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The UK Citizenship Test Process:

Exploring Migrants' Experiences

Executive summary





Authors:

Leah Bassel, Pierre Monforte, David Bartram,
Kamran Khan, Barbara Misztal
School of Media, Communication and Sociology
University of Leicester

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Introduction

Questions of citizenship and belonging are everywhere. In the United Kingdom, we have recently had the Brexit vote, spikes in racism and hate crime, and a General Election in which immigration featured prominently. In this executive summary, we highlight findings from a project (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council) that we undertook between 2013 and 2017, in which we aimed to address questions of citizenship, migration and belonging from a perspective that is often absent or misrepresented: we focus on migrants' experiences of becoming British citizens. Specifically, we consider how the requirements and actual process of becoming a British citizen – the 'Life in the UK' citizenship test and language requirement and the formalities which surround them – shape different people's lives and experiences.ⁱ

Citizenship tests were introduced in the UK in 2005, amid heightened anxieties over immigration, and the perceived failure of multiculturalism. Such tests, amid other policy instruments such as the citizenship ceremonies (which we also analyse in this project) are considered by some to be appropriate solutions to these challenges; it is claimed that they will facilitate integration into British society. Although they are the subjects of these debates, migrants' voices are often inaudible or only selectively represented in public debates.

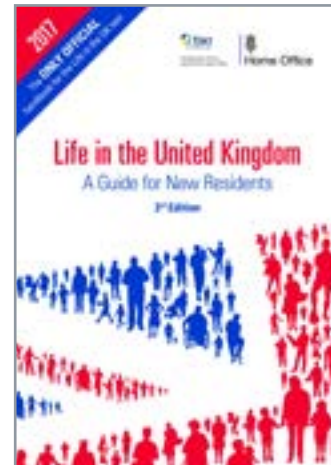
The Life in the UK citizenship test has been the subject of much media coverage since they have been introduced. Popular representations generally include the observation that migrants are asked to answer questions about history, culture, law and politics that many British-born citizens would not know.

Yet the perspectives of migrants on how this 'route to citizenship' is in fact experienced are generally absent. Also, there is very little sustained analysis of the consequences of the process on migrants' lives.

At the time of writing, the main requirements to become a British citizen are:

- Having five years of residence in the UK
- Passing the Life in the UK test, a multiple-choice test based on the Life in the UK test handbook
- Proving sufficient knowledge of the English language
- Meeting requirements of 'good character'
- Participating in a mandatory citizenship ceremony, where one is required to make an oath or affirmation of allegiance

Many strong opinions have been expressed in favour and against the use of citizenship tests. Some argue that by proving that they have good knowledge of life in the United Kingdom (UK), migrants can demonstrate that they will accept and support what are presented as the values of the country in which they are becoming a citizen.



In the 2015 version of the handbook that migrants use to prepare for the current Life in the UK (LUK) test, 'The values and principles of the UK' are described as 'based on history and traditions' and 'protected by laws, customs and expectations. There is no place in British society for extremism or intolerance'. The fundamental principles of British life it outlines include:

- Democracy
- The rule of law
- Individual liberty
- Tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs
- Participation in community life

ⁱThe full report, from which this executive summary draws key points, can be accessed through our project website: <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/sociology/research/uk-citizenship-process> or by contacting Leah Bassel: LB235@le.ac.uk

Aims of the project

Under this reading, the policy was intended to promote 'integration' and to benefit migrants themselves – including by promising to improve prospects for political participation among new citizens. The idea is that by learning about life in the UK and acquiring a sufficient level of English, migrants will be able to apply this knowledge in their daily lives.

Others argue that these tests, and the administrative steps that surround them, instead contribute to alienation and exclusion. They object to language requirements, cost, length and the effort required to learn information that is not necessarily relevant to being a 'good citizen'.

Citizenship tests are sometimes seen as creating or reinforcing boundaries and actual limiting migrants' access to citizenship, in contrast to the stated intention of facilitating access to citizenship. They are arguably about immigration control rather than 'integration'.

It is also argued that these tests risk failing the most vulnerable groups – often migrants who come from the global South, are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and for whom English is not the first language, in particular women – by limiting their access to full membership and participation in society. This concern is especially relevant when differences in pass rates by nationality and other unequal effects and outcomes of the process are considered (e.g. the lack of literacy to undertake the test and paperwork, and the computer literacy required to take the test itself).

When we consider these arguments for and against the UK citizenship test we can see strong differences of opinion but also very different expectations and predictions of how the process will be experienced by those who have to go through it and what the effects of the process of becoming a UK citizen will be.

