



Migration experiences of employees and international students in Hungary

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1. Introduction

Under the umbrella of globalisation and in the middle of environmental, social, political and economic crises, many people seeking for better conditions to live find their ways to move to other countries. In Hungary, there is an increasing number of immigrants every year¹. Employees and students of third countries are a major contribution to these numbers. Although there is a favourable path to acquire a resident permit, immigrants still face many obstacles while living in Hungary: education, political participation, equal opportunities, access to nationality², mental health issues, and the language barrier are the most prevalent ones.

¹ [Hungary: Latest immigration statistics | European Website on Integration \(europa.eu\)](https://europa.eu/european-council/en/hungary/latest-immigration-statistics)

² [Solano-Giacomo-Huddleston-Thomas-2020-Migrant-Integration-Policy-Index-2020.pdf \(migpolgroup.com\)](https://migratorygroup.com/Solano-Giacomo-Huddleston-Thomas-2020-Migrant-Integration-Policy-Index-2020.pdf)

Since literature is a universal form of communication, has many meanings and allows different kinds of expressions, while being a key setting of global education; this case study uses books as lenses to see migrants' experiences in Hungary. Subsequently, it inquires, proposes and encourages self-help through reading using a therapeutic process, in which books are a medium that can help address, discuss and treat emotional-behavioural problems, called bibliotherapy³. By asking employees and international students about their relation to libraries, books, and their general experiences and perceptions in Hungary; this case study aims to analyse how migration experiences can express what are the most critical difficulties faced whilst in Hungary, and how do people deal with them. This is done in order to have diverse and consistent data to come up with inclusive forms of integration, in which libraries and books can be main tools when dealing with immigration obstacles.

2. Methods

The Anthropolis Association conducted a survey, between May and June of 2023, with international students and employees living in three cities of Hungary: Budapest, Miskolc and Szeged. 20 people were interviewed, 13 of them were living in Budapest: 03 were only employees - a 22 years old woman from Kazakhstan; a 28 years old man from Uzbekistan; and a 25 years old woman from Turkey -; 08 were only students - a 24 years old woman from Kazakhstan; a 27 years old woman from Armenia; a 28 years old woman from Uzbekistan; a 22 years old woman from Moldova; a 24 years old woman from Vietnam; a 32 years old woman, a 39 years old man, and a 26 years old woman, were from the Philippines -; and 02 were employees and students - a 25 years old man from Egypt; and a 29 years old woman from Brazil.

There were 06 students living in Miskolc - a 25 years old man and a 33 years old man from Brazil; a 24 years old man and a 30 years old woman from the Philippines; a 28 years old woman from Mongolia; and a 28 years old man from Palestine -. And 01 student living in Szeged, a 20 years old woman from the Philippines. Their level of education varies from Bachelors to PhD and they were enrolled in courses such as Engineering, Physiotherapy, Educational Science, Sports Science, Anthropology and MBA.

³ [Bibliotherapy: Overview and Implications for Counselors \(counseling.org\)](https://counseling.org/bibliotherapy-overview-and-implications-for-counselors)

The questions in the survey were developed taking into consideration possible integration obstacles faced by immigrants and the role of libraries and books during the stay of people living in another country. The questionnaire base for the interviews had 30 questions that explored integration by presenting topics such as: the beginning of a life in Hungary, sense of security/fear in the country, friendship, mental health, cross-cultural matters, experience in libraries and with books, and a session that was developed to inquiry people's knowledge about bibliotherapy and their interest on being part of a bibliotherapy reading group. The questions were adaptable to people and their context, so each interview was conducted differently and were done in different spaces, such as the rooms where students live and public spaces. The interviews usually lasted from 20 to 30 minutes and were recorded and transcribed.

3. Immigration, Mental Health and Bibliotherapy

Hungary has a small percentage of immigrants compared to the entire population of the country. Roughly, 2%⁴ out of 9.6 million people⁵ are foreign citizens from different parts of the world. The majority of immigrants are from neighbouring countries in Europe, such as Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, Germany, Poland, Russia, Croatia and Austria; followed by people from Asian countries, America, Africa and, at last, Australia and Oceania⁶. Minus the halt, forced by the hit of the COVID-19 Pandemic, in which, by mid-2020, only 37 000 requests for short-term resident permit were filed; the National Directorate-General for Aliens Policing shows that the numbers in 2022 - 135.648 - were already as high as the ones in 2019, before the Pandemics, when there were 130 000 requests for short-term resident permit.

