This policy primer discusses government policy towards migrants after their arrival in the UK. It covers the history and goals of policy intervention, what is meant by ‘integration’, to whom policy is directed and some of the issues which underlie policy debates.

The Issue: Should public policy promote ‘integration’?

A key consideration for policy makers is what happens to migrants after they arrive in the UK. Some new arrivals access employment, accommodation and any services they need without delay and begin to build new social networks, but others do not. Some migrant groups, as a result, have low labour market participation rates and, for instance, disproportionately poor housing and health (Gidley and Jayaweera 2010). There is no consensus, however, on the reasons why this is the case. Public concern about migration can reflect a perception that some migrants are unwilling ‘to integrate’: to learn English, for instance, or mix socially with people from outside of their immediate community. Those working with migrants, however, emphasise the barriers to participation that they can face.

This raises the question whether there is a role for public policy in relation to the experiences of migrants after arrival and if so what the aims of policy should be. Should the goal be ‘integration’ and if so what does that mean? Should the primary focus be participation in the labour market for instance or civic participation, or should it be addressing cultural practices that are deemed to be unacceptable? Should all migrants be the target of policy intervention or only certain groups? To the extent that this is a matter for public policy, is it primarily for central government or local authorities; and which policy levers can they use?

Integration policy in the UK

There is no national policy framework on integration. There are integration policies relating to one category of migrant refugees, and to those applying for settlement and UK citizenship (see the Migration Observatory policy primer on ‘Citizenship: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?’). There are policies that have included migrants within their remit: on discrimination, for instance, and on community cohesion. There is also an important area of service provision, English language tuition, and services such as health and education where some targeted provision has been made to meet migrants’ particular needs.

As a result, responsibility for migrants is dispersed across Whitehall. No single department takes a lead role. The UK Border Agency (UKBA) within the Home Office is responsible for refugee integration and for settlement and Citizenship policy. The Department for Communities and Local Government leads on community cohesion while the Government Equality Office leads on discrimination.

The history of integration policy began in the 1960s, directed at migrants from New Commonwealth countries. Integration was then defined by Home Secretary Roy Jenkins as ‘not a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance’ (Rose 1969). The overt hostility faced by migrants ensured that the policy had a strong focus on addressing discrimination and incitement to racial hatred and on mechanisms to manage community relations. Commonwealth migrants also retained rights to vote and stand in elections and a fast track to Citizenship. In subsequent decades the focus of policy, however, remained with the second and subsequent generations of these communities, not migrants. This left a vacuum in policy towards newcomers which has only to a limited extent been filled.

A Refugee Integration Strategy launched in 2000 was intended to help recognised refugees (not asylum seekers) secure access to jobs, accommodation, welfare benefits, health, education and language services and to encourage community participation. The Department for Work and Pensions developed a complementary strategy to target practical assistance to refugees seeking to enter the labour market. Neither focus has
been extended to other migrants. Refugees’ needs were assessed by a caseworker so that they could be signposted to relevant services. Evidence suggests that the service has been insufficient to enable many refugees to overcome the disproportionate unemployment and broader challenges they experience (Phillimore and Goodson 2008).

Research has shown that ability to speak English is strongly related to labour market performance (Dustmann, Fabbri et al. 2003). In contrast to some other European countries there is no targeted introductory language and orientation programme for new arrivals to the UK but migrants can attend classes in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). ESOL provision expanded significantly after 2004 when enlargement of the EU, coupled with new language requirements for those seeking Citizenship, led to increased demand. Budget challenges subsequently led to greater rationing of free places, however, so that some low paid migrants can no longer access classes at no cost (NIACE 2008, Collett 2011).

The previous Labour government’s community cohesion agenda, developed after disturbances in northern English towns in 2001, initially had no focus on migrants, addressing issues relating to long standing ethnic minority communities. The arrival of people from Eastern and Central Europe and in particular the fact that many settled in areas previously unfamiliar with migration, led to a broadening of that agenda following a report from a Commission on Integration and Cohesion in 2007 (CIC 2007). This led to some additional resources and guidance for local authorities and service providers.