With this project, we have generated new knowledge and understanding about these experiences and effects, which should inform future policy decisions on the continuation, use and re-design of citizenship tests.

The report shows that the test process is experienced quite differently depending on personal and group characteristics, and for many, is often a source of fear and inequality. We must question the kind of citizenship that is then the result. Although citizenship tests send a public message about what it means to be British, in the current context of divisive debates on race and immigration, different approaches are needed that recognise that migrants and migration are, and always have been, part of British life.

This project aimed to fill a gap in knowledge. Many opinions and arguments for and against citizenship tests in general and in the UK are based on 'paper knowledge', in other words, on scholarly analysis of citizenship test preparation handbooks and materials, laws and policies (e.g. Immigration Acts), speeches of politicians, test content, media coverage.

With this project, we argue that there is a need for in-depth and intensive research exploring the experiences and perspectives of migrants themselves. We observe that migrants' voices are often silenced in political and public debates on immigration and integration and argue that they need to be heard.

When we focus on experiences of becoming a British citizen, we consider citizenship as a formal legal status – most obviously, a passport – but also the ways citizenship can be about a sense of belonging and participation in society. The one does not necessarily follow the other: for example, the term 'second class citizen' refers to the kinds of inequalities and exclusions that can exist despite having formal citizenship status. While our focus is on the formal process of acquiring the status of citizen, our attention to how people experience this process extends beyond 'getting papers' to broader considerations of belonging, political participation and well-being.

Our Contribution: Exploring the citizenship test as a "process"

Few studies have analysed the citizenship test as a process: how its message is actually conveyed by public authorities at various levels, how it is received and negotiated by migrants, and its concrete effects on migrants' lives.

Our comprehensive approach to these issues examines how migrants **experience** the citizenship process as a whole rather than at different points in the process. With the term 'citizenship test process', we refer to whole experience of acquiring citizenship: **the tests** themselves, the **citizenship ceremonies, the preparation courses many immigrants take beforehand**, as well as the **consequences of the tests** for those to whom it is addressed.

We were concerned to consider how people experience that process while going through it, and also whether its effects persist beyond the point of becoming a citizen. We explore various ways in which effects might become evident in the lives of immigrants in the UK, including whether it promotes engagement with politics, brings about greater attachment to British national identity, and whether it has an impact on people's overall satisfaction with their lives (their 'subjective wellbeing').

Methods



In this study, we combined different research methods to gain new perspectives on migrants' experiences of becoming British citizens.

Qualitative Data Collection

Throughout the project, we conducted 158 interviews between April 2014 and March 2016 with migrants of 39 nationalities in Leicester and London. The participants were at different stages of the citizenship test process (e.g. considering taking the test, preparing for the test, about to take the test, after the test, after the ceremony...) and they had different statuses (temporary leave to remain, indefinite leave to remain, British citizen...).

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis of Understanding Society survey data starts with a group of roughly 1000 respondents in 2010, all of whom were non-citizens. These individuals were surveyed again in 2016, and at that point almost half had become citizens (while the others remained non-citizens). Our analysis compares the two groups: we were able to see how those who became citizens changed over time, using those who remained non-citizens as a benchmark. This 'double' comparison helps reinforce statements about the impact of the citizenship test process: we have 'before and after' measurements for the two distinct groups, which gives us confidence in our ability to connect any changes to the experience of going through the process (or not).

We used this data framework to see whether becoming a UK citizen had any impact on three aspects of immigrants' lives: their interest in politics (which likely connects with actual political participation), their sense of attachment to British national identity, and their overall life satisfaction.

Research Findings

Research Question 1: How do migrants experience the citizenship process?

Costs

Many participants underline that the process is very expensive. At the time of writing, the minimum total cost for one adult applicant exceeds £1300 (test £50 + naturalization fee £1282). On top of this, many participants identified other 'hidden' costs e.g. private preparation courses, solicitors' fees, childcare, travel to test centres.

Length and uncertainty

For some participants, the citizenship test is perceived as a potentially endless process. Many described multiple administrative procedures they did not understand and delays, along with the fear that their passport would be held for a long time leaving them stuck.

Many participants also underlined the uncertainty that surrounded the process. Requirements – such as 'good character' and the passport interview – are often unclear and experienced as arbitrary. Some participants noted that they did not know what was required in the different stages of the process and if they could appeal these decisions or demand accommodations.

The citizenship test and everyday life in the UK

Much of the knowledge that can be gained from the citizenship test process and that participants identified as useful – e.g. how to access services – has disappeared in the most recent version of the test and preparation materials. Some participants also criticised the citizenship ceremonies as being purely symbolic and argued that they should not be compulsory.

