

Involving the family

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Over the last 20 years, the Higher Education environment has changed significantly. This can be seen in not only the increase in student numbers, but also changes in financial arrangements, introduction and acceptance of Widening Participation initiatives and changes in student accommodation arrangements.

Participation in HE has increased dramatically, from 590,000 in 1985/6, to over one million students in 1998 (HESA, 1998). This continues to rise towards the government target of encouraging 50% of 18 – 30 year olds to participate in HE by 2010. This growth has not, however, been evenly spread across all sections of society. Participation from the middle classes remains high, with 73% of young people from professional backgrounds participating in Higher Education (Lewis, 2002, p.1) compared to only 13% of young people from unskilled and manual backgrounds. Focus has been required, therefore, on the under-represented groups to help achieve this government target. Low socio-economic groups and minority ethnic groups are two of the main focuses of widening participation activity.

There are many factors which are accepted as influencers on a student's decision to embark on a course of HE study. The process is informed and influenced in a variety of ways including the use of external resources and the influence of key individuals. Connor et al (1999, p.1 & 2004, p.xvi) found that key influencers on students' decisions to attend HE included expected school attainment, school experiences, access to careers advice, expectations from school and home and concerns about student finance. Conner et al (1999, p.2) also found that those students already definite about going to study at University are more likely to consult subject specific teachers whereas students who are either unsure or who have decided against University study are more likely to consult careers/guidance staff or their parents. Baxter-Smallwood (2002, p.3) found that a University prospectus was perceived to be for people who were already sure about going to University.

The family is acknowledged to be an important factor in the decision making process of potential students throughout their educational career. Many students see their families as the most important source of motivation and advice right through from school age children (Warren & Gillborn, 2003, p.viii) to students making decisions about HE. UCAS (2002, p.10) found that the influence of parents/family can be both positive and negative and is linked to the family's social class. Parents' own experiences of education and personal self esteem (of the parents) are factors which also need to be considered. Connor et al (2003, p.40) state that parents and family of minority ethnic students have a stronger influence on decisions about going to University (and on subject choice with minority ethnic parents favouring professional courses) than the parents and family of white students. Minority ethnic families were perceived to encourage their children more to go to University than their white counterparts, as education is a route to improve their employment prospects. Pathak (2000, p.7) also highlights that cultural values and parents' attitudes may strongly influence Asian students, particularly young women. Here at Aston University, research undertaken from enrolment surveys highlights students' perception of the main influences on their decision to attend HE. 84% of respondents discussed their choice with their parents and 47% rated their parents as the most influential people source (Wood, 2003, p.13-4).

In contrast to the important role parents and families play for all students, those families from Widening Participation backgrounds often have little if any personal experience of the UK HE system whilst still remaining key influencers for their children.

As Higher Education changes the involvement of parents changes. This can be seen through increased financial commitment (tuition fees and variable top up fees from 2006) and increasing number of students choosing to live at home (Holdsworth 2002). Universities are becoming more aware of this increased parental involvement through contact such as admissions procedures and pre and post application open days (The Telegraph 2004, BBC News 2004).

Holdsworth (2002) also found that students from a Widening Participation background were disproportionately represented in her findings for students choosing to live within the family home. Research undertaken as Aston University investigating the achievement and retention of students from Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPNs) found that students who were from LPNs were more likely to be living at home (Fowler & Brookes, 2002).

Widening Participation as policy often fails to meet the requirements of students from non-traditional backgrounds with many learners being offered an opportunity which fails them, further reinforcing that some groups within society are not learners (Thomas, 2001). Ensuring that both students and family have a clear understanding what University does and does not provide must surely be a vital part of any Widening Participation activity. Bird (1996 p.53) states that HEIs and Universities "could do more to produce and disseminate clear, concise and sensitive material to a wide range of groups whose traditions might not place HE on the agenda". In the DfEE report "Schools Plus: Building Learning Communities" (1999, p.9) it was acknowledged that support from parents and local community organisations can be a crucial factor in combating social exclusion. In Dodgson & Whitham (2004) interviews with staff found that they believed that involving the parents in activities at the University contributed to student retention as they (the children and their family) were making appropriate decisions based on information provided. However, Houghton (2002, p.1) highlighted that accessing parents is accepted to be "notoriously difficult". This view has been supported by our own experiences.

Involving the Family Project

In response to both research undertaken by Aston Business School (Jha, Higson & Foster, 2003) and the issues highlighted above, Aston University supported the 'Involving the Family' project. It is the second phase of a WP project undertaken by Aston Business School (ABS). The first phase examined participation and experiences of Minority Ethnic students compared to White British students amongst 1st year undergraduates at ABS. In the findings from the first phase, it emerged that parents and family influences are a strong factor influencing students' perception of Higher Education.

In order to address a possible gap in education, awareness and personal experience, phase two aims to raise awareness and understanding of HE for parents/family and other close advisers of students from under-represented and excluded groups to enable them to support their children both pre-entry and throughout their educational career.