Across Europe there has been a trend towards greater compulsion in integration policies, requiring migrants to attend language and orientation classes for instance and to demonstrate a level of language proficiency before arrival. The UK has to an extent followed this trend in requiring evidence of some language ability and knowledge of ‘Life in the UK’ before acquiring settlement or Citizenship, and most recently in requiring some family migrants to have a level of spoken English before coming to the UK.

European Union (EU) policy, however, has had limited traction on developments in the UK. Integration was not within the competency of the EU until the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. Agreement on Common Basic Principles on Integration in 2004 was followed by a modest programme of activity largely focused on sharing good practice, and an Integration Fund for initiatives at state and local level. Significantly, EU policy only covers Third Country Nationals, not EU citizens who may in practice face many of the same challenges. The EU’s most significant intervention has been the Employment and Race Equality Directives in 2000 requiring Member States to have legislation on discrimination, but this was one area of law already well developed in the UK. In the Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010, UK policy moved ahead of the requirements in EU law. The 2010 Act includes a duty on public bodies to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations, a potentially significant lever for integration if migrants are included within the authorities’ target groups.

Lack of consensus on fundamental questions

A lack of consensus on the objectives of policy intervention and some suspicion of government intentions has meant that the term ‘integration’ is contested and not consistently used at national or local level. This has been a contributory factor in a lack of coherence in policy, including a lack of clarity on the demarcation between policy relating to migrants and to British–born ethnic minorities. The division of responsibility for integration within central government, and between central and local government, also remains unresolved. Nor is it clear to what extent responsibility should lie beyond government in civil society – whether employers of migrant workers should contribute to the cost of English language tuition for instance. Underlying many debates is a lack of consensus on the extent to which migrants have an obligation ‘to integrate’ into British society and bear the primary responsibility for overcoming any obstacles they may face. These issues are explored below.

What do we mean by ‘integration’?

Part of the confusion around the term ‘integration’ is that it can be used in academic and policy debates
to mean different things. In academic analysis it is often used to explain the process that migrants are engaged in from the day they arrive, regardless of policy intervention, whereas in policy debates it can be the term used to describe the desired end goal of integration policy.

Researchers have analysed the processes in which migrants are engaged in different ways. Historically, it was often explained as a one-way trajectory of becoming similar to the rest of the population, referred to as ‘assimilation’, an analysis in which the focus was on adaptation by the migrants. In recent years, research has shown that the outcome of the process is also influenced significantly by the response of individuals and institutions in the ‘host society’. The term commonly used in analysis of that ‘two-way’ process, particularly in continental Europe, is ‘integration’. Research suggests that it is not in fact a single process but a series relating to participation in the labour market and social institutions (such as education), social interaction, cultural practices and, for instance, civic participation. The sense of identity and belonging of migrants, and of those with whom they interact, may also change over time. The rate at which these processes take place depends on the migrant and on the opportunities open to them in the localities where they live (Entzinger and Biezeveld 2003; Penninx and Martiniello 2004; Heckman et al. 2006; Robinson and Reeve 2006; Rutter, Cooley et al. 2008).

In UK academic and policy debates the term integration is not universally accepted. It still carries connotations of assimilation: in particular, a concern that the key focus of interest is whether migrants will become culturally similar to the rest of the population and the normative judgement that they ought to do so. A decade ago policy makers sought to counter the perception that this was the goal of integration policy. The Home Office consultation that preceded its Refugee Integration Strategy, for instance, insisted ‘Inclusion in our society does not mean that a refugee is required to assimilate’; and the strategy subsequently defined integration as ‘the process that takes place when refugees are empowered to achieve their full potential as members of British society, to contribute to the community, and to become fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities that they share with other residents’ (Home Office 2005).

More recently, however, the association between integration and assimilation has been reinforced by the way in which ‘integration’ has been endorsed as a goal by critics of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism, in contrast to an assimilation policy, values the contribution made by the differing cultural traditions of minority communities. In recent years, however, it has been argued that multiculturalism may have reinforced separate identities rather than help to bridge community divides. Critics of multiculturalism have not argued for assimilation per se (a word now too unpopular to attract political support), but for ‘integration’: as in a speech Prime Minister Blair gave in the year before he left office entitled ‘The Duty to Integrate: Shared British Values’ (Blair 2006).

