

**Written evidence from Professor Leah Bassel (University of Roehampton), Dr Pierre Monforte (University of Leicester), Dr Kamran Khan (University of Copenhagen) – CCE0002**

We begin by providing a summary of our research on which this submission is based.

*'The UK Citizenship Process: Exploring Migrants' Experiences'* 2013-2017

(Economic and Social Research Council funded project grant reference number ES/K010174/1)

**Summary:**

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 examined 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 explored 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 qualitative and quantitative research methods to gain new perspectives on migrants' experiences of becoming British citizens.

In this submission, to respond to the invitation to reflect on references to research on lived experiences of those undertaking the Life in the UK test, we draw on the findings from our Qualitative Data Collection:

we conducted qualitative 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...).

Our project concluded in 2017. We therefore cannot comment on the impact of the changes made in 2020.

However, the broader finding of our study is that it is not only the content of the test that is the issue, but the nature of the entire process including the fact of having to take the test, the length and uncertainty of the process and its cost. We elaborate on our findings with respect to active citizenship in the next section.

- Is the Life in the UK test still the best way of measuring progress towards active citizenship? If not, what other alternative mechanisms could be used?

We had previously submitted these recommendations to the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement. We restate these recommendations now here (1. Recommendations of our final project report) in conjunction with further research we have since published (2. Summary of findings from Academic articles published following the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement). Please find a list of these sources at the end of our submission.

### **1. Recommendations of our final project report:**

Our study 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 racism and xenophobia, this is particularly dangerous.

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 our 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?

## **2. Summary of findings from Academic articles published following the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement**

We summarise findings from our recent academic articles to further elaborate on our previous recommendations, particularly to give a more detailed picture of active citizenship.

In essence, these articles show that citizenship tests cannot fully measure progress towards active citizenship. Participants interviewed in our study express competing, contradictory understandings of what counts as 'active' and what it means to be a citizen. The coexistence of these different responses shows that migrants going through the citizenship test process experience this policy instrument – and the requirements to be 'active citizens' on which it is based – in unsettling and contradictory ways.

In particular, due to its content and nature, the test does not take into account the active involvement of migrants into networks through which they participate in civic life at the local level and construct their own sense of belonging. The test does not take into account (and in fact discourages) critical forms of citizenship (such as protest) which demonstrate an interest and an active participation in British politics and the public sphere and demand change.

Finally, is it possible to address underlying social inequalities? Our research has shown that the citizenship test process can exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities leading to more, not less social isolation. This particularly affected non-European women with care duties. Thus, people in a lower socio-economic status are in some senses cut adrift as they lack the resources and support to improve their situations. Any access to language provision must take into account the childcare aspect and the potential for isolation; that is to say, are the means available to the most marginalised and vulnerable? This requires a more nuanced approach to the matter of citizenship and naturalisation that places access and resources at its heart.

### **Academic publications:**

Bassel, L., Monforte, P., Bartram, D., Khan, K., Misztal, B. 2017. Final Project Report 'The UK Citizenship Process: Exploring Immigrants' Experiences' University of Leicester.

➔ Previously submitted to the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement

Bassel L, Monforte P, Khan K. (2021) Becoming an active citizen: The UK Citizenship Test. *Ethnicities*. 21(2):311-332.

To access: DOI: [10.1177/1468796820966360](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796820966360)

Bassel, L. and Khan, K. (2021) Migrant women becoming British citizens: care and coloniality. *Citizenship Studies*. 25(4): 583-601,

To access DOI: [10.1080/13621025.2021.1926075](https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2021.1926075)

Khan K. 2021. Raciolinguistic border-making and the elasticity of assessment and believability in the UK citizenship process. *Ethnicities*. 21(2): 333-351.

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