



Response from the University and College Union (UCU) to the consultation exercise from the Commission on Integration and Cohesion.

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Are your comments on the questions for national bodies, local bodies or individuals?	National Bodies

Key Question 1 -

What does 'cohesion' mean to you? What does integration mean to you? What might a community which is both integrated and cohesive look like?

'Cohesion' in this context means a number of different groups of human beings coming together in harmonious connection with each other.

'Integration' in this context means different groups within society coming into regular contact with each other, and not forming a sub-group which only mixes with other members of the sub-group. It also means all groups in society having sufficient shared values, behaviour patterns and knowledge to allow all groups to feel that they are in some sense part of the whole.

A community which was both integrated and cohesive would have no 'ghettos' of particular races, religions, age-groups, sexualities, etc in terms of where people live within an area, what schools, colleges and universities they attend, where they shop, where they socialise etc. Although there might be occasions and places where only those of, for example, a particular religion or age-group might gather, it would not be the case that there were never occasions or places where people met with members of other religions or age-groups.

Key Question 2 -

What do you think are the main tensions between different groups in our communities? What factors do you think contribute to these and what are your thoughts about how to tackle them? What role can local leaders play in tackling them?

Tensions are caused by people feeling a strong sense of belonging to a group, and an equally strong sense that other groups are opposed to them/working against them/getting more attention and resources than them. At the present moment, the most dramatic example of this is the rise of Islamophobia, fuelled in the popular imagination of the 97% of the UK population which is not Muslim by lurid press reporting, statements by a number of politicians, including cabinet ministers, and an almost automatic linking of the words 'Muslim' and 'terrorist'. For example, the document recently produced by the DfES called 'Promoting Good Campus Relations: Working with Staff and Students to build Community Cohesion and Tackle Violent Extremism in the Name of Islam at Universities and Colleges' was supremely unhelpful, in that it concentrated all concerns about 'extremism on campus' on Muslim students, quite ignoring, for example, the activity of the BNP of campus.

If 'integration' and 'cohesion' are seen as desirable goals, then the obvious starting point is education. If adults from different backgrounds are to have some understanding and acceptance of each other, then it is vital that from the start of primary school, they are educated with children from a range of backgrounds. The current Government policy of encouraging the increase in the number of 'faith schools' is an absolute disaster in terms of the future of 'integration and cohesion'. Obviously in many areas of the country the population is mono-cultural anyway, but in areas where the population is ethnically and religiously diverse, the need for schools to reflect the diverse mix of the population is a top priority. If local education authorities were allowed more control, this could be ensured.

Key Question 3 -

What things do you think help people from different backgrounds feel like they belong? Do you think there are particular values or 'ground rules' for shared life, which are or should be at the heart of society in the UK? What do you think they are?

The priority is an ability to communicate, and therefore ensuring that everyone who needs it and can benefit from it has access to learning English is an essential. The Government's recent decision to restrict the provision of funding for ESOL classes is absolutely astonishing in the light of its much-publicised desire for integrated communities. The simple truth is that without free ESOL courses, most non-English speakers will be unable to access them, and there is therefore not the slightest chance that they will ever feel they 'belong'. It may be instructive here to consider the experience of the Deaf community. This is probably one of the groups with the strongest sense of identity within itself, and with one of the lowest levels of integration with the rest of society. The reason is perfectly obvious – very few hearing people use BSL. This could be rectified if children were taught it in primary

school, at which age they pick it up amazingly quickly. As long as Deaf people can only communicate with each other, there will be a tendency for them to be separated from wider society and to stay within their own community. The same is true of non-English speakers.

The question of 'ground rules' is an immensely complex one, which we will only touch on very briefly. The obvious starting point is that all citizens are of equal value, regardless of their age, class, race, religion, sexuality, disability, sex, wealth, etc. Respect for persons, valuing difference, freedom of expression but not to the point of abusing members of other groups – these are all obvious points. The recent questioning of the right of Muslim women to wear the full veil showed none of these things. The new obsession with the 'obesity epidemic', and the insistence that we should all conform to the same Body Mass Index, and the regular humiliation and abuse of fat people on TV programmes is another instance of how these values are transgressed.

Key Question 4 -

Why do you think people from different backgrounds may live parallel or separate lives? Is this negative or positive?

