

Mapping Ethnicity in the Highlands and Islands

*Access to Further and Higher Education among Minority
Ethnic Groups in Moray and the Highlands and Islands*

Executive Summary

Background

In 2003, Inverness College was successful in securing funding from the North Forum for Widening Participation in Higher Education (the North Forum) to undertake research on minority ethnic access and participation in further and higher education. The overall aim of the research was to identify barriers to access and participation in further and higher education amongst minority ethnic groups. The project focused on the following local authority areas: Highland, Moray, Eilean Siar (the Western Isles) and the Orkney and Shetland Islands. These are referred to as the 'research study area' in the report.

Drawing on the 2001 Census, the research identified the main demographic trends amongst the minority ethnic groups, highlighted some of the barriers faced by minority ethnic groups in gaining access to and participating in further and higher education and identified some gaps in provision. The research confirmed findings of previous studies on the experiences of minority ethnic groups in rural areas, i.e. that services providers in general (including post-school education providers) are lagging behind in addressing issues of diversity and in developing an ethos, policies and practices which value diversity (Netto et al: 2001¹; de Lima 2004²).

Methodology

A 'mixed methods' strategy was employed and included the following:

- a literature review to provide the context for the study,
- analysis of the 2001 Census to identify the main demographic trends,
- questionnaires to Colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to obtain a snapshot of current provision and relations with minority ethnic groups in the research study area, and
- questionnaires, focus groups and interviews with minority ethnic individuals and groups to obtain their views on access to and participation in further and higher education.

Findings

Demographic Trends

The demographic profile of the minority ethnic population in the research study area is consistent with the demographic trends highlighted in the 2001 Census for Scotland as a whole in relation to, for example, growth in population, diverse ethnic groups, age, place of birth and issues such as qualifications and economic activity profiles (Scottish Executive, 2004³).

7.2% (363,589) of the Scottish population lived in the research study area, of which 0.8% (2,926) was from minority ethnic groups. It is important to note that the Census figures do not include migrant workers who are an increasing feature of the rural population. There was a presence of minority ethnic groups/individuals in all but one of the wards in the research study area. The minority ethnic population had a significantly younger age profile (more than 80% were less than 50 years old) than the population as a whole and about 50% were born outside the UK. Whilst caution has to be exercised in making stereotyped assumptions about people born overseas, the study did seem to suggest that the latter group (especially those with little or no qualifications or where communicating in English was a problem) may experience more difficulties in accessing and interpreting information about further and higher education opportunities for themselves and their young people.

Although there were slight variations in the ethnic composition of the minority groups across the research study area, diversity was the norm. People of 'mixed' minority ethnic background constituted the largest category (between 24 % and 27%) of the minority ethnic population in each of the research study Local Authority areas, except Moray, where the 'mixed' category was the joint largest with the Chinese community.

In general, the minority ethnic gender profile of the research study area was similar to that of the 'white' population in the area (i.e. 49% males: 51% females). However, there appeared to be greater gender differences in council areas with lower minority ethnic populations: men were more likely to outnumber women in areas such as Orkney, especially amongst some communities, for example the Indian and Pakistani/Bangladeshi/Other South Asian groups.

A significant number of people were in managerial/ professional positions, which may mean that there are at least a substantial proportion of minority ethnic households who have experience of higher education and are potentially in a position to guide their young people in making post school decision choices. The two minority ethnic groups with low qualifications were the Chinese and Pakistani/ Bangladeshi and other South Asian groups.

Rights not Numbers

The Census data highlights the risk that the rights of minority ethnic groups to services are likely to be neglected, especially in a context where organisations have tended to emphasise 'numbers rather than needs'. Their small but growing number and the dispersed and diverse (ethnically and in terms of social class) nature of rural minority ethnic households has resulted in a neglect of their perspectives in policy, planning and delivery of services, compounding their sense of social and cultural isolation. Their low absolute numbers has an effect on the barriers they experience in making themselves visible to public policy, developing common interests and in persuading service providers, including further and higher educational institutions, to focus on their 'needs' and their right to services irrespective of their numbers.

Diversity - Potential Learners

Drawing on the Census analysis and research amongst minority ethnic groups, their educational needs are diverse and cut across ethnic, class and geographical boundaries. Five categories (not necessarily mutually exclusive) of potential 'learners' with varying post-school educational needs were identified:

- the 'well-informed' group,
- adult re-trainers with overseas qualifications,
- English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) or those with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) needs,
- adults without qualifications but who have potential for career development, and
- the poorly informed group.

Provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

ESOL/EFL was offered by three providers i.e. colleges, local authorities and the voluntary sector. There were some geographical areas (North and West Highlands, Orkney) where college based ESOL/EFL provision does not appear to exist. Although there were some examples of collaborative initiatives across sectors, these were not the norm.

The study found a high level of demand for ESOL/EFL provision amongst the participants. The majority of participants expressed frustration at the lack of adequate provision, the large size of some of the classes and poor resources. This was particularly the case for those living in the Inverness-shire and Ross-shire areas. Many felt that the Highlands and Inverness in particular, despite its city status, did not demonstrate an ethos that welcomed diversity and this was exacerbated by the lack of a systematic infrastructure to support ESOL/EFL teaching and learning. As a consequence, the area was felt to be missing out on opportunities for attracting more students.

Post-School Decision Making and Participation

The main motivation for engaging in further study was employment related. Education was perceived as the main mechanism for achieving social mobility. However, minority ethnic participation in post-school education provision seemed to be below their share of the research study area population as a whole. In this context, the reasons for under-representation of minority ethnic groups in the research study area were a combination of factors, for example, lack of local availability of subjects (e.g. medicine and law), lack of information and understanding of what is available in the local institutions, especially the Colleges and UHI Millennium Institute and promotional/marketing strategies which fail to engage proactively with minority ethnic groups and individuals.

