked and contributed before they are entitled to benefits".

However, according to Dustmann and Frattini (2014) European immigrants to the UK have paid more in taxes than they have received in benefits, helping to relieve the fiscal burden on UK-born workers and contributing to the financing of public services. They suggest that "European immigrants who arrived in the UK since 2000 have contributed more than £20b to UK public finances between 2001 and 2011", they further suggest that "they have endowed the country with productive human capital that would have cost the UK £6.8bn in spending on education" (Dustmann & Frattini, 2014, p. 3).

They further argue that "over the period 2001 to 2011, European migrants from the EU-15 countries contributed 64% more in taxes than they received in benefits and that Immigrants from the Central and East European "accession" countries (the A10) contributed 12% more than they received" (Dustmann & Frattini, 2010, p. 3).

### **Work ethic and achievement**

To suggest that most Eastern European students under-achieve in college due to poor language skills is perhaps an unfair assumption, many come from backgrounds where parents possess a strong-work ethic and where families value education highly. According to McGinnes (2012) Polish schoolchildren are boosting English pupil's standards, the article suggests that "although many Polish children arriving in Britain do not speak English as their first language, they do not appear to hold

back class mates in reading and writing and there is some evidence that suggests they are helping to raise grades in subjects like maths" (McGinnes, 2012, p. 1).

Research by the centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics shows they actually appear to have a positive effect on English children. Professor Sandra McNally, who led the research, looked at data from 2005 to 2009 taken from the National Pupil database, a census of all children in English schools. The professor of economics at Surrey University said "Evidence from catholic schools attended by children of polish migrants suggests that the presence of non-native English speakers might – in some cases, at least – have a positive effect on native results".

Professor McNally said that this could be due to better education standards in countries like Poland, as well as the work ethic of their parent, who had left their homeland to seek employment in Britain. She said "it may be the fact that immigrants from Eastern European countries are better educated and more attached to the labour market than the native population". Professor McNally also pointed out that "it was possible Polish children caught up fast upon entering English schools", she further stated that "they may have other things about them in their own environment that make them good to have in your school" (McGinnes, 2012, p. 1).

In addition to this, Sumption and Somerville (2010) suggest that recent migrants tend to be highly popular with employers and that immigration studies have found again and again that employers value Eastern European workers for their "excellent work ethic" (Sumption & Somerville, 2010, p. 24).

### **Equality and diversity implications**

According to the Department of Education and Professional Studies (2014) "recent migration adds to the UK's existing diversity, and over a decade of experience of substantial immigration has helped the public and policymakers to adjust to EU labour mobility". Therefore, there is a growing need for the government to respond to equality and diversity issues to fully ensure that Eastern European Students are fully integrated into the British Education System. Recent government reports relating to social mobility and the most recent paper by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014) suggests "that the UK is deeply elitist, this was based on an analysis of the backgrounds of more than 4,000 business, political, media and public sector leaders".

The findings suggest that small elites, educated at independent schools and Oxbridge, still dominate top roles, it further suggests that key institutions do not represent the public they serve. However, some quarters have called the study "unfair and unreasonable". However, the figures below represent public sector leaders:

- 71% of senior judges;
- 62% of senior armed forces officers;
- 55% of top civil servants;
- 36% of the cabinet;
- 43% of newspaper columnists.

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014), suggest "there is a need for a diversity of talent and experiences in the UK, Locking out talent and diversity, makes Britain's leading institutions less informed, less representative and

ultimately less credible than they should be" (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014, pp. 12-16).

In addition to this an increase in the number of countries forming part of the European Union means that the UK is more diverse than ever before, as a consequence of this Britain will at some stage have to address the social mobility of all of its citizen's ensuring everyone is given an equal chance to reach the very top of their chosen profession.