Fairness

When asked whether they thought the citizenship test process was 'fair', many participants commented on the specificities of the test rather than on its overall legitimacy – e.g., that the test is administratively sound and 'fairly' delivered on the day. This may be because, in cases where participants had not acquired citizenship, they did not feel able to criticize a process that still had power over their lives.

Some participants who perceived the test as being 'fair' endorsed the process strongly on the basis of negative comparisons with other groups who they argue did not 'deserve' citizenship. This points to the role of the test process in fostering or enabling divisive and negative attitudes. However, most insisted on the difficulty of the test for those who do not speak English, particularly those with little or no literacy in their own languages.

'Why do you think the citizenship test was introduced?'

When we asked participants why they thought the government introduced and uses the test, they provided different explanations.

Some participants chose to speak about immigration control. In these cases, whether they endorsed or opposed it, there was a definite perception of the process aiming at selection and immigration control rather than integration and inclusion. More generally, many participants argue that the introduction of the test is 'politically motivated'. This shows that, for many participants, the message received is not that the test is meant to help them with their life in the UK.

Question 2: What are the consequences of the citizenship process on migrants' sense of belonging and political participation?

Our study shows mixed results in terms of the extent to which the test process effectively provides knowledge and resources that can then be used in real 'Life in the UK', especially in relation to political engagement.

The qualitative and quantitative analysis show that the consequences of the citizenship test process on migrants' political participation and sense of belonging are complex. In the interviews, migrants reflect upon how the test process relates to their interest in politics and sense of belonging through a diverse, and sometimes contradictory, range of responses. Some migrants point to the positive effects of the test on their political and social inclusion in the UK. Others argue that the test does not have anything to do with their interest in British politics or sense of belonging.



The quantitative findings show that the consequences of the citizenship test process are neither entirely negative nor entirely positive. In some regards, the requirements seem to have a negligible impact: they are simply a hurdle to overcome, diverting people from more important aspects of their lives. Having said that, the results of the analysis of political participation are worrying: the requirements do not appear to support migrants' integration in the political sphere (and perhaps actually impede it). In that sense, they undermine a key stated objective of the policy.

Bringing these findings together, we argue that the ways migrants reflect on these dimensions (political participation and sense of belonging) depend largely on their personal background as well as on the features of their community in the UK rather than a result of undergoing the citizenship test process.

Question 3: What are the consequences of the citizenship process on migrants' subjective well-being (happiness)?

Analysis of Understanding Society data was conducted to consider whether becoming a UK citizen (in part via meeting the requirements to pass the Life in the UK test and participate in a citizenship ceremony) is associated with an increase (or a decrease) in one's subjective well-being (happiness). The core finding is that naturalization does not have an impact on the happiness of immigrants in the UK: becoming a citizen (or indeed remaining a non-citizen) leads to no net change. The UK citizenship process might well have significant impacts on the lives of the people subject to its requirements, but those impacts do not themselves have consequences for one's overall subjective well-being. The possibility that the average finding of "no impact" might vary among sub-groups (specified e.g. by region of origin) came to nothing here as well.

Broader findings

Ways migrants cope with and navigate the process lead us to question whether the desired outcomes of the citizenship test process are in fact achieved, or whether participants distance themselves from the figure of the "good citizen" that is defined by state authorities. We find that the ability to navigate the process is unequal and is conditioned by social class, race, gender and education (among other characteristics).

Some of the migrants we interviewed drew a line between their own experiences and behaviour around naturalization and that of other migrants. In this way, they demonstrate that they have 'deserved' citizenship. These values reflect broader shifts in the ways citizenship is understood. Increasingly, citizenship is seen less as a set of rights and responsibilities, and more as a status to be 'earned' and deserved.

Our data demonstrates the way in which responsibility for dealing with the citizenship process has been placed firmly on the shoulders of the individual. In some cases, the individual felt discouraged by the level of the test and demonstrated signs of being reluctant to engage. Others continued learning, albeit with the support of family and friends. Another response was to prepare for the test in another language by translating preparation materials.

What is a highly individual process – each person taking the test has to prove their own knowledge and language skills – in fact also has collective dimensions. Networks and interactions within and across 'communities' are constructed or consolidated. It is not the knowledge that is to be tested that is significant here but the socialization that takes place throughout the process, in particular through the organisations we worked with. When they prepared for the citizenship test, many participants met and interacted with new people, including outside of their own communities, and pooled knowledge and resources to navigate the process itself but also to participate more broadly in social and political life. These networking processes are often unintended consequences of the citizenship test in the context of an unequal and often difficult experience.