The two most important factors in decisions about location of study were availability of relevant course options and the reputation of the institution. Buying into a 'known brand' was seen as critical in making decisions as to where to study.

Word of mouth was the main vehicle for accessing information. Family, relatives and friends were the primary sources of information in relation to further and higher education opportunities across all age

groups. Institutional efforts at marketing and promotional activities did not reach most of the minority ethnic population.

Post-school decision making is a complex process, which is affected by structural factors (e.g. ethnicity, gender and class) as well as by individual choice and preferences. Although there were a number of adult participants who expressed a preference for their young people to have the option of studying in their local area, the majority perceived the society and culture to be 'too insular'. Most young people felt socially and culturally disengaged from the majority culture and preferred to be in an environment which was more culturally diverse and which valued diversity explicitly.

Access to Further and Higher Education

The main barriers to accessing post-school education appeared to be:

- language barriers and lack of/inadequate ESOL/EFL provision,
- lack of understanding of the qualifications framework and the employment opportunities that may arise from undertaking specific qualifications,
- poor guidance and advice especially in relation to those with overseas qualifications, and
- lack of flexibility of provision in the Colleges

Once in the System, What Then?

Those who had participated in post-school educational provision, especially ESOL/EFL, expressed positive views about their course experiences and their relationship with their tutors/lecturers. The lecturers were described as being supportive, despite the institutional context in which they had to work. However, the majority of participants felt that the local institutions lacked an ethos that reflected a respect for diversity and the absence of a diverse workforce was seen as a disadvantage. In addition, the majority of participants expressed disappointment at the lack of consultation, responsiveness and understanding on the part of educational providers with regard to their specific educational needs. This was particularly the case when it came to offering relevant and appropriate course guidance and advice, making information more accessible and understandable and offering courses that were flexible to meet their specific needs.

Recommendations

Focus on needs and rights to services rather than numbers

The Colleges and HEIs in the research study area should adopt a more proactive approach to addressing the needs of minority ethnic groups and give serious consideration to how they might promote positive relations with all sections of the community. In collaboration with other bodies and initiatives (e.g. health, local authority community planning), institutions could be making more of an effort to understand the nature of the communities they seek to serve by:

- using current and local/regional data sources (e.g. Census 2001) to plan provision more effectively at local and regional levels,
- being more creative and proactive in accessing and consulting 'hard to reach' groups, for example, by establishing contact with individuals / 'gatekeepers', agencies and groups that are in touch or are working with minority ethnic individuals/households as well as using resources such as the electoral roll for supplementary information.

"One Size Fits All" will not work

Mass marketing and promotional approaches are inappropriate when the potential minority ethnic post-school market is highly differentiated. Institutions need to explore more creative methods of communicating and conveying information about their courses and qualifications that make it meaningful to this audience.

Institutions may wish to consider a range of strategies. For example:

- developing more outreach marketing and /promotional activities, by going out to communities,
- mentoring schemes to promote a better understanding of the curriculum and what qualifications and employment it can lead to,
- translating key documents (e.g. course overviews and access to funding) into relevant languages and ensuring that information is circulated to the relevant networks and publications accessed by these groups, and
- collaboration across institutions and with agencies working with minority ethnic groups to provide specialist advice and information to those with overseas qualifications

ESOL/EFL provision

Academic partners of UHI Millennium Institute working at the local authority level as well as the regional level (i.e. Highlands and Islands) in collaboration with other sectors (such as the local authorities and voluntary sector) should explore how and in what ways the unmet demand in ESOL/EFL provision might be addressed. There is a need to explore and clarify the roles that different providers may play in ESOL /EFL provision, drawing on the strengths of each sector. For example, provision for absolute beginners may be best provided in informal settings by the local authority and voluntary sectors, whereas advanced

provision might be provided more appropriately by the Colleges. In general there is a need for the provision to be more systematic with a vision of how students may progress not only from one level to another of ESOL/EFL provision but also to other educational provision.

In addition, the courses that are provided should be reviewed to ensure that the content and student numbers are consistent with good teaching practice.

Guidance, support and information

Staff involved in guidance and support need to be more sensitive to the diverse needs of minority ethnic groups. UHI Millennium Institute could provide a useful mechanism for its academic partners to work with parents, schools, community groups and all relevant guidance professionals to develop a more holistic approach to information and guidance with regard to post-school provision.

The North Forum should work in collaboration with agencies such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority to explore ways of providing accessible, relevant and appropriate information sensitively, including making the qualifications framework easier to comprehend.

Institutional commitment -embedding an ethos which respects and values diversity

Recruitment processes should emphasise skills such as 'cultural sensitivity' (i.e. a sound knowledge and experiential base of diversity issues), which should be part of the person specification for posts. Job advertisements should be circulated to places and publications that are relevant to under-represented groups.

In general, the senior management of the institutions based in the research study area need to demonstrate their commitment to equality by establishing an ethos where individuals feel respected and valued. Institutions need to give serious consideration to how they engage with diversity issues proactively at different levels of the organisation and across different functional areas (e.g. management, reception, recruitment marketing, curriculum planning and teaching). They need to consider how effective they are in preparing all learners to work and live in an increasingly diverse society, irrespective of the presence or absence of minority ethnic groups and individuals.

The role of North Forum

North Forum could provide a useful mechanism for institutions to collectively address a number of issues raised by this report, for example data collection, consulting with communities, training of staff, developing more accessible information, as well as sharing of good practice.

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July 2005

References

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