The main aims of Phase II are:

- ~ To increase the awareness of parents and other close advisers of students from under-represented groups of what going to university entails
- ~ To bring participants in to the University in a way which will make them familiar with the main features of universities
- ~ To draw up a checklist of the main factors which students and their families need to expect when coming to university

This paper describes the research undertaken during 2004 to investigate the views, perceptions and key concerns minority ethnic parents held with regards their children and participation in Higher Education study and the subsequent development of the project activity.

Research Methodologies

Participants

The participants used were self selecting parents from minority ethnic groups from within the Birmingham region. A total of 60 parents took part in the research.

Questionnaire

The instrument used in this study was a semi-structured questionnaire exploring parents' perceptions and concerns of Higher Education for their child. The questionnaire included statements that have been adopted and modified from previous research conducted by Dodgson & Whitham (2003). This was a paper-based questionnaire and was divided into four distinct sections:

- ~ Yourself
- ~ Your Child (For Children Over 11)
- ~ Views on Higher Education
- ~ Your Families History of HE and Knowledge of HE

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with parents after they had completed the questionnaire. Interviews were conducted by the researcher either on a one to one basis or in a group dependant on the availability and location of participants.

Results

Section 1:

The average number of children of participants was 3.2 per family, ages of children varied between 1 – 37. 40% of participants did not have English as their first language, however, 78% reported English was spoken at home.

Section 2:

Parents were asked about their children and the information they had already received about Higher Education. Although the majority of parents (or their children) had not been involved in open days or visits to a University, this may be due to the average age of the eldest child being 15 and that for a large proportion of parents, their children had not reached the age where such visits are offered.

Parents were asked to rate their preferred form of information provision. An event at school was the most preferred form (78.4%), followed by Daytime visit to a University (72%) and a booklet sent to you (68.6%). 60% of parents did not want a visit to their home.

Parents were asked to respond to the statements:

1. I would like my child to go to University
2. My child has the ability to go to University
3. I could afford for my child to go into Higher Education
4. My child is interested in going to University
5. I am happy for my child to move away to attend University

The majority of parents responded that they agreed with statements 1, 2 and 4 with only a very small percentage responding otherwise, however, statements 3 and 5 both received mixed responses. When the results for these statements are examined by ethnicity, a clear difference can be identified. 'Asian or Asian British – Indian' parents were more likely to respond that they strongly agreed with the statement "I could afford for my child to go into Higher Education" than any other ethnic group. Likewise the statement "I am happy for my child to move away to attend University", 'Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi' parents are more likely to respond that they disagreed compared to 'Black or Black British – Caribbean' parents who were most likely to agree. This result may be attributed to religious and cultural issues which play an important role for some parents/families. Religion was not recorded as part of this research and therefore, further work is required to fully understand these issues.

Parents were asked to identify what they would be concerned about if their child went to University. Parents were given 11 topics and asked to rate each one. The issues parents reported that they would be most concerned were: safety on campus (90.9%) if they were running up debt (82.8%), where they would be living (80.7%) and if they had enough money to live on (78.9%). These results are supported by the research undertaken by Dodgson & Whitham (2003) into parental concern about Higher Education.

When asked about part time work ("If your child was to go to University, would you expect them to take up or continue with part time work?") parents were unsure with 50.9% reporting that they would expect their children to work and 32.7% reporting "don't know".

Section 3:

Parents were asked to respond to the following statements:

1. University is for everyone
2. Higher Education is expensive
3. Higher Education is a waste of time and money
4. Everyone has an equal chance of going to University
5. A degree gives you a chance of getting a better job
6. Having a degree means you earn more
7. Higher education is good value for money

Parents responded that they agreed with statements 1, 2, 5 and 6 with only a small percentage responding disagree or don't know. Parents responded that they disagreed with statement 3 and parents were in agreement with statement 7.

In contrast, results for "Everyone has an equal chance of going to University" show a mixed response with 38.9% agreeing with the statement and 48.2% disagreeing. When examined by ethnicity, 'Black or Black British - Caribbean' parents were more likely to disagree than any other ethnic group, with 'Asian or Asian British - Pakistani' parents most likely to agree. During the interviews, some parents reported that they felt their children (especially Black Boys) were not encouraged as much as other children. Further work is required to understand fully this perceived inequality.

Section 4:

Parents were asked about their family's history of Higher Education. Over half (55.9%) of the parents reported that they had not been to University. However, for 71.9% of parents, there had been another family member attend University prior to their child.

Finally, parents were asked if they felt they had received enough information about their child going to university. 48.1% responded 'no' compared to 33.3% who felt they had. Parents who have no personal experience of HE in the UK rely on appropriate information being provided to help them with their (and their family's) decisions. There is however, clearly a lack of understanding by parents about the HE system and options available to them which needs to be resolved by developing appropriate forms of information which address the key issues around Higher Education.

Interviews

The results from the parents' interviews extended the information gathered by the questionnaires. There were three questions to the interviews:

1. If your child was interested in going to University, what would you say were your main concerns would be?
2. Do you believe there are any external issues/barriers that affect your child progressing to Further Education (e.g. College) and/or Higher Education (e.g. University)?
3. Would you like to be given more information about education, especially University?

