

Chapter 10. Integration and adult education for immigrants in Iceland

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Immigrants in Iceland

Until recently, Icelandic society has been rather homogeneous, with most inhabitants coming from the same ethnic group and sharing the same mother tongue. Before the 1990s, almost all of the few immigrants in Iceland came from the neighboring countries in Scandinavia, Germany, the United Kingdom and North America. With the economic expansion in the last decades and increased job opportunities, the society has become more diversified in terms of national background (Garðarsdóttir and Bjarnason, 2010; Skaptadóttir in this volume).

The number of immigrants increased fast. In 1996 immigrants (individuals born abroad, with parents born abroad) were 2.1% of the population of Iceland, but in 2008 they had become 8.1%. In January 2010, after the economic crash, 8.2% of the inhabitants were immigrants (Statistics Iceland, 2010). Following these changes in the population, a discussion on integration has risen in Iceland. What are the best ways to incorporate these new inhabitants into the society? An underlying question is: what kind of society do we want to live in? Even though these issues have been present in the public discourse for a while, both because of an interest and appreciation for multiculturalism and diversity, and because of doubts or fears of the society becoming more heterogeneous, a policy regarding the integration of immigrants was first published in 2007, and a special immigration law is currently being made in the year 2011.

In order to integrate and become active members of the society, immigrants need to have access to information about the society and to education. Here I examine the field of adult education for immigrants as one of the fields where both the Icelandic community and the immigrants

make an effort to facilitate the integration process. This chapter is based on an ethnographic research done for a master's thesis in anthropology from the University of Iceland with the guidance of Professor Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir. The materials were gathered in the autumn/winter 2010]2011 on the basis of field research, interviews with organizers and teachers of courses, staff of the social services, and immigrants. The interviews were semi-formal and informal conversations conducted during fieldwork. Part of the research was an examination of official data, such as policy analysis and analysis of course materials.

Given the former homogeneity of Icelandic society (a homogeneity which Kvisto and Faist (2010, p. 169) go so far as to call a monoculture!¹) and the geographical isolation of the country, it is interesting to examine the interaction and interconnections between those who see themselves as original Icelanders and those who have moved here in recent decades. How has Icelandic society welcomed new inhabitants?

Integration

Concepts regarding incorporation of immigrants and ethnic relations and interaction in nations are “fuzzy” and often hard to grasp (Grillo, 2007). It is the case with the concept of integration, often used in contemporary discourse on immigration and multiculturalism. Here I choose to use the term to describe the process of incorporation of immigrants into a society. My understanding is that integration covers efforts of all parts of a society, the majority and the minorities, to secure rights and interests of all the inhabitants of the country (Castles 2002; Joppke 2007). The idea of integration originates in the equal rights movement of the 1970s, which questioned previous ideas on the homogeneity of nations (Castles 2002; Skaptadóttir 2008; Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir 2009). Castles (2002) defines integration as the change that happens when immigrants and the host nation mutually adjust to each other and respect their diversity. In research on integration, key domains of integration are often said to be employment, housing, education and health. Here I focus on adult education. Language skills and knowledge about social institutions are

¹ I do not think Iceland or any other country could ever be defined as monocultural, but I guess I might have a different view on what culture consists of.

usually named as key elements for integration (Ager & Strang, 2010). Educational opportunities for immigrants are thus important aspects to look into. What are the aims and governmental policies regarding education for adult immigrants in Iceland? Do immigrants have access to courses and opportunities to gain language skills and the information they need? Are the educational opportunities offered to immigrants in Iceland intended to facilitate their integration into society? As Eriksen (2007) points out, it is important to examine what factors may exclude immigrants from a society. What are the conditions for inclusion? The focus has to be on immigrants and their efforts, but also on barriers they confront in the society. The barriers can be caused by many different factors: the law, rules and regulations, the labour market, general attitudes or prevailing stereotypes. To study the integration process in a society, it is important to examine how immigrants' needs are met.