Language also acts as a border. The notion of judgment through assessment underlined the entire process, and rendered it longer and more demanding for some than others.



There is a significant gender dimension. For some women, the demands of the test process – the time, money, energy and skills it requires – can make existing inequalities worse and create new challenges.

Recommendations

The Brexit debates appear to be shaping strategies of belonging and specific processes through which EU migrants draw boundaries between themselves and other migrants living in the UK. In their reflections about the Brexit context, Eastern European EU migrants refer to their experience of free movement in the EU to demonstrate their sense of respectability and dignity. In doing so, they display strategies that are specific to EU migrants in trying to use the opportunities opened by free movement and also to cope with the obstacles to their upward mobility which emerge in their daily life in the UK.



Many of our participants expressed discontent with how the citizenship test is constructed and implemented. They questioned whether it is useful and its connection to migration control. Many migrants criticized both the content of the test and its lack of clear connection with their daily life in the UK. Some participants also criticized the usefulness of the citizenship ceremonies.

Our study also shows the negative impact that the citizenship test process can have on migrants' lives and on how they relate to British citizenship. We find that the test process generates divisive and negative perceptions of some groups of migrants as 'deserving' and others as undesirable, which are sometimes expressed by migrants themselves. In the current context of renewed racial hostility, this is particularly dangerous.

Over a decade after the introduction of the citizenship test, we recommend:

a **fundamental review** that includes **all actors** involved in the citizenship test process

The review should include:

- Migrants of different nationalities, social backgrounds, lengths of time in the UK
- ESOL providers and teachers
- Civil society organisations
- Community representatives
- Local authorities
- UK Visas and Immigration, the Home Office

The purpose of this review should be to examine why so many migrants point at ways the citizenship test process **excludes them rather than helping them to integrate**. The review could address the following questions:

- How to better acknowledge the role of migrants in British society, and that it has always been shaped by migration?
- How to formulate policies that use a variety of perspectives – including those of migrants – to support learning about life in the UK?
- How to give migrants the best opportunities to feel included in British society?

- Is the citizenship test the right tool?
- How to challenge negative effects that citizenship tests can have on migrants' lives (including divisions between different groups of migrants)

Drawing on the specific findings of our project, we recommend:

Long-term:

Our findings confirm the work in other studies showing the fear and anxiety that the citizenship test process creates for migrants. In order to avoid naturalization 'by fear':

- Clearly distinguish debates and policies (including the citizenship test) on migrants' inclusion in British society from migration control policies
- Better inform members of the public about what is actually involved in becoming a UK citizen and the challenges of the process, beyond the popular portrayal of a 'pub quiz'

Shorter-term:

Content of the test:

- The test should be less about history and culture, and material that has disappeared in recent versions of the test (practical material about Life in the UK and access to services) should be reintroduced.
- More attention should be devoted to the institutions in which migrants will be able (and indeed expected) to participate. Given the findings about interest in politics, further development of materials and questions about British democracy (at both local and national levels) is advised, so that people who become UK citizens have a stronger sense of their ability and entitlement to participate.

Preparation for the test:

- Promote the role of local councils in assisting with naturalization processes and access to Indefinite Leave to Remain
- More effective experiential learning techniques to be used as initially recommended by founders of the process, rather than a 'paper exercise'

- Barriers for women in preparing for the test and succeeding in the process must be directly addressed, particularly the impacts of reduction of ESOL and ESOL with crèche facilities
- ESOL to be made accessible to everyone, taking into consideration the different needs of learners (e.g. childcare)
- Permit and enable taking and preparing for the test in other languages

Naturalisation application:

- Reconsider the good character requirement and its purpose
- The overall cost of the process is prohibitive and the largest component is often the naturalization fee. Reduce costs and waive entirely for some applicants, e.g. through means-tested fees and/or interest free loans as in other contexts

Ceremonies:

- Serious consideration should be given to making the ceremonies optional, rather than a requirement of naturalization
- Enable voter registration at ceremonies

Passport interview:

- Make explicit from the beginning that this interview can be required. Clarify the reasons for the passport interview: is this to check identity or language? Who has to undertake it? Under what conditions, e.g. can the applicant be accompanied? What is the right of appeal?



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School of Media, Communication and Sociology
University of Leicester
Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK
t: +44 (0)116 252 2730
e: LB235@le.ac.uk
www2.le.ac.uk/departments/sociology/research/uk-citizenship-process