People live parallel or separate lives if they feel that 'the mainstream' has nothing to offer them, or excludes or rejects them, or subjects them to detriment. Why would a Deaf person want to spend an evening in a pub with a group of hearing people talking, none of whom could use BSL? Why would a gay man want to go to a night-club whose main function was to allow straight men opportunities to pick up straight women? Why would a Muslim woman want to go out for dinner with her work-place colleagues when the menu on offer was a roast-pork dinner, washed down with lots of alcohol? It is both understandable and desirable that there are times when Deaf people, gay people, Muslim people meet only others who are like themselves, and society should be flexible enough not to see this as a threat. But if any groups are so excluded from the mainstream that they do everything possible to only mix with their own kind for as much of the time as possible, then there is the danger of real alienation from majority society. There is also the loss of variety and diversity if minority groups feel compelled to hide themselves away, and the only culture publicly visible is the majority one.

Key Question 5 -

What role in contributing to community cohesion and integration do you see for organisations and institutions such as: local authorities, the police, the health service, schools, youth organisations, faith groups, inter faith and race equality bodies, housing associations, private sector bodies, voluntary organisations, theatres, art centres, sports associations, and the media? (Please comment on as few or as many as you wish).

We want to focus on institutions which, astonishingly, you do not mention - colleges

and universities. FE colleges have a deserved reputation for being one of the few places in many towns and cities where people from all different backgrounds come together. In places as disparate as Bradford and Belfast, it is frequently the case that when students join the FE college, it is the first time in their lives that they have mixed significantly with large numbers of people from a different background, as the schools they attended were, either formally or informally, segregated along ethnic or religious lines. FE colleges serve the whole community, and in areas with an ethnic mix, in many courses there will be little division along ethnic lines. Indeed, the main form of segregation which continues in the curriculum is along gender lines, and this needs to be addressed. Colleges have a long tradition of welcoming all, and meeting a huge variety of educational needs under one roof. Traditionally, students with severe learning difficulties were taught in the same building as 'A' level students, mature students sat in the same classes as sixteen-year-olds, and ESOL students from around the world met and mixed with the native British population. Many of these features are now under threat because of government funding policy.

Adult education, whether delivered in the FE college or in community centres, has been one of the greatest building blocks of community cohesion, and its current decline because of cuts in funding is a national tragedy.

Universities also have a very diverse population. The high number of international students means a further expansion of the cultures and ideas to which students are exposed, leading to a greater understanding of the world beyond our borders. One cause for concern is the very unequal distribution of BME students within the university system. Although the proportion of British-born BME students going to university is satisfactory, they are concentrated in the post-92 universities, with tiny numbers in the most elite universities, which continue to be largely mono-cultural.

We might also add that trade unions are organisations in which people from a wide variety of backgrounds come together and work collectively for the common good.

Key Question 6 -

What help do new people to a community need when they arrive? What help do existing residents need to cope with change in their community?

We would reiterate – people coming to this country from abroad need free and easy access to ESOL courses. The idea of citizenship classes is an interesting one. We oppose people being forced to take citizenship classes before they can become British citizens, because this is discriminatory if it is not a condition imposed on the British-born. But citizenship courses as a part of the school and college curriculum, open to all, could be useful to both foreign nationals and British-born students, addressing some of the issues about living in a multi-cultural society. Existing residents often fear that their access to health, housing, education, jobs, etc will be threatened by the newcomers. They often believe, wrongly, that minority groups are getting privileged treatment. Clear information needs to be made available about how local resources are allocated, to counter-act some of the myths put about by the popular press.

Key Question 7 -**What do you see as effective ways to counteract people's negative perceptions of and attitudes to people from different backgrounds?**

Knowledge is all. If people with particular disabilities are locked away during their childhood in residential schools, and are not visible to the rest of the population, then when non-disabled people encounter them, a common reaction is fear and embarrassment, a sense of not knowing how you are supposed to behave towards this strange person. Integrated schooling for most disabled students removes that barrier. If the inhabitants of an all-white English village never talk to a Muslim person, the danger is that the Muslim/terrorist link will lodge in their brain. Education, from the cradle to the grave, obviously has a crucial role to play, and colleges and universities, largely speaking, are playing their part here. Civilising the popular press is a long-term aim, although it is hard to see how this can be achieved under current ownership. Politicians bear a huge responsibility, and their public comments can either help or hinder. Recently, a large number of high-ranking politicians made comments which exacerbated the growing climate of Islamaphobia. If the government is serious about wanting to achieve 'integration and cohesion', it needs to get its own house in order. It needs, most specifically, to support, and not attack, ESOL in particular, and adult and community education in general.