

DIMENSIONS OF INTEGRATION IN POLICY DISCOURSES

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Aim

Our main aim in this brief is to explore the findings from interviews with policy stakeholders (i.e. local authorities and Third Sector representatives working on related issues). Here we present an overview of their definitions and perceptions of integration, a concept that has no clear national and local policy framework.

Summary definition of integration

The word cloud in Figure 1 represents the relevant words most often used when respondents were asked to provide a summary definition of integration. The reference to 'people', 'person', 'community' and 'society' is evidently strong, suggesting that integration is linked both to individual but also societal processes and outcomes. Diversity and culture appear to be quite prominent themes, followed by the words 'social' and 'access', but also issues linked to English language, equality and skills. It is also possible to notice expressions like 'belonging', 'confidence' and 'contribution' emerging from the cloud.

The word cloud shows some commonalities in the policy stakeholders' definitions of integration, but also a clear complexity stemming from the idea that integration is a multi-

dimensional phenomenon. But what is this complexity exactly made of?

We found five main groups of themes that were discussed with regard to defining integration in our interviews, as represented in Figure 2. The size of the bubbles gives an approximate indication of the relevance of each group, i.e. how often issues were discussed during interviews. These themes are not exclusive and separate but greatly overlap with one another.

The data

These results are based on primary evidence from 24 semi-structured interviews conducted with policy stakeholders at the national (UK/England/Scotland) and local (Manchester/Glasgow) levels undertaken between January and September 2015. The respondents include (1) local policy makers - i.e. councillors and public officials - and (2) national and local representative of charities, community organisations, and relevant think tanks. The interviewees were recruited on the basis of their specific knowledge and expertise in issues related to integration, ethnic and immigrant minorities. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed in Nvivo 10 following a thematic analysis approach.¹

Figure 1. Word cloud (stemmed) – definitions of integration



¹ The project was conducted according to the University of Manchester's code of Research Governance and Research Ethics. Ethical approval was granted in September 2014 (Project Ref 14267) and transferred to the University of Birmingham in 2016 (ERN_16-0726).

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Thematic groups

Socio-cultural

This group comprises numerous themes including cultural diversity to social interaction, shared values, acceptance and language. Socio-cultural themes were the most frequently raised factors. Discussions around this primarily (although not solely) focused on aspects where migrants were seen as playing a more active role (e.g. in adapting to shared values and rules and learning English). However, the contribution of the receiving society also emerged as an important aspect, for instance, with regard to supporting language provision, but also to promoting feelings of acceptance and tolerance.

Rights and Opportunities

This group relates to elements that are seen as primarily the responsibility of the receiving society and its institutions. They relate to ensuring that opportunities across various domains of life can be accessed equally by all members of society, regardless of their immigration status, ethnicity or religion. The role played here by the receiving society emerged clearly: integration is about being able to access support and statutory services, but also being given equal opportunities to be part of, and participate in, society. This was seen as a form of empowerment which could help prevent the exclusion, discrimination and disproportionate disadvantage of certain groups or individuals, a major barrier often mentioned.

Socio-economic

Education and employment, but also access to income, poverty, and economic contribution, are the main elements of this group. Integration was linked to how well individuals or groups do throughout their life, primarily in terms of educational attainment and employment outcomes. However, socio-economic factors were primarily addressed with regard to individuals and groups being given the opportunity to access, for example, employment and education.

Civic-political

This brings together two elements that emphasise the importance of active participation. They could be political (e.g. voting, being elected at the local or national level, attitudes towards democracy and political parties), but also 'civic'. In the latter case, participation was more about 'taking part' in the community in a more informal and social way, i.e. the ability and confidence to play an active part of local communities and have a role in shaping relationships and decision-making.

Psychological

The 'psychological' theme is linked to a sense of attachment and belonging to a community, be it local or national. It also relates to the importance of feeling confident in accessing opportunities, services, spaces and every other element of everyday life in the communities individuals belong to and settle in. In this sense the receiving society plays an important role in empowering individuals and fostering feelings of belonging and confidence.

Integration: Multi-dimensional, dynamic and 'two-way'

The themes identified by the policy stakeholders describe integration as a phenomenon made of multiple dimensions that not only relate to several spheres of life, but are also as a consequence closely interconnected. A flexible view of integration hence emerges, where themes and thematic groups are at the same time distinctive but also interrelated and often overlapping. The evidence also points out that integration should be addressed both dynamically (as a series of outcomes but also as a process that is influenced by cyclical and fast-changing migration flows) and holistically (as a compound of dimensions that all play a crucial role). Finally, integration is a 'two-way' process that is made of elements facilitated both by migrants and the receiving society.

Figure 2: Integration – Main thematic groups.



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