As stated before, the knowledge of the dominant language and basic functions of the society are usually said to be the key to successful integration (Ager & Strang, 2010). What are the government policies regarding adult education for immigrants in Iceland? Do the courses provided allow immigrants to participate and to access society?

Adult education and incorporation of immigrants

Rights and obligations

To acquire certain rights, immigrants often need to show that they have acquired certain knowledge of language or society, or at least that they have made an effort to learn (Joppke, 2007). In the Nordic countries, new inhabitants are invited to take part in introduction courses that are free of charge. These courses differ greatly across countries, but the language and society are introduced in some way in all of them (Borevi, 2010). In Iceland, there are no such introductory courses available, even though many courses taught could serve the same purpose. Attending 150 hours of an Icelandic language course is required for residency in Iceland (Kristjánsdóttir, 2010). Since January 1st, 2009 those who seek Icelandic citizenship have to pass a test in Icelandic (Regulation 1129/2008). In interviews, the organizers of these exams say that the exams are quite easy to pass and only test basic knowledge of the language, not exact

spelling or grammar. According to the website of the institution in charge of the exams, the Evaluation Office (Námsmatsstofnun n. d.), these exams are supposed to test knowledge on what is taught in the first four levels of Icelandic for foreigners (240 hours) according to the National Curriculum for Icelandic for immigrants (Ministry of Education 2008). The knowledge one is supposed to acquire in four courses of Icelandic is not only the basics. Even so, the exams seem to have been rather easy so far, as around 93% of those taking the test in 2009 passed (Námsmatsstofnun 2009). However, it is unclear how and when exceptions are made because of learning difficulties, illness or disabilities. The exam has been criticized by some teachers interviewed in the study for excluding individuals that are illiterate or have learning difficulties. Borevi (2010) views obligatory courses and exams as a sign of a changed attitude towards immigrants and integration in Europe. Christian Joppke agrees and says: “So far the prevailing view across Europe was that a secure legal status enhances integration; now the lack of integration is taken as grounds for the refusal of admission and residence” (Joppke 2007, p. 250). This tendency mirrors a view according to which it is the lack of integration that is the main problem of immigrants, and not structural factors that may hinder their integration, e.g. the lack of access to courses. As the main aim of the tests is to enforce integration, the excluding factors should be looked into for a more encouraging integration policy that can facilitate integration.

Governmental responsibility regarding the availability and quality of the courses varies in Scandinavia, but the right to some basic education is ensured for all immigrants. It is not so in many European countries, for example the Dutch government does not take any part in funding or organizing courses for immigrants, even though immigrants in the Netherlands need to pass difficult tests (even before they migrate to the country in some cases) (Joppke 2007). In Iceland the organization of courses in some respects resembles that in Scandinavia, and in others that in the Netherlands. Courses funded by the government are available, but their organization is random and there are no fixed regulations in this area. As funds for courses and their availability vary from year to year, the immigrants’ right to education is not fully ensured. Unlike in other Nordic countries, little emphasis is put on interpreting or translation of information, and direct governmental control over courses for immigrants is rather limited (Harðardóttir, Loftsdóttir & Skaptadóttir 2007).

State policy

The state policy regarding integration of immigrants in Iceland was first published in 2007. Before, reports on immigration had been published, but the government had not officially formed any policy on immigrants' incorporation (Ministry of Social Affairs 2007; Ministry of Social Affairs 2005). The aim of the policy is to “ensure that all residents of Iceland enjoy equal opportunities and are active participants in society in as many fields as possible”.² (Ministry of Social Affairs 2007, p. 2). The emphasis of equal opportunities resonates with definitions of integration mentioned above. The policy emphasizes immigrants' participation in the labour market and their role as workers.

