Research And Design Of Programmes That Attract And Fulfil The Needs Of Britain's Ethnic Groups:

Phase 2: Involving And Informing The Family

Catherine Foster & Helen Higson

Aston Business School

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Background information

The changing face of Higher Education (HE) and the acceptance of Widening Participation (WP) as an important aim (Archer & Hutchings, 2000, p.555) is now firmly embedded within the UK HE system. During the last 20 years, participation in HE has increased dramatically. In 1985/6, there were approximately 590,000 full time students compared with 1998 where over 1 million students were in HE (HESA, 1998). The government target of encouraging 50% of 18 – 30 years old to participate in HE may see these figures rise even further. 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.

Research has suggested that ethnic minorities are over-represented in higher education compared to the working age population. Minority ethnic groups make up approximately 15% of undergraduate students, compared with approximately 6% of the working age population (Pathak, 2000, p.1; NAO, 2002, p.6). On closer inspection however, there is a disproportionate representation of minority ethnic students in 'new' (post 1992) Universities and on professional courses, such as Business and Law (Pathak, 2000, p.9). There is also a difference between the ethnicities and their participation in HE. Bangladeshi, Pakistani (Connor et al, 2003, p.x) and African-Caribbean students are under-represented in HE. Bangladeshi and Pakistani families are also living in the low socio-economic areas of the UK (60% in low-income households) (Pathak, 2000, p.2).

Influence on Decision Making

The factors which influence a student's decision to undertake a course of HE study vary between students and their own situation. The process is informed and influenced by a variety of factors 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. Key information sources were also highlighted and they found that information sources used most by students include the UCAS handbook, University prospectuses and visits/open days at Universities, whereas IT based media were used the least. They further found that league tables (including research and teaching quality assessments) were used more so by higher ability and higher social class applicants. 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.

This decision making process occurs quite early on in a student's educational career (Preece, 1999, p.198) and as such, activity aimed to raise aspiration and achievement needs to occur early within the school years. Dodgson & Whitham (2003, p.15) emphasise that engaging with parents should ideally begin when children are in primary or secondary school due to the early age of children decisions about education are formed by both the child and the family.

Family

As has been highlighted in the above section, 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 parents/family influence can be both positive and negative and is also linked to social class. Parents' own experiences of education and the 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 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.

> "*Muslim girls in particular are likely to be influenced by their parents and family about what is an appropriate choice*" (Connor et al 2003, p.37).

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, it is understood that minority ethnic students' families have little if any experience of HE compared to white students' families. Connor et al (2003, p.42) found that minority ethnic students were more likely than their white counterparts to have no family experience of HE (26% compared to 34%).

Concerns

Research conducted by Dodgson & Whitham (2003, p.8) highlighted key concerns parents had over their children's participation in Higher Education. Such issues included whether they were running up debt, their financial well-being, safety, academic progress and accommodation. Bird (1996, p.53) found that a concern of parents was that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are predominantly white institutions and that parents had concerns about cultural identity in such an institution.

These concerns need to be addressed by universities to raise awareness and understanding within communities as to the issues involved in studying at University. Bird continues to state 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". Bird then explains that the dissemination of information needs to occur on both a formal and informal basis in order to raise the profile of HE within communities and that any information needs to be relevant, impartial and delivered appropriately.

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. Houghton (2002, p.1) highlighted however, that accessing parents is accepted to be "notoriously difficult".

Involving the Family Project

Involving the family is the second phase of a Widening Participation project being run by Aston Business School. Phase I "Research and design of Programmes that attract and fulfil the needs of Britain's ethnic groups" focused on the experiences and participation of Minority Ethnic students compared to White British students (Jha, Higson & Li, 2003) amongst 1st year undergraduate students at Aston Business School. In the findings from the first phase, it emerged that family and academic support played a significant role in enhancing students' academic achievement and consequently success. Family influences and perceptions were recorded as a significant factor throughout the educational experiences of ethnic minority students.

As discussed, while groups traditionally well represented in HE consult careers/school advisers before coming to university, those from low participating groups seek advice from their parents and families. Phase I findings from both the student survey and interviews with ethnic minority students, indicated that parents of ethnic minority students are also less likely to have been to university or have clear ideas of what to expect. These findings are in line with those by Connor et al 2003.

In response to this, Phase II was developed to involve and inform the parents and families of ethnic minority students in order to raise their awareness and understanding of Higher Education. Focus groups have been conducted with parents with a view to develop a list of key issues to be addressed as an outcome of the programme. It was agreed that any activity designed to meet the needs of community members should be developed in consultation with that community.

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 university advice
~ To draw up a checklist of the main factors which students and their families need to expect when coming to university

This report describes the research undertaken during 2004/5 to investigate the views, perceptions and concerns minority ethnic parents held over their children and participation in HE study. The research began in August 2004, and aimed to examine parents' concerns and issues about Higher Education for their children. The findings are being used to inform the content, structure and design of the "Involving the Family" project activities.

Research Methodologies

Participants

The participants used were self selecting, responding either to letters sent out (Appendices I) using initially a database of contacts held by Connexions (11 participants) or through focus groups held at Community groups or community based events (49 participants). A total of 60 parents took part in the research. Table 1 below shows the number of participants by gender and ethnicity.

Table 1: Participants by Gender and Ethnicity

Males	12	
Females		48
Black or Black British - Caribbean.	8	16
Black or Black British - African.		2
Other Black background.		1
Asian or Asian British - Indian		5
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani.	3	14
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi		6
Other Asian Background	1	1
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean.		1
Other Mixed background.		2

Figure 1 shows the number of parents by age.
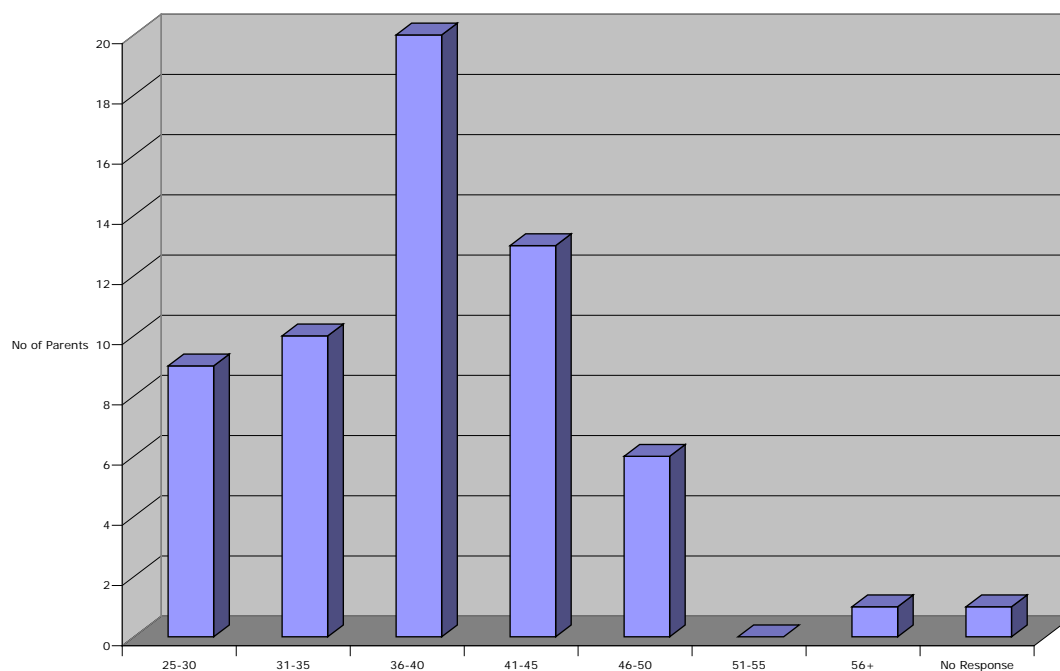
Participants completed a questionnaire and participated in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. The interviews were conducted either individually or in a group, dependent on availability of participants and location of interviews. Two questionnaires were completed by post due to family commitments.