Sumption and Somerville (2010) suggest that experience from many developed, immigrant-receiving countries suggests that the success of immigrant children depends to a large extent on their parent's background. In general, children who come from wealthier source countries tend to fare better. In practice this often means that white children from immigrant families tend to face fewer challenges to educational and labour market success than visible minorities (Sumption & Somerville, 2014, p. 34).

Sumption and Somerville (2010) further argue that while the new migrants are popular with employers and have been successful at finding work, it is less clear whether meaningful social and economic integration has been within their reach. The majority fare well, but their employment and housing circumstances can be precarious, their future prospects somewhat uncertain, and a small minority remains vulnerable to substantial short-term risks (Sumption & Somerville, 2014, p. 35).

There is an indirect link here where the challenges faced by Eastern European student's parents will have a direct impact on their children.

### **White other**

Within many schools and colleges the ethnicity of Eastern European students falls under the category of white other, they are likely to share this category with Turkish students, and any other student who choose to identify themselves as white other. There are no legal requirements to provide a separate ethnic category for Eastern European students.

### **Analysis of data**

The students who participated in the research were from the following countries in Eastern Europe. 1 student from Hungry, 1 student from Kosovo, 1 student from Albania, 3 students from Poland, 7 students from Lithuania and 12 students from Romania.

A total of 13 students were enrolled on the BTEC Vocational qualification, 7 were enrolled on the level 2 BTEC Qualification (equivalent to GCSE's) and 3 were enrolled on the academic A'S and A2 Qualification. 2 students were enrolled on the BTEC Level 1 qualification.

A total of 26 students from Eastern European backgrounds were asked if they had achieved at least a C grade or equivalent in English, 12 stated they have achieved a C grade in English Language while 12 stated they had not achieved a C grade in English Language. While one respondent stated they had achieved a level 1 qualification in English.

The 26 respondents were asked if they were born in the United Kingdom all 26 respondents stated they were born outside of the United Kingdom. They were

further asked if they attended secondary school in the United Kingdom 22 stated they attended secondary school in the United Kingdom, while 3 stated they did not.

26 respondents were asked how many GCSE's they had attained 2 respondents did not state the amount of GCSE's they had achieved. 1 respondent stated none, 5 respondents stated they had achieved between 2-3 GCSE's, 5 respondents stated they had achieved between 3-4 GCSE'S, 4 respondents stated they had achieved between 4-5 GCSE's and 6 respondents stated they had achieved 6+ GCSE's.

26 respondents were asked if they lived at home with their parents, 25 stated they lived with parents while one stated they lived alone. 26 respondents were also asked if they were in receipt of the college bursary, a payment made to student's parents who earned below £20,000 annually 8 stated they were in receipt of the college bursary, while 18 stated they were not in receipt of the college bursary.

All respondents were asked to state why they were not in receipt of bursary.

9 respondents stated that their parents earned above the threshold (£20,000) which is why they were not in receipt of bursary. However, 4 respondents stated they missed the deadline to apply for the bursary which is why they are not in receipt of it.

2 respondents stated that they were unsure of how it worked and therefore did not apply, 1 respondent stated they were given enough money by parents and also worked, while 1 respondent stated that they experienced difficulties relating to a member of staff in finance and therefore were unable to apply for bursary and so found a part-time job instead. 1 respondent did not give a reason as to why they were not in receipt of bursary.

### **Data from the college**

Information was also gathered from Alis, an information system that collects data for all sixth form colleges in the United Kingdom in relation to achievement according to ethnicity. Information was also gathered in relation to value-added and achievement compared according to various ethnic groups for example White other, Black-Caribbean, Black-Other, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese.

Data for September 2014 suggests that "white other" have a total enrolment number of 27 students with an average GCSE score of 4.3 and a value added score of 0.33(this means that their achievement is not significant), Error score is 0.54 which indicates a significant score, the figures suggest that the white other group are significantly higher performers than all other ethnic groups that have been identified (Black- Caribbean, Black-other, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese). This appears to be an achievement as the majority of white other students start with the lowest GCSE scores of 4.3 in comparison to other groups.