What is most notable in the policy is the emphasis on the importance of the Icelandic language, which is said to be the key to Icelandic society and the most important factor in the integration of immigrants (Ministry of Social Affairs 2007, pp. 3, 6, 13). There is a widespread opinion that translation and interpreting can never substitute for knowledge of the language, especially since funds devoted to these services are limited (p. 2). Language learning facilitates integration of immigrants, but it is also said to be important for the preservation of the Icelandic language (p. 6). This does not come as a surprise for those familiar with the importance of the Icelandic language in the national identity of Icelanders. The Icelandic language was one of the most important resources the Icelandic people used to fight for sovereignty. The common ancient language and the basis of our most important heritage – the Sagas – were seen as a proof that Icelanders really were a (natural) nation, sharing the same language, culture and history; a nation that deserved independence (Hálfðánarson 2001; Matthíasdóttir 2004; Skaptadóttir & Ólafsdóttir 2010). When looking into integration in Iceland, all the above is important to understand how national identity affects the requirements regarding knowledge and the level of adaptation necessary to acquire access to the community. Having the immigrants speak the language is not only important because it facilitates their participation, but also because it makes the locals proud of their national identity. This creates a barrier for immigrants, because

² In the Icelandic version: “að tryggja sem best að allir njóti jafnra tækifæri og verði virkir þátttakendur í samfélaginu á sem felstum sviðum mannlífs” (Félagsmálaráðuneyti 2007, p. 2).

for some people speaking Icelandic with an accent does not honor and preserve the language. This can also create a barrier between those who have Icelandic as their mother tongue and those who do not, because using other languages is sometimes perceived as an offense or even a threat to the heritage that the Icelandic language preserves.

The discourse on the preservation of the Icelandic language evokes inevitable (if unintended) nationalistic associations and can make immigrants feel somewhat excluded. For example, until very recently it was extremely rare to hear individuals speak with a foreign accent on the radio because of a strict language-preserving policy in the national radio. It is evident that the commonly heard statements about immigrants not learning the language because they are not willing to integrate is an extreme simplification of a more complex situation, and that many factors play a role in the process of learning and speaking the Icelandic language. The integration policy mainly considers immigrants as workers and the Icelandic language as the key to integration, and places significantly less emphasis on their access to information and knowledge about the Icelandic society and its institutions.

Immigrants as “guest workers”

The field of integration is rather new and in the making in Iceland. There are doubtlessly many reasons for the lack of official policies regarding immigrants and their incorporation into the society, but one of them could be that the majority of the immigrants are viewed as “foreign workforce” (Icelandic: *erlent vinnuafli*) expected to leave the country as soon as there is no more work. After the financial crisis in the fall of 2008, this view appeared in the media and public discourse. Many thought all the foreign workers would leave the country. Journalists looked for a pattern of immigrants leaving and some employers were interviewed and asked if they feared losing their staff (Fréttablaðið, 2008; Morgunblaðið, 2008; Dv.is, 2008). Since Poles are the biggest immigrant group in Iceland, it was mainly them who were said to be leaving, which was evident in headlines like: “Poles run away from Iceland” (Dv.is 2008a) and “Poles buy one-way tickets” (Dv.is 2008b). Even though many immigrants left, the majority were not “running away”. Foreign citizens were 7.6% of the inhabitants before the crisis, but are now 6.8% (Garðarsdóttir & Bjarna-

son 2010). The decision to migrate to a new country is a complex process and the reasons for migration are many, as are the reasons for not leaving in time of crisis. For many, the situation in the country of origin is still worse than in the country they migrated to. Many have a responsibility to send money to relatives (Wojtyńska & Zielińska, 2010) and many stay because they have formed ties to the new country.