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 includes statements that have been adopted and modified from previous research conducted by Dodgson & Whitham (2003). The survey instrument consisted of a covering letter as well as the questionnaire itself. This (see Appendix 2) was a paper-based questionnaire and was divided into 6 distinct sections:

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

The questionnaire utilised both quantitative and qualitative answers, using Likert scale responses (on a scale of 1-3 or 1-5) and open statements.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with parents after they had completed the questionnaire. The aim of the interviews was to investigate further parents' views/concerns about HE for their child. The interview consisted of four questions including an opportunity for further comments. Interviews were conducted by the researcher either on a one to one basis or in a group. This was dependent on the nature of the contact with the parent, for example, when the contact was a community group, interviews were conducted as a whole group. Where a parent responded by email or by post (due to family commitments) the interview questions were added to the questionnaire (Appendix 3).

Results

Questionnaire

Section 1: Yourself

Table 2 and 3 below show the information parents provided about themselves and their families. As can be seen from table 2, the average number of children of participants was 3.2 per family, ages of children varied dramatically between families as can be seen by the age of eldest and age of youngest figures. Table 3 shows the number of parents for whom English is their first language and the number of families for whom English is spoken at home. Although 40% of participants reported that English was not their first language, over 78% of participants said English was spoken at home.

Table 2: Number of Children - Reponses

	Average	Min	Max
No of Children	3.2	1	8
Age of eldest	15	4	37
Age of youngest	7	1	25

Table 3: English Language – Percentage Responses

|	Yes	No	No Response
Is English Your First Language?	35	24	1
Is English spoken at home?	47	2	11

Section 2: Your Child

Parents were asked about their children and the information they had already received about Higher Education. Figure 2 below shows the responses to their and their child's attendance at awareness raising events.

About Your child
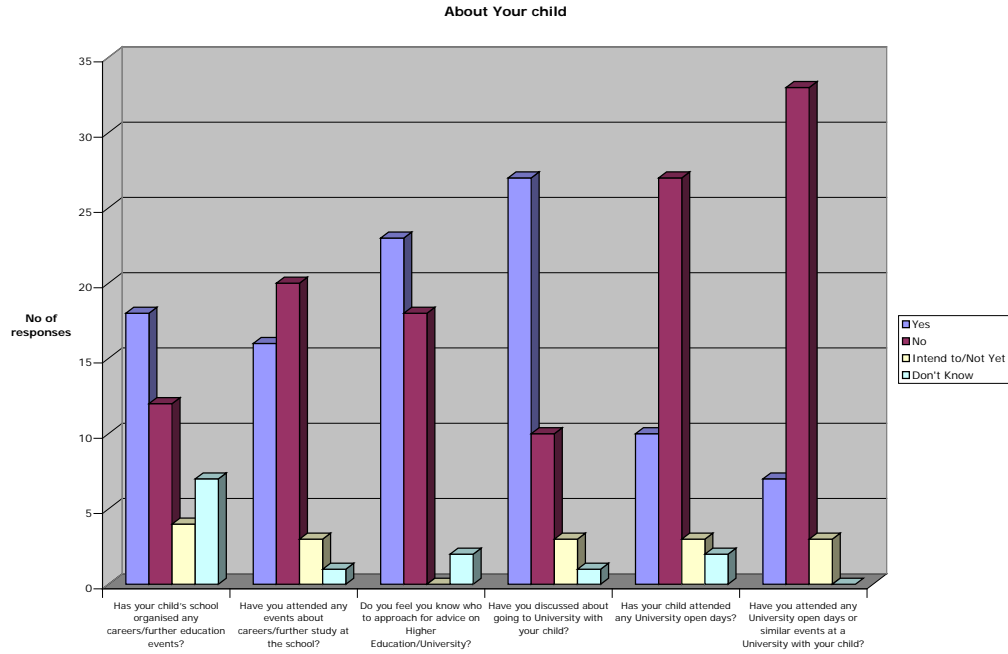
Although the results indicate that the majority of parents or children had not been involved in open days or visits to a University, this may be due to the average age of the eldest child being 15 and that for a large proportion of parents, their children had not reached the age where such visits are offered.

Figure 3 below shows the results regarding information sources and which form of information provision parents would find most useful.

**Which of the following would you find useful?**
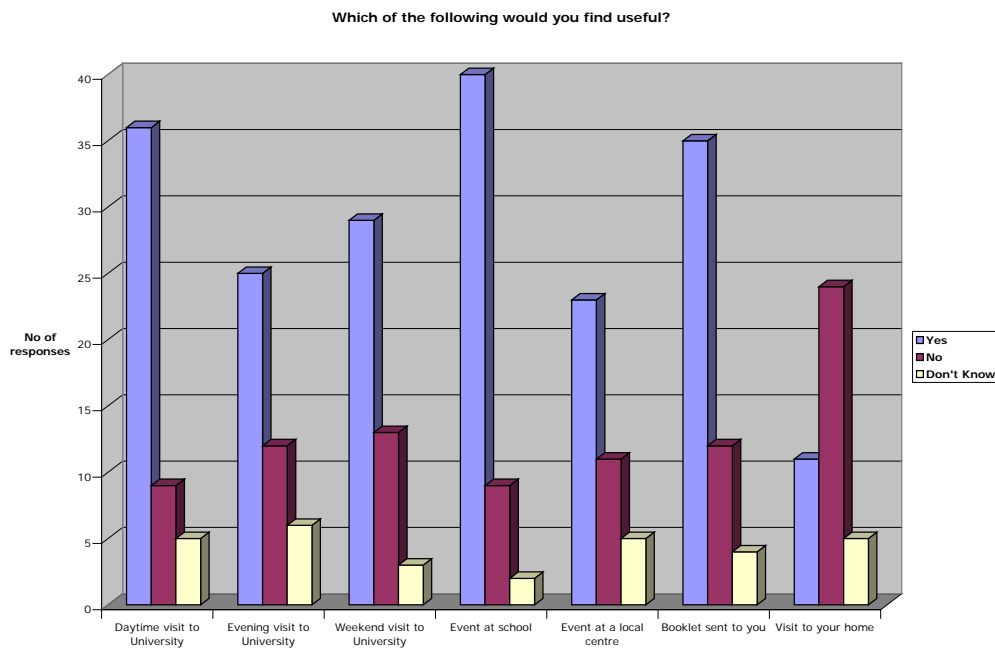
Parents rated an event at school as the most preferred form of information giving (78.4%), followed by Daytime visit to a University (72%) and thirdly a booklet sent to them (68.6%). The majority of parents did not want a visit to their home (60%). These results will be taken into consideration during the development of the programme's activities.