### **Findings**

26 students from different countries in Eastern Europe took part in the research and identified the following challenges they experienced as students with a 16-19 education setting.

Respondents 18, 20, 22, 24, and 26 each stated that they felt they experienced some form of stereo typing from non-eastern European Students. Student 18-stated that "some students are a bit negative towards foreign students", respondent 20

suggested that a student once told him “that Eastern European students only come here for the benefits”. Respondent 26 suggested that “some students hold grudges against them due to conflicts that have taken part in some parts of Eastern Europe”. Respondents 24 and 22 simply suggested that “they often felt stereo typed against”.

Respondent 23 stated they experienced challenges with regards to cultural differences, while respondent 10 suggested their experienced challenges making friends.

Respondents 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17 and 23 stated that the challenges they face were all related to barriers of understanding English language.

Respondents 7, 15 and 16 did not identify any challenges that they experienced at college.

The findings from the 4 teachers who contributed to the research are as follows. Respondent 1 suggested that the challenges Eastern European students are likely to face are related to language both written and spoken, different cultures, different education systems and the fact that they are a minority group. Respondent 2 suggested that some students experience language barriers they also stated that this does not affect all students, and that a proportion of this group are likely to be in employment. Respondent 3 suggested that there may be “nuances” that Eastern European students may misunderstand and if classroom delivery is too fast it may be misunderstood. Respondent 4 identified language the language and economic challenges faced by Eastern European students.

### **White other**

White other is the category that Eastern European Students fall within, however, they share this category with Turkish students, and any other student who identifies themselves as white other, therefore it is often quite difficult to determine the achievement and true performance of this particular ethnic group. Although the data showed that the performance from this group was better than other ethnic groups it is not truly reliable.

### **English Language**

Only 12 respondents out of the 26 who completed the research have achieved a grade C in English Language. This supports current research that many Eastern European students require additional help with English Language.

### **Bursary payments**

Only 8 students stated that they were in receipt of the college bursary, while 18 stated they were not in receipt of it for varying reasons, it is evident that some students are in need of the bursary but are unable to obtain it due to missed deadlines and a range of other reasons that have been provided. However, 9 stated that their parents earned above the threshold, dispelling the perception that Eastern Europeans impinge on the welfare system, this has also been supported by Dustmann and Frattini (2014).

### **Challenges**

The main challenges faced by Eastern European students within the 16-19 education setting researched are predominately language barriers, cultural differences and stereotyping. There have also been some observations made regarding the negative perception of Eastern European students by some students within the college.

The research has indicated that some students experience financial difficulties, but only one student stated they currently lived on their own without their parents, however, taking a much closer look it appears that given the opportunity more Eastern European students should receive the bursary payment.

### **Conclusion**

English Language continues to be a key challenge for many students of Eastern European heritage. However, many Eastern European students have been identified as possessing a strong work ethic and tend to be well organised with generally a positive attitude towards education, which often enables them to perform well on vocational as well as some academic courses leading them on to successful employment or alternatively a place at university.

However, tracking the performance and achievement of this particular group is often unreliable due to the ethnic category they tend to fall under “white other”, which is also the category used to describe Turkish students, and any other student wishing to adopt or identify with this category.

Some participants identified stereotyping as a challenge they often have to face; there is a need for this issue to be addressed as well as the perception of Eastern Europeans to change.

### **Recommendations**

- Clear guidelines and time-span provided by tutors to students regarding how to apply for bursary, ensuring that all students who meet the criteria are provided access to the fund.
- To encourage changes to the perception of Eastern European students through awareness training and discussions about stereo-types of this particular group, through the tutorial system.
- Cultural awareness day, creating an awareness of Eastern European culture through visits literature and discussions.
- Continuous language support for students of Eastern European heritage.
- A separate ethnicity category for Eastern European Students, supported by the Department of Education, facilitating a better understanding of student numbers and student performance and achievement.

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