Preface

Britishness, belonging and citizenship: Experiencing nationality law is a book about the lives of migrants who become British citizens (termed migrant–citizens for ease of reference in this book) drawn from their life stories. What do their experiences reveal about the links between citizenship and belonging? How does the process of applying for British citizenship affect those who make applications? How can the experience be improved for future applicants for British citizenship? Seeking to connect the sociological with the legal, the book presents some urgent considerations for reform.

Most migrant–citizens migrated as strangers to this land and then resided for a long period of time to become British citizens. They exemplify ‘the stranger’ idealised by prolific sociological and philosophical thinker Georg Simmel (1971) in his eponymous essay. Simmel (1971, p 143) writes about the resident stranger as ‘not … the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow’. These strangers are relative newcomers to the land but are not transient visitors. They are successful in entering legally and fulfilling all requirements for acquiring citizenship over time.

This book is a quest for untold stories. With the exception of research on citizenship ceremonies (for example, Byrne, 2014), there is little on record about the experiences of citizenship processes and the meaning of citizenship for those who successfully undertake the journey. Lawyers generally lose contact with successful applicants. This book originated in multiple conversations with practitioners who did
not know how citizenship applicant clients subsequently fared in life. Lawyers had more contact with failed applicants who had further need for legal assistance. One lawyer spoke of how, after assisting a client for nearly 10 years in the immigration and citizenship legal process, she was pained when he did not stay in touch.

The citizenship process becomes a personal memory for successful applicants, but institutional memory is lost as when the citizenship application process is over, the successful applicants just carry on with their lives: education, families, jobs, leisure and travel. Their stories remain undocumented. Gathering and analysing this elusive data, the book investigates what citizenship means to applicants who successfully undergo the application process for British citizenship. It highlights the processes of inclusion and exclusion that are experienced by long-term residents (the ‘politics of belonging’).

It seems particularly important to tap into the experiences of past applicants of British citizenship because of the current uncertainty of legal status for more than three million long-term UK-resident nationals from the European Economic Area (EAA). Many EEA nationals have been present in the UK for years without seeking formal citizenship because, as EEA nationals, they were treated nearly the same as citizens for purposes such as entry, seeking employment and education, travel, bringing in family members and continuous residence. Now, as the UK prepares to withdraw from the European Union (EU) – a process known as ‘Brexit’ – they are unsure of what the future holds for them. Depending on their personal circumstances and choices, the EEA nationals in the UK may or may not decide to opt for British citizenship. Contradictory trends are observable on naturalisation in contemporary Britain. While there is a rush of citizenship and permanent residence applications in the UK from some EEA nationals, there is a contrasting reaction from many others who are reluctant to become British at a time when, should they choose to do so, they may potentially lose EU nationality after Brexit.

The situation of EEA nationals may appear exceptional, but viewing their plight through the long lens of time, we can find many others who have been similarly placed in a precarious position. For instance,
in the past there were categories of British protected persons, or people of British lineage with special claims to Britishness, or people from former colonies, who could also claim membership in British society, but who lost their legal protections because of changing geopolitics and personal circumstances that reshaped their situations. Some of them fought legal battles and successfully made their entry into UK, while others are still struggling for their place in British society. These stories are relevant for our contemporary times when long-term resident EEA nationals are being affected by Brexit negotiations so that past mistakes are not repeated.

Stories have special functions in research as they bring in beliefs and emotions to the understanding of belonging and citizenship in a manner that reported legal cases are seldom able to achieve. Stories also provide direct ‘user feedback’ on naturalisation processes. Using such feedback, recommendations will be made in the concluding chapter so that the process for future applicants can be made more fair and transparent while retaining the features past applicants have found useful. Throughout the intention is to allow the voice of applicants to come through without academic ventriloquism. However, some academic intervention is inevitable while identifying recurrent themes and connecting these to past research and available literature on citizenship.

Several patterns and common themes emerge from the collected experiences of the storytellers. Even though citizenship pathways of people are highly individualistic and varied in nature, for most people the length of time in residence in the country is the single most important factor that generates feelings of belonging. Similarly, a recurring thread is that of the experience of making an application for British citizenship being a bureaucratic one with all the attendant problems such as delays, expenses and anxiety about procedures and outcomes. These appear to chip away at feelings of belonging to the UK. The data indicates that, despite the divergent origins or pathways of people, there is much in common in their citizenship experiences that can be usefully scrutinised. In the inspiring words of the slain MP Jo Cox: ‘We are far more united and have far more in common
with each other than that which divides us.' Her words reflect a foundational claim of universal human rights and also resonate with the findings of this book on the citizenship experiences of many different people who successfully become British.