Parents were asked to respond to the following 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

Figure 4 below shows the results for these statements.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
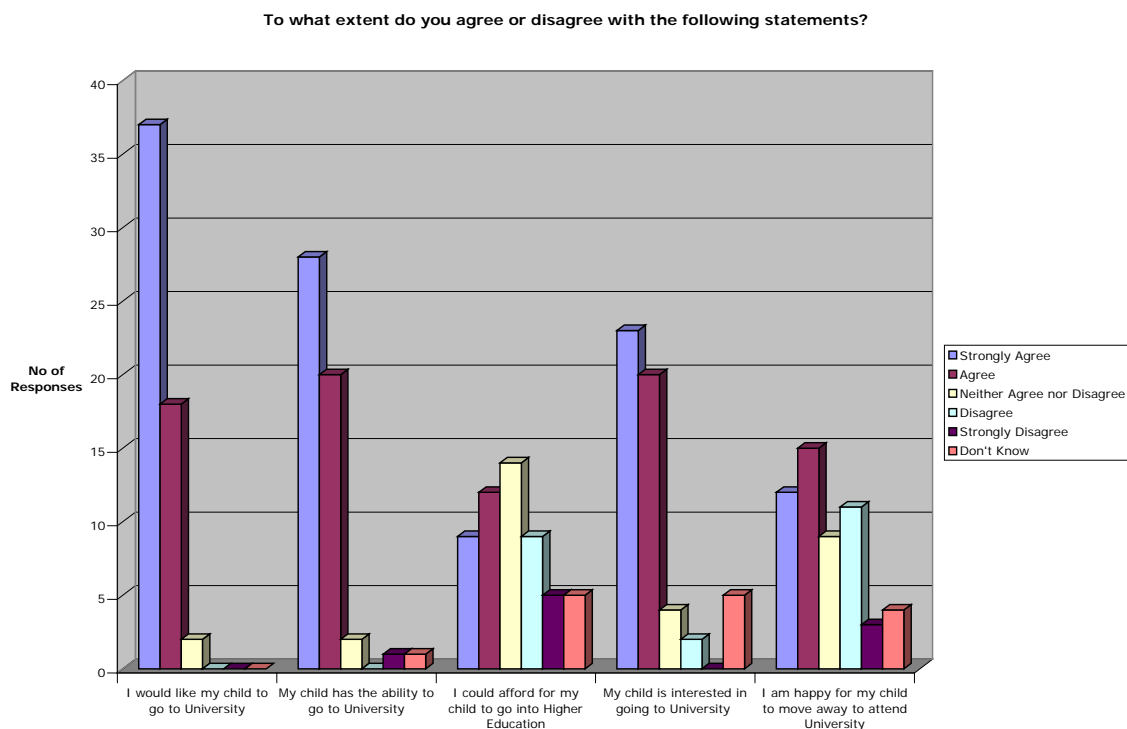
As can be seen in the figure above, parents agreed with the first, second and fourth statements with only a small percentage responding otherwise. For statements three and five however, responses were mixed. Statement three, "I could afford for my child to go into Higher Education" reported 16.7% of parents strongly agreeing, 22.2% agreeing, 25.9% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, 16.7% disagreeing and 9.3% strongly disagreeing with the statement (9.3% responded don't know). For statement 5, "I am happy for my child to move away to attend University" parents reported that 22.2% strongly agreed, 27.8% agreed and 16.7% neither agreed nor disagreed, however, 20.4% disagreed and 5.6% strongly disagreed with the statement (7.4% responded don't know).

When the results for these two statements (three and five) are examined by ethnicity, a clear difference can be identified (and are highlighted below in table 4 and table 5). '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.

Table 4 shows the responses to the statement "I could afford for my child to go into Higher Education" divided by the ethnic group of the parents.

Ethnicity	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Black or Black British - Caribbean	4	3	8	3	3
Black or Black British - African				2	
Other Black background			1		
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2	1	1		
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	2	6	6	2	
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	1	2	1		1
Other Asian background				1	1
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean			1		
Other Mixed background			1	1	

Table 5 shows the responses to the statement "I am happy for my child to move away to attend University". Again, these results have been separated into each ethnic group.

Ethnicity	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Black or Black British - Caribbean	5	8	5	2	1
Black or Black British - African	1	1			
Other Black background				1	
Asian or Asian British - Indian	2	1	1		
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	3	3	3	4	2
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi		1	1	4	
Other Asian background			2		
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	1				
Other Mixed background		1	1		

These differences between the ethnic groups may be attributed to religious and cultural issues which play an important role and influence for some parents and their families. Religion was not recorded as part of this research and further work is required to understand these issues and influence on families fully. These results also support the need for further information regarding attending university and the choices of and facilities available in terms of accommodation for their children. This will enable parents to become more aware of the issues involved in their children attending university and to enable them to make informed decisions appropriate to their child. Due to the low number of participants within each ethnic group however, further statistical analysis is not possible on this data to investigate if these differences are significant.

Parents were then asked to identify what they would be concerned about if their child went to University. Parents were given the following topics and asked to rate each one:

1. Where they would be living
2. If they had enough money to live on
3. If they were running up debt
4. If they would make friends
5. That they would settle into University life
6. If they would be able to cope with the workload
7. If they would be able to cook for themselves
8. Support/Care available for them on campus
9. Safety – on campus
10. Health – if they would be able to look after themselves
11. If there were other activities available as well as academic study (such as societies and sports)

Figure 5 below shows the responses to issues parents would be concerned about, if their child went to University.

