

Why does superdiversity matter?

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June 13th sees the launch of the Institute for Research into Superdiversity, known as IRiS, at the University of Birmingham. It will bring together more than 60 academics from a wide range of disciplines across the University with practitioner researchers from 17 statutory agencies and community groups. The Institute is the first in the UK to focus on superdiversity and has already attracted international attention appealing to visiting fellows from leading universities and working with others to establish a global network of superdiversity researchers.



So what is all the fuss about? Why have an institute dedicated to the study of superdiversity?

The advent of IRiS reflects the emergence of both the process, and condition, of superdiversity in the developed, and to a lesser degree, the developing world. The past two decades have witnessed possibly the most momentous population changes ever as countries move from being multicultural; with long-established, relatively homogenous ethnically-defined communities; to becoming superdiverse as new migrants arrive from many different countries to wide-ranging locations with which they have no historical connection. Steven Vertovec, the academic who coined the term superdiversity, added the 'super' prefix to diversity to indicate that this was diversity that superseded anything previously experienced.

At a recent event focused on superdiversity a number of dimensions were identified and it is these that make research into superdiversity of critical importance for developing knowledge about the condition and its impact on our society and economy. Superdiversity is happening at greater speed than we have seen demographic change before as locations quickly move from being diverse to being superdiverse and then continue transforming. Change is happening at a greater scale as demonstrated in the recent census, with 3.5 million more people born overseas living in the UK than in the previous census. We are also seeing greater spread of diversity as rural areas and smaller settlements experience levels of diversity traditionally associated with urban areas. At the same time the populations of new migrants that overlay existing minority populations tend to be fragmented living in small groups, or even in isolation, rather than in clusters. Superdiverse populations are diverse across a wide range of variables including country of origin, immigration status, reasons for migration, class, ethnicity and faith.

So our population is more complex than ever before and despite the best efforts of politicians to reduce immigration, the fact is that superdiversity has already happened and is here to stay. We need to come to terms with our new condition and in order to do this we need to understand it. We need to know how the process of superdiversity will continue. We need to understand the different dimensions of superdiversity and what contributes to its emergence; to explore the implications of superdiversity for society and the economy; to examine the impact of superdiversity on individual, local and national identities; and ascertain the challenges and opportunities associated with our new condition.

This is a big ask but it's the challenge that IRiS is rising to. Based in Birmingham, one of the UK's largest and most superdiverse cities, the new Institute is ideally located to make sense of population complexity and to use the new knowledge developed to not only shape thinking in academia but to help develop new policy and practice that enables us to make the most of superdiversity.

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