

## The integration of expatriates:

### How expatriates living in Denmark define integration – A summary

This is the summary of a Master's thesis written at Copenhagen Business School in the study program Business, Language and Culture. The study investigates how highly educated foreigners (expatriates), currently living and working in Denmark, define and experience integration. For this study, applying a qualitative, explorative approach, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviewed expatriates were between 24 and 51 years old, coming from nine different countries. The transcribed interviews were structured and analysed through qualitative content analysis.

#### **Choice of research area: Why this study?**

As the author of this thesis is living as an expatriate in DK herself, integration is an often discussed topic in her personal network. Especially in expatriate networks, forums or blogs, expatriates frequently complain about not being covered by the definition of integration by Danish government. Having a job automatically seems to qualify them as 'integrated'. However, expatriates feel that they are not accepted because of their different cultural background. Although providing an essential resource for Denmark they feel treated as either a problem for society or as non-existent. Hence, they feel that they have to group up to become more visible and get the attention they deserve.

Thinking about this issue and in order to find out how integration for expatriates could work better, it seemed recommendable to define, as the first step, what integration means for them and what it is that they want. The discussion about integration in the media, literature and in private networks is intense, but what does it actually mean? Is everybody talking about the same thing?

#### **Main findings: What does integration mean?**

According to the findings, integration is an individual process that people go through in order to feel satisfied with their situation in a foreign environment. Integration seems to be a combination of several aspects, which are connected to both individual satisfaction and attitude, as well as to interaction with the environment.

It contains sociocultural aspects such as:

- Learning the host country language
- Following the local law
- Building a social network, including the locals

It also contains psychological aspects such as:

- Accepting, understanding and respecting the local culture
- Developing a sense of belonging

As long as they can make their own choices and as long as their situation satisfies them, expatriates are open towards *some* parts of the local culture. A general desire

to integrate seems to exist. Most expatriates are eager to establish contacts to the Danish society and to learn the local language. However, for them, integration does not mean dictation, pressure or changing who you are. Assimilating neither seems to be perceived as necessary nor seem expatriates to be willing to leave their home country culture behind. Superficial aspects, concerning the public domain or aspects perceived as enrichment for the individual might be open for change. However, change should be balanced and never be imposed.

Interestingly, the Danish definition and the expatriates' definition of integration are quite similar. However, the expatriates seem to be influenced by the current political and media discussion about integration and immigration which makes them feel pressured to assimilate. One expatriate said for example that he normally likes to blend in when entering a foreign cultural society, but that "*there is a difference between blending in and being asked to blend in*". Many expatriates had never thought about the different concepts of integration and assimilation before coming to Denmark and were quite surprised as well as offended by the idea of having to assimilate into the host culture. Hence, it seems that if there would be no (perceived) pressure, assimilation would be slightly more accepted since pressure created refusal for many of the expatriates.

### **Contribution: How does this thesis contribute?**

The number of well educated foreigners coming to Denmark for a job or to live with their Danish partner exceeds the number of more vulnerable immigrants by far. Nevertheless, these expatriates lack attention and support, which is why this thesis aimed at contributing in giving them a voice. To do so, it introduces the aspect of willingness into the concept of integration. Research on cross-cultural contact and expatriation was studied intensively and was found to have a tendency to focus on the problems and processes that occur when adapting to a foreign culture, assuming that a general willingness to do so exists. This thesis, however, takes a rather explorative approach and investigates what expatriates *want*, what integration *means* for them.

Furthermore, the thesis contributes to existing literature by bridging different disciplines: First of all, although expatriation and immigration seem to be interrelated concepts, existing literature often perceives them as separated. By expanding the definition of expatriate in this thesis, the concepts were integrated in this study. Besides traditional expatriates such as business people migrating for formal short term assignments it includes well educated individuals that migrate for their partner into his/her home country. These people are often called immigrants in the literature but they seem to build a big group of foreigners in Denmark, which is why it seems important to consider them in expatriate research.

Secondly, the thesis combines individual and group level of intercultural contact. It compares the expatriates' individual definition of integration with the one by the Danes as a group. By looking at integration from two perspectives, it could show how the Danes as the receiving society influence the definition of integration of the individual expatriate.

Finally, this work contributes by bridging the areas of concern for companies and communities. It seems crucial to understand that these areas are connected and

hence should cooperate. Expatriates are neither only business people nor only private individuals, they are both and their two identities are interconnected. For both government and companies reading this thesis could be interesting in order to be reminded that that one cannot just recruit foreign skills and knowledge: they come attached to a private individual. Thus, if Denmark wants expatriates as resources it needs to take the whole package. Consequently, it would be important for Denmark to find out what psychological and social processes the expatriates go through and what satisfies the expatriates. Interestingly, according to the findings, the expatriates do not expect much support; however, they are clearly requesting more room for diversity. Furthermore, the government should be aware that their political discussion reflects on how expatriates understand the Danish definition of integration and that it reflects on Denmark's reputation as a host country. This discussion should be changed into a more positive direction. In this aspect, companies and government need to cooperate. There is no point in companies searching talents abroad and investing in employer branding when at the same time the Danish government gives these talents a hard time through harsh immigration law, making them feel unwelcome.

The findings of this thesis are, however, not only of possible interest for government and companies. The society as a whole as well as the expatriates in Denmark themselves could gain new insights by the findings of this study. The society might realize that there is no need to be afraid of foreigners; not all foreigners are intruders to the welfare system that the Danes are so eager to protect. Foreigners are happy to offer their knowledge to Denmark; however, they are private individuals who do not aim to become Danish. Rather than portraying foreigners as a problem, the society could become more open towards diversity. Expatriates perceive Danes as a rather closed and homogeneous group, difficult to establish closer friendships with. In order to avoid that expatriates shift towards integrating into an existent expatriate society instead, efforts should be taken to open the Danish society for them. At the same time the expatriates might understand that not all Danes and not even the government request assimilation. Their perceived pressure to assimilate is, rather, a result of the influential and wide spread political and media discussion

To sum up, the topic is a joint concern for different disciplines and stakeholders. The author hopes that this research could contribute to get the voice of expatriates in DK heard and could eliminate some misunderstandings between expatriates and Denmark.