If your child were to go to University would you be concerned about any of the following?
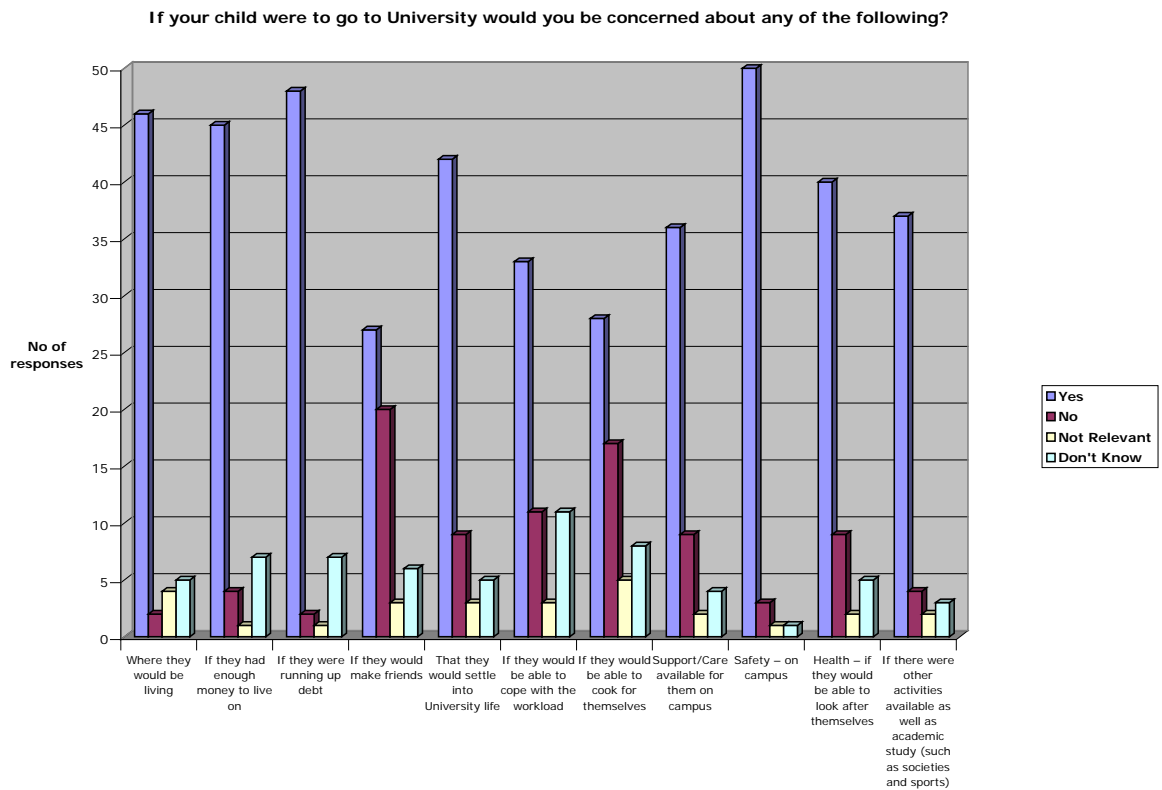
As can be seen by the chart above, the issues parents would be most concerned about if their child was to attend a University are: safety on campus (90.9%) if they were running up debt (82.8%), where they would be living (80.7%) and if they had enough money to live on (78.9%). These results are supported by the work undertaken by Dodgson & Whitham (2003) into concerns 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" (see table 6 below).

Table 6: Part time work

|	yes	No	Don't Know
If your child was to go to University, would you expect them to take up or continue with part time work?	50.9	16.4	32.7

These results suggest that parents are unsure of the need for part time work by students, how it would fit in to or affect their studies and if students are able to support themselves. This further information needs to be provided to parents to enable them to fully understand the issues involved financially for their children. Universities provide information to students about finances and part time work guidelines, however this could also be available to parents.

Section 3: Views on Higher Education

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

Figure 6 below shows the responses to the statements given by parents:

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
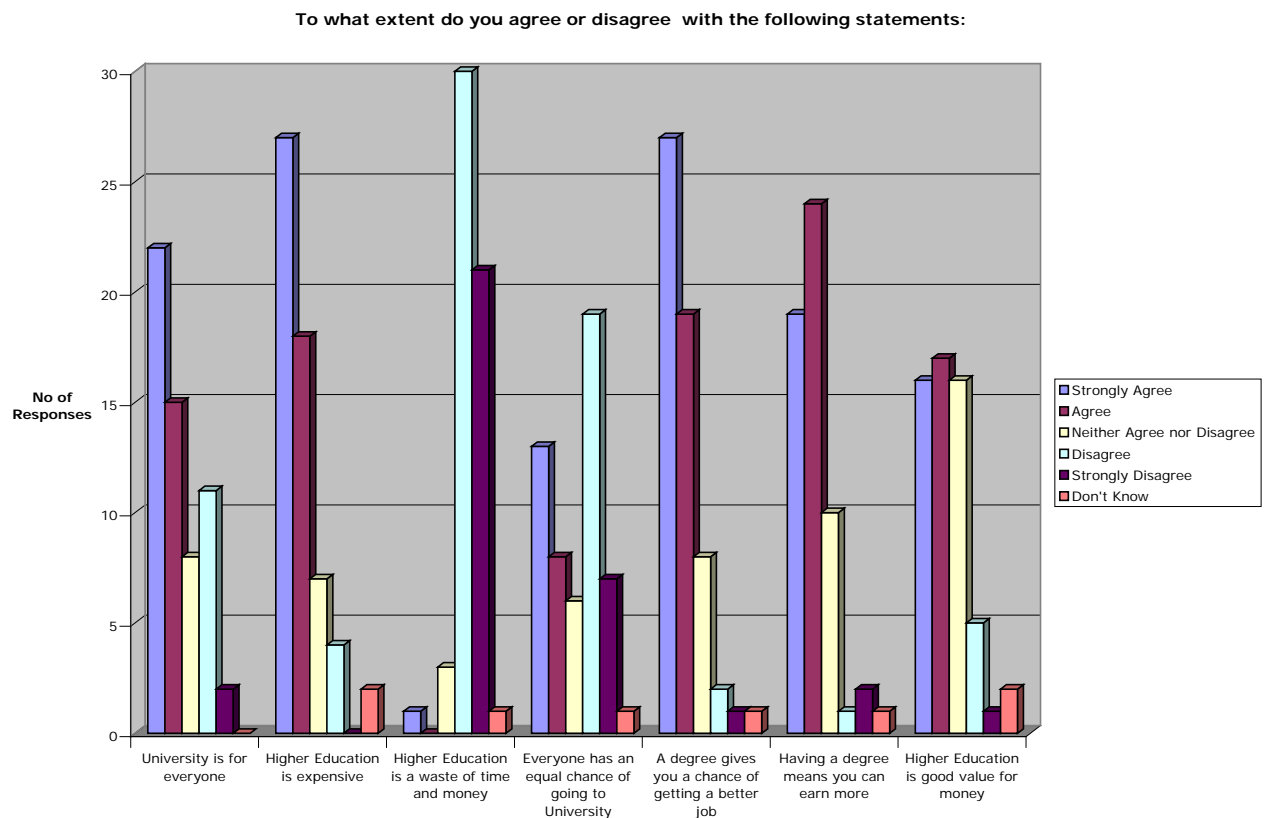
Parents responded that they agreed with statements one, two, five and six with only a small percentage

responding disagree or don't know Most parents also agreed with statement seven although 28.1% responded neither agree nor disagree.