Although there is an increasing number of immigrants in Hungary, there are still many restrictions that can make living in the country a stressful thing. The last report, released in 2020, by The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), which is a tool that measures policies concerning integration of migrants across five continents and creates a panoramic view of opportunities to migrants, shows that Hungary hasn't changed much of its integration policies

⁴ [Countries - Hungary - Prague Process](#)

⁵ [Hungarian Central Statistical Office \(ksh.hu\)](#)

⁶ [22.1.1.23. Foreign citizens residing in Hungary by country of citizenship and sex, 1 January \(ksh.hu\)](#)

for legal residents. In their research, done from 2014 to 2019, policies are still in fault when it comes to non-EU citizens. Despite Hungary providing immediate access to the labour market, something that also favours employees with temporary job agencies and non-EU citizens, immigrants are constantly facing other integration obstacles⁷.

Hungary provides a small amount of integration policies when in comparison to other countries of the European Union. MIPEX shows that healthcare administrative discretion and documentation for asylum-seekers are some of the most critical negative changes according to their indicators. Together with that, migrant education policies and the lack of opportunities in public political participation are still a very critical problem, since those are two main important areas for migrants to have a critical sense of their living in the country and also to be able to be heard and supported by policymakers. The absence of assistance makes room for fear, inequality and separation. Immigrants are more vulnerable to be left in difficult positions, where they can be seen as threats to the nation, increasing, then, the number of xenophobia and islamophobia, and also decreasing levels of social trust and cross-cultural benefits⁸.

Mental health issues are a vulnerability faced by many immigrants who are in need of integration policies. Migrating to European Union countries, like Hungary, can be a very stressful and insecure experience. Alienation, anxiety, loss, longing, relief, optimism are all feelings that can happen throughout the journey. Different forms of discrimination, individual and institutional, paired with low levels of social trust and stigma of social inferiority can be a factor in the development of health issues among immigrants.

With the lack of politics to address immigrants' needs, psychosocial well-being is produced through social connections among immigrants. "They work to establish new communities and cross-cultural ties and to anchor themselves with the resources at their disposal, including their faiths, cultures, and cuisines. They labor to support family members left behind, sending remittances that sustain not only family units but the economies of low- and middle-income countries. They also contend with new languages, national norms, racial and ethnic categories, and discourses of citizenship that often cast them as 'the other.'"⁹

Another source of support is also given by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), where alternative integration strategies are developed and put into action. Funded by the European Union, the NGO Anthropolis, together with the NGO Humanitas and Sigmund Freud

⁷ [Solano-Giacomo-Huddleston-Thomas-2020-Migrant-Integration-Policy-Index-2020.pdf](https://mipex.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-06/Solano-Giacomo-Huddleston-Thomas-2020-Migrant-Integration-Policy-Index-2020.pdf) (mipex.europa.eu)

⁸ [Solano-Giacomo-Huddleston-Thomas-2020-Migrant-Integration-Policy-Index-2020.pdf](https://mipex.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-06/Solano-Giacomo-Huddleston-Thomas-2020-Migrant-Integration-Policy-Index-2020.pdf) (mipex.europa.eu)

⁹ [Immigration, Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603113.2020.1811111) ([tandfonline.com](https://www.tandfonline.com/))

University, both as Slovenian partners, are acting towards this direction. A project concerning migration, mental health and bibliotherapy has been in development in order to address immigration obstacles faced both in Hungary and in Slovenia.

Bibliotherapy is basically a psychological tool where people read and reflect about literature in order to have cognitive shifts¹⁰. Using books as a therapeutic instrument, relational aspects of mental health can be shared and discussed through stories. By using bibliotherapy as a main strategy, the project “Books as Saviours” developed by Anthropolis, Humanitas and Sigmund Freud University, seeks to reach immigrants living in Hungary and Slovenia, and offer a safe space and opportunity for them to create connections with other non-EU residents, so that they can read, relate and reflect with not only what those stories in the books tell, but their own stories.