During the latter years of the Labour government, integration was also used to refer to relationships between migrants and other residents. Thus the Department for Communities and Local Government argued ‘community cohesion is what must happen in all communities to enable different groups of people to get on well together. A key contributor to community cohesion is integration which is what must happen to enable new residents and existing residents to adjust to one another’ (CLG 2008).

Which policy levers?

The lack of a national framework identifying the objectives of integration policy has resulted in some gaps and inconsistencies in the levers that are used. Migrants have not, for instance, been a focus of mainstream skills policy but were the beneficiaries of expanded provision of English language tuition and of some targeted support for children at school. Migrants have been identified as one target of community cohesion policy at national and local level, but have been marginal to the application of equality policy (despite in most respects being covered by discrimination law). Almost without exception mainstream policies include a focus on ethnic minorities rather than on those who have come to the UK from abroad. While data are routinely collected on ethnic minorities,
significantly less is available on migrants in the UK. The EU Integration and Refugee Funds have supported local initiatives to promote aspects of integration such as employability skills and civic participation where mainstream government policy did not include them among the target groups. There is little provision to engage migrants’ representatives in the policy making process at national or local level, in contrast to formal arrangements in some EU states to do so (MIPEX 2011). Negative public attitudes towards migrants are known to be one barrier to economic and social integration. Guidance has been provided to local authorities on steps that can be taken to address factors at community level that can contribute to those views (LGID 2011).

Who is the target?

Refugees are the only group for whom there has been an overt integration policy. Family migrants have not been identified as a target for integration, nor labour migrants or students. This may reflect an unspoken assumption that families, employers and education providers respectively are filling this void.

Unlike many other EU states, UK national policy has not identified new arrivals as a priority for information, advice or services. Evidence suggests they may nevertheless have immediate needs for support in order to secure work and accommodation or to access services unfamiliar to them. Their presence may also raise issues for their neighbours (over-crowded living conditions giving rise to tensions relating to rubbish and noise, for instance) that need to be resolved. In the absence of a national policy framework, many local authorities and service providers such as the police have acted on their own initiative to provide information and advice to migrants, the public and front line staff (IDEA 2008, Glasgow City Council 2009, Belfast City Council 2011).

The lack of a focus on newcomers may reflect an underlying assumption that it is those who will remain in the UK in the long term who should be the priority for intervention and resource allocation. Information on life in the UK is, for instance, provided at the national level for those seeking permanent residence and citizenship (UKBA 2007). Yet those who are in the UK for shorter periods may face challenges in accessing jobs or services to which they are entitled under their conditions of stay, or pose challenges that could be avoided if integration measures were more universally applied.

Whose responsibility is integration?

There are three issues here: the extent to which responsibility is felt to lie with the migrant; the balance of responsibility for public policy between central and local government; and the extent to which organisations and individuals in civil society also bear some responsibility for integration outcomes.

The geographical concentration of migrants and minorities in some cities and neighbourhoods can contribute to a perception that they are unwilling to participate in mainstream society. The evidence on whether concentration is increasing or decreasing is complex and there is no agreement on the factors which contribute to it, including the departure of other residents (Poulson and Johnston 2006, Philips 2007, Peach 2009). For migrants and minorities, the choice of area in which to live can reflect limited options in the housing market and/or fear of living in areas where they may face hostility (Phillips 2006). Broader barriers to economic and social participation can include the cost or inaccessibility of English classes, lack of practical information on arrival, services ill equipped to meet migrants’ particular needs, lack of job opportunities in the area and the negative attitudes or disinterest of some other residents (Bloch 2002; Robinson and Reeve 2006; Spencer, Ruhs et al. 2007; Phillimore and Goodson 2008; Rutter, Cooley et al 2008; Finney and Simpson 2009).