In contrast, results for "Everyone has an equal chance of going to University" (statement four) show a mixed response with 38.9% agreeing with the statement and 48.2% disagreeing. Table 7 below shows the responses for the statement "Everyone has an equal chance of going to University" by ethnic group. On examination of the results by ethnicity, 'Black or Black British – Caribbean' parents were more likely to disagree than any other ethnic group with the statement whereas 'Asian or Asian British – Pakistani' parents most likely to agree.

Ethnicity	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Black or Black British - Caribbean	4	1	2	12	5
Black or Black British - African		1			
Other Black background				1	
Asian or Asian British - Indian			2	3	
Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	9	3	2		
Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi		2		2	
Other Asian background		1			1
Mixed - White and Black Caribbean				1	
Other Mixed background			1		1

During the interviews, some parents reported that they felt their children (especially Black Boys) were not encouraged or supported as much as other children, feeling that they were stereotyped or misunderstood. If parents (and their child) feel that education is not equal and opportunities are not available to all, this belief may also be applied to Higher Education. Further work is required to understand fully this perceived inequality and develop activities which will address this perception and raise understanding of equal opportunities policies within Higher Education. As previously, due to the low number of participants within each ethnic group, further statistical analysis is not possible.

Section 4: Your Family's History of Higher Education

Parents were asked about their family's history of Higher Education. Table 8 below shows the percentage results for the two questions "Have you ever been to University" and "If your child was to go to University, would they be the first in your family to do so?"

Table 8: Family History of Higher Education

	Responses	Yes	No	Don't Know
Have you ever been to University?	*59*	44.1	55.9	0.0
If your child was to go to University, would they be the first in your family to do so?	*57*	24.6	71.9	3.5

Over half (55.9%) of the parents reported that they themselves had not been to University. However, for 71.9% of parents, there had been another family member attend University prior to their children. These results are supported by those from Connor et al (2003) who found the under-represented groups were more likely to have no previous experience of Higher Education (UK). If underrepresented groups don't have

personal experience of Higher Education, it is important to ensure that they have an opportunity to gain understanding and experience in order to support, and make and informed decision with, their child about their participation in Higher Education.

Section 5: Your Knowledge of Higher Education

Parents were asked about their understanding and knowledge of the UK Higher Education system. The table below shows the results.

Table 9: Your Knowledge of Higher Education (% response)

	No of responses	Yes	No	Don't Know
Do local colleges offer HE qualifications?	56	62.5	5.4	32.1
Is it possible to study for a HE qualification on a part time basis?	55	83.6	3.6	12.7
Do you feel you have received enough information about how your child could go to University?	54	33.3	48.1	18.5

62.5% of parents knew that local colleges offer Higher Education qualifications, however 32.1% responded "Don't Know". There is clearly work which needs to be undertaken to raise the understanding of parents about the HE system and courses that are available to both them and their family. During the interviews, parents requested more information about courses (structure and content) and university which supports the finding here that many parents are not aware of what is or isn't available. 83.6% of parents knew that HE qualifications could be studied on a part time basis and only 12.7% responded that they didn't know. 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 received enough information (18.5% responded "don't know"). There is clearly a requirement for information aimed at parents about the UK HE system and all processes associated. The Involving the Family project aims to address this requirement for information by under-represented groups within the West Midlands.

Section 6: The Future

Parents were asked what they would like their child to do after school/college and given a choice of options where they were able to chose all that applied. The response rate for this question is also shown on the table below.

Response to this question was low, however 97.8% of parents who responded reported that they would like their child to go to university.

Table 10: What parents would like their child to do after school/college (% response)

	Sixth Form	Further Education College	University	Modern Apprenticeship	Get a Job
No of responses (%)	62	57	75	33	30
Yes	86.5	88.2	97.8	55.0	50.0
No	8.1	8.8	0.0	15.0	44.4
Don't know	5.4	2.9	2.2	30.0	5.6

Interviews

The results from the parents' interviews extended the information gathered by the questionnaires. There were three questions to the interviews (plus any other comments):

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 the first question were varied (see appendix IV a). Although parents raised a range of different issues, there were common themes. Many parents reported being concerned about University accommodation, in particular; knowing where their children would live (on campus etc), what it would be like, where it would be, what it would cost and how safe it would be for them. Security/safety was also raised frequently by parents, especially with regards to how secure the campus was, and if their child would be safe whilst at University. Pastoral care was also a concern to parents. Parents wanted to know that there were sufficient support structures in place. Some parents raised concerns about the social side of University life, with specific reference being made to University life as a distracter from their studies. Parents raised concern about drugs and also the company in which they would be mixing. However many parents also acknowledged that this was an excellent opportunity to meet a broad mix of people. The concerns raised in this section mirror those responses selected in the questionnaire as key concerns and issues.

Parents were also concerned with the academic side of University and raised issues such as independent learning and if their child would be able to cope with the change from school-style education to University-style. Parents highlighted 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. Issues such as students getting into debt, what loans/options were available to them. Muslim parents were also interested to find out how Muslim students were funding themselves through University as this was a concern. The amount of information that parents had received about University/Higher Education also raised concern as parents felt they were not receiving adequate or appropriate information in a format and language (i.e. jargon free) that is accessible to them.

Many parents also reported that they felt confident about their child being able to cope with University and being motivated to succeed. Many parents also believed their children would be able to look after themselves and were mature and confident people.

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 reported a variety of issues/themes that they believed were both external to their family and that affected their child (see appendix IV b for responses).

Issues included pressure on a child from external sources such as friends, their peers, schools and school teachers, and the family itself (extended). These were accepted to be both positive and negative in many

cases but that finding a balance was necessary. Parents also raised concerns about their experiences of racism within the school system and also throughout society. In addition many parents reported that they felt a lack of clear understanding of their culture had an effect on their child. Parents also reported that a perceived lack of understanding of behaviour resulted in children being labelled or stereotyped unfairly. Parents highlighted this 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 encouragement of non-traditional routes would be beneficial as traditional style education was not necessarily appropriate for all young people. Parents also raised the issue of cost as being a barrier for their children especially for single parent families.

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

Parents were then asked about information and if they would like to be given more information about University. Again the responses can be summarised into the following key areas:

~ Course Information

This covered what courses are available where, what the content of courses was (what subjects would be studied) and where the qualification would lead after graduation (employment etc). Parents also commented on the prospectuses available and that they would like them in "easy speak".

~ Course Content

Parents also wanted more information about the content and structure of courses, including workload, assessment techniques and key dates as well as the entry requirements and UCAS information.