Financing adult education

In The Policy on Integration for Immigrants (2007), the goals for immigrant education are set high: “The Government plans to ensure that everyone has access to Icelandic language education, which is designed to meet the needs of each individual” (Ministry of Social Affairs 2007, p. 8). Despite these goals, there is still no centralized organization for the specialized education for immigrants in Iceland. Courses for immigrants are mostly subsidized by the government, but funds are provided from more than one ministry and there is no evident cooperation. Since there is no centralized organization, it is not clear where the responsibility for the availability of appropriate courses lies. The funds are assigned to individual temporary projects, individuals, private or non-governmental organizations. Our interviews with the organizers show that job security for most people who work in adult education for immigrants is rather poor. Since funds are assigned for a short period of time, staff can only be hired on a temporary contract and the future is always uncertain. This also makes it hard to develop projects. It is clear that the financial situation of adult education for immigrants in Iceland is very complicated and not transparent enough. Although the government promises suitable courses for immigrants, most of the responsibility lies in organizations or individuals taking the risk of working with temporary funds.

Organizing courses

Because all the courses are financed on a temporary basis, it is up to those who initiate courses to apply for funds. Fortunately, there seems to be no lack of interested individuals and organizations to carry out projects, work out the system and prepare applications (often in their free time). Because of this interest, a wide range of courses is available. The organizers are

quite many and diverse: from individuals interested in multiculturalism, independent Icelandic teachers, to NGOs and managers of language schools. Because of this variety, it can be complicated for immigrants to figure out what kind of courses are taught at a specific time and where they are held. What is more, the number of courses is still not sufficient in some smaller rural villages. This has forced some immigrants in the rural areas to take the same course twice or more often to reach the 150 hours required for residency (or the 240 hours to prepare for the exam for citizenship). This problem could be avoided with more centralized control and organization of courses.

Almost all courses intended for adult immigrants in Iceland focus mainly on the language. According to the Policy on Integration of Immigrants in Iceland (2007), “Icelandic language education for immigrants should include education about Icelandic society, its values, cultural heritage and the rights and obligations of citizens” (Ministry of Social Affairs 2007, p. 8). The same policy states that the core values of Icelandic society are democracy, human rights, solidarity and freedom of the individual. What these values mean exactly or how they are supposed to be taught is not clear.

How has the economic recession affected the field of adult education for immigrants?

The situation in Icelandic society has changed greatly since the immigration policy was published in 2007, because of the economic recession. It was not deemed necessary during the economic boom to offer courses for immigrants free of charge and it is no more likely to be considered now, during the recession. As many employers are struggling, it is harder for them to offer Icelandic courses during working hours or time off to attend courses. The situation is also more insecure and harder for immigrants. They find it more difficult to pay for courses or to get a job without speaking Icelandic. Despite all this, there are full classes of students learning Icelandic all over the country.

One of the surprising side effects of the financial crisis is a new field of Icelandic language courses. Because of increased unemployment, since the fall of 2008 the Directorate of Labour and the Ministry of Welfare have organized projects to activate the unemployed. The purpose of these projects is to reach all those receiving unemployment benefits and offer them various activities that are compulsory to receive the benefits. The

activities offered are all kinds of courses and volunteer work. Special courses are organized for foreign citizens or those with insufficient knowledge of Icelandic to take part in courses organized for Icelanders. Immigrants on unemployment benefits undergo evaluation of their knowledge in Icelandic and are assigned to courses that fit their capacities and interests. For the first time immigrants are offered courses in Icelandic (with some introduction to the culture and society) free of charge.

Conclusion

Education for immigrants in Iceland has been organized quite recently, without any regulations and through grass roots actions. Many people had migrated to Iceland before the turn of the millennium, and by then it was evident that the number of immigrants would increase. However, a substantive immigration policy has not yet been formed in Iceland. The existing 2007 integration policy is only implemented in the areas of the Icelandic language and the labour market. It refers to such concepts as multiculturalism and integration of immigrants or appreciation and respect for diversity, but the emphasis on the Icelandic language resonates with nationalistic ideas of the Icelanders as a homogeneous nation built around a common literary heritage. Contrary to the policy, the access to education for adult immigrants is not fully secure. The government takes only limited responsibility, and the future of adult education for immigrants in Iceland is uncertain, since funding is temporary and can change from year to year.

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