4. Survey Outcomes and Conclusions

The outcomes of the survey made by Anthropolis, with 20 people who are currently non-EU residents of Hungary, can suggest that integration policies, indeed, are in need. It's also valid to mention that all of the students interviewed are under a scholarship, the Stipendium Hungaricum programme, provided by the Hungarian Government; and their perceptions are based on the experience of being a scholarship holder. The set of questions proposed on the interviews can be divided in two categories: 1- questions about migrants' perceptions about their experience living in Hungary; 2- questions about migrants' relations with libraries, books, and their knowledge and interest on being part of a bibliotherapy reading group.

On the matter of experiences while living in Hungary, the questions go from perceptions about the environment, to social relations and psychological states of being. Regarding the environment, the survey is concerned to know how do migrants perceive their first impressions on arriving and living in Hungary; what do they like the most in the country; if they are well informed to find their ways in the new environment; and what would support them more, in order to make them more relax and safe.

The beginning of making a life in Hungary was difficult for the majority of the people interviewed. Many feelings, struggles and worries were commonly present in their answers.

¹⁰ [Frontiers | Bibliotherapy as a Non-pharmaceutical Intervention to Enhance Mental Health in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mixed-Methods Systematic Review and Bioethical Meta-Analysis \(frontiersin.org\)](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00123/full)

Excitement most of the time seemed to be intersected with being worried about their future, the doubt if that was the right choice, and the biggest thing: language barrier. Because of the fact that almost all of the students who come to Hungary under Stipendium Hungaricum don't speak Hungarian, they all face the hardship of not being able to communicate properly. When asked if they feel well and informed to find their way in the country, some mention that the internet is the saviour when having to deal with things in Hungarian, since what is provided by the institutions where they study is not enough. There is the effort of a mentor that is responsible to help the new student with all the bureaucratic processes but usually there is not enough help. Especially in cities like Miskolc, the Hungarian language really is a key to communication with Hungarians.

They answer, then, that what would support them more to make them feel more relaxed and safe in Hungary would be more information and institutional help in English, even in the capital Budapest; more integration with Hungarians and their culture, specially in smaller cities, like Miskolc; and more governmental integration policies, more open minded people, and also one mentioned more information on where to get food that can be allowed by their religion. The things people like the most, according to the survey, is calmness, safety and good public transportation. The community that they are part of, is usually made of other international students, because they face similar struggles and share common experiences, plus the fact that they all can communicate in english. They usually meet each other in the university, go to pubs, trips and parks.

Concerning what they miss the most apart from family and country, food is the first thing everybody mentions. Friends, family, the beach, the warmth of people, the easiness of communication are also things they miss. When asked how they would describe their attitude towards themselves since they arrived here, they all say they changed: some became more independent, more open, more cautious or even more depressed. And most of them felt loneliness or despair at some point, especially in the first semester. Those moments happened when they were sick, feeling alone, missing their family, when they lost a relative. Usually, what they do when they feel lonely and despair is to talk with their families, to go for walks, breath, and meet friends.

The second set of questions were developed to know migrants relations with libraries, books and what they know about bibliotherapy. When asked if they went to libraries, most of them answered: yes. Aside from the people living and studying in Miskolc, where the library of the university is under renovation, people did use and were enrolled in libraries. In Budapest, Ervin Szabó Library was the most mentioned. Although they did go to libraries, most of them

only went for the atmosphere. Most of the answers express that people see libraries as a quiet space to work, rather than to borrow books. There is a prevalence for the digital and when it comes to physical copies, usually it's when they are related to a class/course. When asked about books that reminded them about their childhood, fairy tales were the most mentioned ones. Local books were also talked about.

The last part was to know if they had previous knowledge about bibliotherapy and if they were interested in being part of a reading group. The answers were divided, not everybody was aware of what bibliotherapy means or have ever heard of such kind of self-help through reading. But all of them were interested and willing to go to such an activity. The books, the people are the things that would motivate them the most to attend these reading groups. And the best time for those meetings, according to the answers, would be twice a month, but varying to less or more, depending on their experiences in the meeting.

As a form of conclusion, we can see how immigrants also have their own tactics on surpassing their struggles. The difficulties with Hungarian language and the need for more integration policies facilitates more international communities to be formed. These people help themselves because they face similar difficulties but also because they have the opportunity to share their cultural background with others that are open to do the same. In relation to that, bibliotherapy reading groups seem to be a good activity to enhance critical thinking on migrants' experiences and sharing experiences.

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