~ Accommodation

Whereabouts in the city accommodation is, what it is like, information about both on and off campus accommodation etc.

~ Support Available for Students

This included both academic/course support and pastoral care. One parent highlighted illnesses that are more common amongst specific Minority Ethnic groups and reassurance that pastoral staff at universities are aware of such issues. If students experience difficulty with the academic side of the course and what structures are in place to help them.

~ Events

Parents were keen to have more information and understanding about the activities that schools/HEIs provide for school children and the existing links with University. They felt experiencing University first hand was valuable.

~ Diversity

Parents were keen to know the ethnic diversity both amongst staff and students at University.

~ Other issues

Parents also mentioned safety, finance, and social life as areas they would like more information.

As can be seen with the above results, there are very clear areas about which parents would like more information. These common themes reflect those areas expressed by parents as issues they are most concerned about. These findings will be used to develop the programme of events of the "Involving the Family" project.

Question 4: Any other comments?

Finally, parents were given the opportunity to raise any other issues not covered by the above questions. One of the key issues concerned information and that parents felt they were not being given enough information from schools. Other issues raised include:

~ Role of the man in family environment, one parent believed that children benefit from a male role model and that if the father figure is missing from the family, sons may feel the need to take on the father role within the family

~ University is not a good choice for everyone – one parent raised concern about the drive to encourage all to attend University and that for some children this was not the right path for them.

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. This research has supported previous work in this field by many researchers, as mentioned in the Introduction. In addition, it has also provided 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.

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 there 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

~ 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

These findings are not only relevant to Aston Business School but to the wider Higher Education audience. As the level of involvement of parents increases (partially due to the introduction of first tuition fees but also with the introduction of top-up fees from 2006) institutions will need to address concerns and questions parents have over their child's education to ensure that all parents are fully prepared and able to support their child as required. This is particularly important for those working within the Widening Participation field

to ensure students from under-represented groups, and their families, are fully prepared for their transition into Higher Education. Raising awareness of parents has been included in the activity of DfES (Department for Education and Skills) and Aimhigher who both provide information sources and basic guides to the stages of their child's education developed for parents. This project aims to address the specific needs of under-represented groups in Higher Education.

The results and main conclusions will be addressed in the activities of the Involving the Family project by informing both the content and structure of the project activity over the next year (detailed in the introduction). The key activities of the project will include attendance at events within the community to raise awareness of Higher Education and to develop a relationship with parents within their own environment. Activities will give parents the opportunity to visit the University, following a 'masterclass' style of programme. The visit will include a campus tour to make parents familiar with the facilities on campus for students as well as giving parents and/or family members a taste of University life and an opportunity for parents to question both staff and current students. Visits to schools and community groups will also be offered. Visits/events held within the local environment (especially school) of parents were rated by parents in the questionnaire and seen as a vital method to familiarise parents with the project and its staff and answer any initial questions participants may have. Participants are invited to take part in the project by the project officer utilising contacts within the community and also by contacting both schools and community organisations within the West Midlands region. Evaluation will take place during the life of this project to assess on an ongoing basis the appropriateness of design and content of the project activity. Evaluation is an essential part of this project. The nature of parental involvement is changing and it would be inappropriate for a project such as this to not continually review that it meets the needs of its audience.

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. The guide is available online http://www.aston.ac.uk/parents and will be in printed form for participants of the Involving the Family project. However, future funding for the continuation of this guide is needed to ensure it remains appropriate, up to date and responsive to the needs of parents and carers of future students of the University as well as Involving the Family participants. Further investigation into the potential use and development of the guide beyond 'Involving the Family' participants is also required.

The Higher Education environment is changing. This can be seen by the change in both the needs and expectations of students as well as the increased involvement of parents, due primarily to the perceived increased financial commitment (tuition fees and variable top up fees from 2006) and with an increasing number of students choosing to live at home rather than on campus. Holdsworth (2002) 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 at Aston University investigating the achievement and retention of students from Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPNs) also found that students who were from LPNs were more likely to be living at home (Fowler & Brookes 2002). It is important to fully understand the influence and effects this has on the student body in order to enable students to fulfil their potential and as an academic institution, empower students to achieve academically.

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. This failure further reinforces, to the student and their community, that some groups within society are simply not learners (Thomas 2001). Ensuring that both students and family have a clear understanding of what University does and does not provide, and preparation for the transition to University from school for both parties, must surely be a vital part of any Widening Participation activity. Engaging with parents in this way also provides universities with an opportunity to ensure parents and their families are aware of the role parents play when their children become students, and consequentially adults (i.e. access to results, attendance records etc). Parents have become used to the information provided by schools about subjects, exam timetables and coursework deadlines and if they are unaware of the different approach at University they will continue to expect the same level of information and involvement. Discussion needs to occur within Aston University as to the provision of information to parents and students and how to ensure this meets the needs of both parties as well as the needs of the institution.

If young people have their aspirations, aims and awareness raised by activities at University and within their school, it is vital these activities are also provided for parents, as without their support, young people may still not achieve their goals. In Dodgson & Whitham (2004) interviews with staff from the North East region of England found that staff believed that involving parents in activities at the University contributed to increased student retention as they (the children and their family) were making appropriate decisions based on information provided about their involvement and participation in Higher Education.

Continual research is required to ensure that universities (and for this project, Aston University) are meeting the needs of their students and that they are developing and changing in response to the changing student cohort. Further investigation into the applicability of this project further into the wider WP field will also be undertaken with a view to involving staff of Care Homes or Children in Care workers. The same aims (as detailed in the introduction) can be applied to anyone with a guidance/carer role to young people.

To continue research into parental influence, proposals are being submitted for funding to investigate the influence post-application and throughout the student life cycle in recognition of the increasing numbers of students choosing to life at home. In recognition of increased numbers of students living at home and the acceptance of the influence of parents pre-entry, it is proposed that for students who live at home this influence continues throughout their university experience.

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Dear

Do you have school age children?
Would you describe your ethnicity as one of the following?

- Black or Black British - Caribbean.
- Black or Black British - African.
- Other Black background.
- Asian or Asian British - Indian.
- Asian or Asian British - Pakistani.
- Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi.
- Other Asian background.
- Mixed - White and Black Caribbean.
- Mixed - White and Black African.
- Mixed - White and Asian.
- Other Mixed background.

If so you may be able to help me with my research. I am looking for parents/families to talk about your beliefs, understanding and experiences of education, in particular Higher Education and University. We recognise the importance of the family in young people's education and would welcome your involvement.

If you would like to take part and come to talk to me please contact me (details below). All discussions will be kept completely confidential. Travel expenses will be reimbursed. Refreshments will be provided on the day. Sessions will take no longer than 1 hour.