Where responsibility should lie for public policy between central and local government reflects a broader debate on the desirability of central direction versus local autonomy. A strong view from local authorities that central government should not dictate policy where local differences require flexibility has been one factor inhibiting development of a national policy framework (SC Communities and Local Government 2008). Some local authorities including the Mayor of London have taken a lead in developing an integration strategy for refugees and migrants per se while others have taken
initiatives without using that terminology. While local authorities are closest to many of the issues raised by the presence of migrants within their communities they do not control some of the levers that affect integration outcomes. It is central government that determines the extent of migrants’ rights to participate; has the capacity to inform national media and public debates; funds most English language tuition; can incentivise civil society leaders to contribute to this agenda and ensure, for instance, that local authorities have an evidence base to inform their interventions.

Where responsibility lies is also a matter of who should pay. The Labour government’s rationale in establishing a Migration Impacts Fund resourced by a levy on visa fees was in part to demonstrate that migrants were contributing to the cost of local initiatives. Its suggestion that employers should contribute towards the provision of language classes for migrant workers equally reflected the view that those who benefit from migration should contribute to any costs that arise. In that case, however, it was reluctant to insist. Within civil society the greatest responsibility has fallen on the voluntary and community sector, in some cases with support from public funds, providing targeted services, information, advice, language classes and access to social networks and support.

Restrict entitlements or promote integration?

The choices that are made in migration policy between competing priorities are rarely explicit. Here there is a choice between granting migrants the same rights as other residents in order to foster their integration, or restricting rights to those who already belong and who have already contributed to the public purse.

Migrants are granted many civil rights on arrival: freedom of speech for instance and the right to a fair trial. These are guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights to all within the jurisdiction. In other respects, migrants’ rights to work, access social housing and other services, to draw on welfare benefits or to vote, depend on their immigration and nationality status and their length of residence in the UK. The pattern of rights and restrictions is complex and constantly evolving. This can make it difficult for employers, service providers, advice agencies and migrants to know exactly who is entitled to what.

The balance is by no means entirely restrictive. Local education authorities have a duty to ensure that all children of school age have access to education regardless of immigration status. Migrants can access free health care for most communicable diseases and can access services such as public libraries on the same basis as other people. In other respects a requirement that they have ‘no recourse to public funds’ can cause hardship. Where the balance lies in rights or restrictions reflects a trade off between the benefits of allowing access (to promote integration or, for instance, protect public health) versus the cost. The cost may be financial or political (if the public resent migrants being able to access the service). Access may also be denied for reasons of immigration control: to deter potential migrants who might be attracted by the availability of the service, or to encourage those not entitled to be in the UK to leave. Access to social housing, a severely rationed resource, is the service which has most highlighted the tension between access on the basis of need or on the basis of local belonging (Spencer and Pobjoy 2011). Limited evidence is available on the consequences of legal restrictions on access (as distinct from other barriers that migrants can experience such as lack of information or discrimination). It is therefore difficult to assess whether the restrictions are proportional to the policy aims they are intended to achieve or counter productive in limiting integration.

Uncertain way forward

The nature and extent of migrants’ engagement in society and in the labour market is a matter of legitimate interest to policy makers and the public. There is nevertheless no national policy framework for integration and no consensus on what the goals of such a policy might be. There is a lack of clarity on where responsibility lies in Whitehall for policies, differing definitions of integration used and some lack of consistency: as between the expectation that migrants learn English but a shortage of opportunities to take language classes. The UK has to an extent followed a trend in the EU of greater emphasis on the migrant’s
obligation to integrate rather than on addressing barriers that they face. Some local authorities have identified integration overtly as within their role while others have relevant initiatives within other programmes. The lack of data on migrants (as opposed to ethnic minorities) contributes to a paucity of evidence on integration outcomes, including the impact of interventions, to inform future policy and practice. In the current financial climate there is unlikely to be support for any integration programme requiring significant resources, and some loss of existing provision. Embedding migrants within the ‘Big Society’ focus on inclusive, active communities and inclusion with public bodies’ responsibilities to advance equality and good relations, may be ways in which the agenda could move forward; within a national policy framework providing vision, leadership, evidence and coordination. Clarifying the goals of ‘integration’ policy in a way that reassures civil society and local authority partners could in practice prove to be a pre-requisite for securing their active participation (Spencer 2011).

References


The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory’s analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.

COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

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