Question 1: If your child was interested in going to University, what would you say your main concerns would be?

Responses to this question were varied. Although parents raised a range of different issues, there were common themes. Many parents reported being concerned about University accommodation; knowing where their children would live, what it would be like, where it would be, what it would cost and how safe it would be. Security/safety was also raised frequently by parents, especially with regards to how secure the campus was. Pastoral care was also a

concern to parents, i.e. that there were sufficient support structures in place. Some parents raised concerns about the social side of University life, which specific reference being made to University life as a distracter from their studies.

Parents were also concerned with the academic side of University and raised issues such as independent learning and whether their child would be able to cope with the change from school-style education to University-style, including the lack of preparedness for HE level study within school e.g. research skills and reading skills. Finance also remained a common concern for parents, raising issues such as getting into debt and what loans/options were available. Muslim parents were also interested to find out how Muslim students were funding themselves through University as this was a concern. Parents also raised concern as they felt they were not receiving adequate or appropriate information about Higher Education. These issues reflect those highlighted in the questionnaire.

Many parents also acknowledged that this was an excellent opportunity to meet a broad mix of people, feeling confident about their child being able to cope with University, being motivated to succeed and that they were mature and confident people able to look after themselves.

Question 2: Do you believe there are any external issues/barriers that affect your child progressing to Further Education (e.g. College) and/or Higher Education (e.g. University)?

Parents commented on issues they perceived as influencers on progression. These included the pressure on a child from external sources such as their peers, schools and school teachers, and the family itself (extended). These were accepted to be both positive and negative but that finding a balance was necessary. Parents also raised concerns about their experiences of racism within the school system and throughout society. Many parents reported that they felt a lack of understanding of their culture had an effect on their child. Parents highlighted that a perceived lack of understanding of behaviour resulted in children being labelled or stereotyped unfairly, specifically in the case of young black boys, with parents reporting they felt their children had been labelled as being trouble makers and not given the same encouragement, understanding or support as other children. Another issue raised by parents highlighted the routes into Higher Education and that more promotion of non-traditional routes would be beneficial as 'traditional' routes were not necessarily appropriate for all young people. Parents also raised the issue of cost as being a barrier for their children especially single parent families.

Question 3: Would you like to be given more information about education, especially University?

Responses to question 3 can be summarised into the following key areas:

- ~ Course Information
- ~ Course Content
- ~ Accommodation
- ~ Support Available for Students
- ~ Events
- ~ Diversity
- ~ Other issues

These common themes reflect those areas expressed by parents in both the questionnaire and earlier interview questions.

Conclusions

The findings from both the questionnaire survey and interviews provide excellent results in terms of the opinions and beliefs held by parents on Higher Education and supports the findings from Dodgson & Whitham (2003). In addition, it also provides information about the experiences of parents and the current system (both their own experiences and those of their child), their beliefs and concerns and also the areas in which parents would like further information. It is clear parents have mixed views about education and its opportunities. There is a need for information to be given

directly to parents throughout a child's educational career not just about Higher Education but the whole process, from nursery/pre-school to HE. Parents felt that they do not receive enough or appropriate information to enable them to make informed decisions about their child's future.

The results from this research have been used to inform the content and structure of the programme. Key findings from this research include:

- ~ Parents responded that an event at school followed by a daytime visit to the University and a booklet sent to them were their preferred modes of information source – these will be the three main delivery methods used in this project
- ~ The top three concerns for parents about their children and Higher Education were safety, debt and accommodation
- ~ The majority of parents stated they would like their children to go to University, however, the majority of parents did not agree that they could afford for them to go
- ~ Differences exist between minority ethnic groups when asked if they would be happy for their child to move away to attend University
- ~ More than half of the parents stated they would expect their child to take up or continue with part time work whilst studying in Higher Education
- ~ Black or Black British Caribbean parents were less likely than other minority ethnic groups to agree that everyone has an equal chance to go to University although most parents (irrespective of ethnicity) thought University was for everyone
- ~ Parents expressed a need to have further information about specific aspects of university, in particular information about courses and course structure, accommodation and support available for their child whilst at University

Key activities of the project will include both attendance at events within the community to raise awareness of Higher Education but also visits into the University for parents of underrepresented groups. The visits aim to give parents/family members a taste of University life whilst also addressing the key issues highlighted throughout this research and answering additional questions enabling them to provide accurate and informative guidance to their children and/or families.

As an additional outcome for this project, a "Family Guide to Higher Education" has been developed (in conjunction with Schools and Colleges Liaison for use by the extended Aston University community) to support the programmes of activity for local parents/families and also parents/families of overseas students. The focus of the guide is based upon the findings from this research, the key topics parents raised as concerns and areas in which they would like further information, which are detailed in this report. The guide provides information about University life, the facilities and pastoral care available to students on campus as well as broader University issues.

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