Catherine Foster
Aston Business School
Aston University
Birmingham
B4 7ET

0121 359 3611 ext 5058
c.s.foster@aston.ac.uk

I look forward to hearing from you. Even if you don't have first hand experience of University in the UK or if you do, your views and opinions are vital to my project.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Foster

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research.

All answers you provide will be treated with total confidentiality.

If you do not wish to complete any sections please leave them blank.

Yourself

Gender: ☐ Male   ☐ Female   Postcode

Age: ☐ 25-30   ☐ 31-35   ☐ 36-40   ☐ 41-45   ☐ 46-50   ☐ 51-55   ☐ 56+

Number of children: ☐   Age of eldest child: ☐   Age of youngest child: ☐

Ethnicity:

☐ White – British (including White Scottish)   ☐ Chinese

☐ White - Irish   ☐ Other Asian background

☐ Other White background (including Irish Traveller)   ☐ Mixed - White and Black Caribbean

☐ Black or Black British - Caribbean   ☐ Mixed - White and Black African

☐ Black or Black British - African   ☐ Mixed - White and Asian

☐ Other Black background   ☐ Other Mixed background

☐ Asian or Asian British - Indian   ☐ Other Ethnic background

☐ Asian or Asian British - Pakistani   ☐ Not known

☐ Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi

Is English your first language?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If not, what language is your first language?

Is English spoken at home?   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If not, what language is spoken at home (if different from above)?

Your Child (for children over 11)

	Yes	No	Intend to/ Not yet	Don't know
Has your child's school organised any careers/further education events?	☐	☐	☐	☐
Have you attended any events about careers/further study at the school?	☐	☐	☐	☐
Do you feel you know who to approach for advice on Higher Education/University?	☐	☐	☐	☐
Have you discussed about going to University with your child?	☐	☐	☐	☐
Has your child attended any University open days?	☐	☐	☐	☐
Have you attended any University open days or similar events at a University with your child?	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other (please state)				

Which of the following would you find useful:

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Daytime visit to a University including a chance to meet University staff and current students and have a look around	☐	☐	☐
Evening visit to a University including a chance to meet University staff and current students and have a look around	☐	☐	☐
Weekend visit to a University including a chance to meet University staff and current students and have a look around	☐	☐	☐
Information event at your child's school about University	☐	☐	☐
Information event at a local community centre/facility about University	☐	☐	☐
Information/booklet sent to you, developed by University staff	☐	☐	☐
Visit to your home by University staff	☐	☐	☐
Other (please state)			

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't Know
I would like my child to go to University	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child has the ability to go to University	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I could afford for my child to go into Higher Education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child is interested in going to University	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am happy for my child to move away to attend University	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

If your child were to go to University would you be concerned about any of the following:

	Yes	No	Not Relevant	Don't know
Where they would be living	☐	☐	☐	☐
If they had enough money to live on	☐	☐	☐	☐
If they were running up debt	☐	☐	☐	☐
If they would make friends	☐	☐	☐	☐
That they would settle into University life	☐	☐	☐	☐

If they would be able to cope with the workload	☐	☐	☐	☐
Be able to cook for themselves	☐	☐	☐	☐
Support/Care available for them on campus	☐	☐	☐	☐
Safety – on campus	☐	☐	☐	☐
Health – if they would be able to look after themselves	☐	☐	☐	☐
If there were other activities available as well as academic study (such as societies and sports)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other (please state)				

	Yes	No	Don't know
If your child was to go to University, would you expect them to take up or continue with part time work?	☐	☐	☐

Views on Higher Education

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
University is for everyone	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Higher Education is expensive	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Higher Education is a waste of time and money	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Everyone has an equal chance of going to University	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A degree gives you a chance of getting a better job	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Having a degree means you can earn more	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Higher Education is good value for money	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Your family's history of Higher Education

	Yes	No	Don't know
Have you ever been to University?	☐	☐	☐
If your child was to go to University, would they be the first in your family to do so?	☐	☐	☐

If no, please say who

Have you any experience of Higher Education as:

A former student	☐	☐	☐
A current student	☐	☐	☐
Through your job	☐	☐	☐
Other (please state)			

Your knowledge of Higher Education

	Yes	No	Don't know
Do local colleges offer Higher Education qualifications?	☐	☐	☐
Is it possible to study for a Higher Education qualification on a part time basis?	☐	☐	☐
Do you feel that you have received enough information about how your child could go to University?	☐	☐	☐

And finally!

What would *you* like your child to do when they leave School/College?

	Yes	No	Don't know
Sixth form	☐	☐	☐
Further Education College	☐	☐	☐
University	☐	☐	☐
Modern apprenticeship	☐	☐	☐
Get a job	☐	☐	☐
Don't know	☐	☐	☐
Other (please state)			

Thank you very much for your time

Catherine Foster

Widening Participation Development Officer

Interview Questions

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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)? *(If yes, please give examples)*

3.   Would you like to be given more information about education, especially University? If yes, what kind of information would you find useful?

4.   Any other comments?

Combined Responses Q1

If your child was interested in going to University, what would you say were your main concerns about your child going?

- That they were on the right programme and that they know what they want to do afterwards. That's the course will offer them actual employment opportunities and transferable skills

- Right level of support both academic and non academic on offer

- Study skills being taught – enabling students to work at HE level

- Financial aspect of attendance – as don't want child to leave with huge debt – affects where they study too

- Expectation – level of performance of black students lower than for other students – not an equal chance being offered. Both expectation of HE and individual

- Cost

- Safety/Security

- Ability to adapt to new environments

- Support

- None

- That my child obtains the correct grades to enter the University

- Appropriate University and course to meet my child's needs

- Safety

- That it was a suitable place for her

- Accessing reliable and easy to understand information. Connexions advice depends on who is seen.

- School advice isn't timely. School and exams information can change and info isn't given, has to be sought by parents

- Quite confident about my child, mature and not easily led.

- Own attendance at University and family friends who have been provide information

- Finance

- Safety – on campus and looking after self. Looking away from home yet never lived on own. Concern of own experience and lack of – female child who is not mature

- Lack of awareness of University life and workload

- University fee system – per year costs, fees – how much and can we afford it

- Undergraduate compared to student – jargon and language used – isn't inclusive

- University information passed to parents – not prospectus but straight answers about University – directly to the parents

- Security and Safety of child

- Where they would live

- Settle in quickly

- Treated and respected as a Black child

- Different structure to school, less structured at University

- Ability to cope with independent learning, prioritising workload

- University life distracting away from studies

- School doesn't prepare fully for University style of learning, especially research skills and reading around skills – need spoon feeding

- Financial issues – debts, differing grants/loans options

- Social life – drugs especially

- Company they would be getting into

- Transition to HE – organisation skills, workload, reading etc

- Equal ops – how they would be treated as a black student

- Support on campus

- Drugs – I don't want my child to get involved in taking/using them

- A lot of the concerns already mentioned

- predominantly safety

- value for money

- lodgings

- facilities at university

- safety – pastoral care and security

- cooking – if they can!

- Finances and loans (specifically for Muslims)

- Support

- Working as well as studying is very difficult to manage

- Getting the grades needed and sticking at their course

- Getting children motivated and enabling them to see what the benefits of university are

- Encouraging children to take part important

- Making aware of opportunities of education and take advantage of being young

- Fairly confident with children – choices are made by the children and not controlled by anyone else – just be supportive

- A bit worried about drugs but not drinking

- If they are motivated they will succeed

- Getting into debt – loans needed

- Having to work as well as study

- No concerns about health/coping – capable children

- Good opportunity to meet broad mix of people

- Travelling if living at home

- Course Content

- Pressure of assignments

- Expense

- That there wouldn't be many tutors in the University who have Caribbean or African Background (Heritage)

- Most people I know say that their life in University has been one of their best experiences

- That he would complete his assignments on time and put in full effort

- Peer pressure

- Expense

- Would he be able to cope

- Does not get mislead by bad company

- Finishes his degree

- That the university provides a good education

- Finance

- Accommodation – decent and safe

- Safety for children – especially girls

- Support – academic and all round support (mentor? – Maths support at B'ham University £24 p/h)

- Make up of staff and students at university, who is there?

- Being aware of University life

- Specific course can be exclusive – class wise

Combined Responses Q2 (Total = 17)

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)?
(If yes, please give examples)

- Expectations of individuals – have staff that are open to all students

- Routes through to HE, many access routes taken rather than traditional entry by black students, could apply to all students instead of just mature students – traditional route not always appropriate

- No

- Racism

- n/a

- non understanding of cultural ways e.g. mix of sexes in University

- Understanding the system e.g. EMA forms, financial support available, college waiting lists etc

- Financial barriers of fees

- Added pressures

- Financial resources to encourage/focus on EM students to attend

- Knowledge of English system – located home in 'right' area to give better access to schools, colleges etc

- School very positive about progressing to next stage

- Expectations differ between genders at school – females able to see long term, boys can't and need short achievable goals

- Language and jargon not inclusive and lack of information

- Understanding of cultural differences and individual differences – respect for who the child is

- School education not explaining system to progress to next stage nor encouraging to progress

- Expectation by school that child won't go to University so don't push to progress

- Still feel and brought up with belief that Black children/people still second rate. Not equal chance of opportunities

- Schools still group afro-Caribbean males together and assume all have negative behaviours

- Financial issues for single parent families who struggle day to day

- Equal ops again

- Expectations of students – low expectations for black students, judged by their colour

- Treatment of black students at school – culture, personality and learning styles

- Stereotypes

- Teachers and their attitudes to black students

- Relationship with the school and with teachers not as good as it should be

- financial aspects – concern about ability to attend and pressure put on family

- confidence – if knocked by someone (i.e. teachers) easily turned away from education

- own family doesn't allow unstoppables and work together, whereas for other families who aren't as forthcoming/pushing, the same opportunities may be missed

- ethnicity still a barrier in the workplace

- parents expectations – both positive and negative

- afro-Caribbean churches can be discouraging

- labelling by school of black students being trouble makers due to different behaviours

- education record following child

- education fairly accessible but information not i.e. who to see, who to speak to and where to find information and advice

- schools now do more for children re University visits but day content not aimed at children correctly

- equal opportunities – they way teachers treat black children – expectations

- The quality of teaching and support given in current practise

- Also peer pressure and media pressures – msn!!

- Girls pressurised to get married – difficult to be a young married woman and study for a degree

- Peer pressure – if their friends aren't studying

- Parents who haven't been to education may not see the value of it and therefore don't promote it

- Schools don't encourage black children (boys and girls)

- Lack of cultural understanding

- Try to give them a better understanding of what's happening around them community wise and encouraged them to be involved in external activities such as sport etc

- Expense

- There are not many teachers in school or HE who have a Caribbean or African background (Heritage)

- Himself – not working to his full potential

- Social class differentiation

- Racism at University

- Disabilities not being declared – stigma

- Needs not being met

- Brighter children given more support

- Financial issues for single parents

- Expectations of black students – not understanding behaviour etc

- Lip service to diversity

- Visits to University – very patronising lectures, not very enthusiastic or encouraging

Combined Responses Q3 (Total = 17)

What information would find useful about University?

- Event based at school – intro to University life, what it entails (workload, coursework, exams, work content, group size)

- Skills needed to survive at university

- Range of courses offered from U/G to P/G

- School work offered for children – summer schools etc

- Accommodation – where and what like for all years

- What happens if you're ill

- Case studies of students written by students (use ambassadors)

- Criteria's for acceptance

- No

- Module information within courses

- School links into University

- Making information available and accessible

- Statistics of populations at University – Minority Ethnic groups, staff and students

- Care of students

- Experience of environment

- From all local universities – what they are actually offering

- Care of students

- Illnesses specific to EM students – knowing staff aware of them

- What is available for the parents at FE and HE level

- Prospectus is full of information but could have it in 'easy-speak'

- What subjects, what they qualify you as, where you can use them, narrow and broad opportunities

- Chance to discuss choice of subject and if a degree is the appropriate route

- Colleges available by subject

- Support available at University

- Mentors and counsellors

- Social life – on campus

- Accommodation – whereabouts located in the city

- Ethnic make up of University

- Private accommodation – registered landlord lists etc

- I only know of the old UCCA system – but I'd like to know more about current system for application

- Accommodation

- Safety

- Courses available

- Finance

- Statistics of earning power post degree

- Post education opportunities and comparisons

- Opportunity to see and experience student life

- More in schools for parents – schools should promote HE better – stops at FE level i.e. taster days @ University for parents as well – keep in-depth info out till later on

- Information about the course, its contents and the what if's

- About how long the qualification will last

- What the students do in University – how they study and how are the lectures

- A video would be useful

- What courses they do

- What jobs they could get

- UCAS deadline

- Support for students – all kinds

- Open days

- Pastoral care

- Other activities

- Breakdown of course structure

- How and where are the lectures

- What happens if a child gets into difficulty

- Make up of students

Combined Responses Q4 (Total = 17)

Any other comments?

- Connexions is meaningless and not accessible to workers

- Saturday opening

- More information about what is provided – info in school diary

- Feel like we're fighting for information all the time

- DoE, youth groups, support networks information – provided by school to parents

- Princes Trust concept to support/guarantor a proposed business to help establish new companies

- Role of man in family environment – children benefit from role model, if father is missing, sons feel need to take on father role within the family

- Not bothered about who teaches, as long as treated with respect

- University isn't a good choice for everyone

- School expectations for black boys is still lower by staff – only promote apprenticeships and college rather than HE for students

- Parents would love their children to go to University but how do you encourage children to go?

- Very negative image portrayed – need to be positive