



Feature: Ethnic minority parents

Culture shift

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Education Correspondent

A project to get ethnic minority parents more involved in their children's schools is the first of its kind

When Rami Ousta was first asked to take part in running his children's school in Glasgow, by joining the board in the days before parent councils, his first reaction was confusion, and perhaps even a little

fear. "I thought, why are they asking me?" Originally from Syria, Ousta had no concept of helping to shape his children's education. "Where I come from, I would never dream of having a say in my child's education. The state school controls everything. Nobody can interfere in the education setting, or wouldn't dare. That culture is carried here."

A quarter of a century later, as the head of minority empowerment organisation BEMIS, Ousta is helping to oversee a unique project in partnership with the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC) to try and foster greater engagement in school life by ethnic minority parents, called Gathered Together. "We don't live in this country because we are ethnic minorities – we live in this country because we are citizens."

Issues around ethnic and cultural minority integration often appear to get less attention in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK.

Scotland's minority population is much smaller – making up just 4 per cent of the total compared with 14 across England and Wales, according to the 2011 census – and when it comes to educational attainment, the gap between native and non-native pupils is smaller. The 2012 PISA survey showed minority pupils in Scotland as a whole outperforming their peers.

That doesn't mean that Scotland's ethnic minorities are fully engaged in all aspects of society. Schools in particular can often be the first public service that new immigrants encounter when they arrive in the UK, but language barriers and lack of confidence on the part of minorities, coupled with a lack of awareness on the part of school communities, can open up a gulf between the two.

The size of that gulf has been hinted at by the first piece of work undertaken for Gathered Together, a mapping exercise

of attitudes amongst Scotland's parent councils. Of the 328 groups that responded, 77 per cent said they had no ethnic or cultural minority parents as members. More revealing was some of the written feedback. One parent council wrote that there was "difficulty in engaging with parents from all groups, never mind ethnic minorities". Another commented that "Is this translation necessary? We live in an English-speaking country!"

"Some of the comments that came in were a bit scary," says Ousta. "Other groups would have pointed a finger at the parent councils to say, look at these answers and how bad they are. In fact, we admire them for being brave and coming up with these answers." Recrimination is entirely absent from the vocabulary of the project, which is built around the idea of 'active citizenship' and focuses far more on parents exercising their responsibilities than on rights. "It's nothing to do with racism or discrimination – it's a gap in terms of empowering or enabling participation."

SPTC executive director Eileen Prior says increasing diversity is something that parent councils have wanted to act on for a long time, without knowing how best to go about it until now. "This is one of the issues we hear about most often from our members and they need a great deal of help and support to address this. It is very unlikely to change spontaneously," says Prior. "This is truly a ground-breaking project – we're tackling something which has not been addressed before."

While most local authorities have been supportive of the project, it has encountered some unhelpful attitudes. Ousta says one council representative told him: 'We don't need this – even my gardener, who is Polish, speaks English'. He adds that over recent years, BEMIS has collected evidence of 44 incidents of prejudice directed towards ethnic minority pupils in Scottish schools, including one student being told: "You don't have to worry whether you do well in high school or not, because you can always go to work in your dad's takeaway".

Ousta says those kinds of comments betray a culture of low expectations towards minority pupils that is contributing to reduced participation in further education, and higher youth unemployment. Greater parental engagement is a powerful tool in combating that. "It's evident from various pieces of research that the child who sees

their parent or parents involved in their school and their education will perform better and take their work more seriously, and the parents themselves become more aware about the potential available in terms of future choices for their children," says Ousta.

Gathered Together is being funded by the Third Sector Early Intervention Fund, which is administered by the Big Lottery Fund, and kicked off with an event at the Scottish Parliament at the end of January. Six pilot

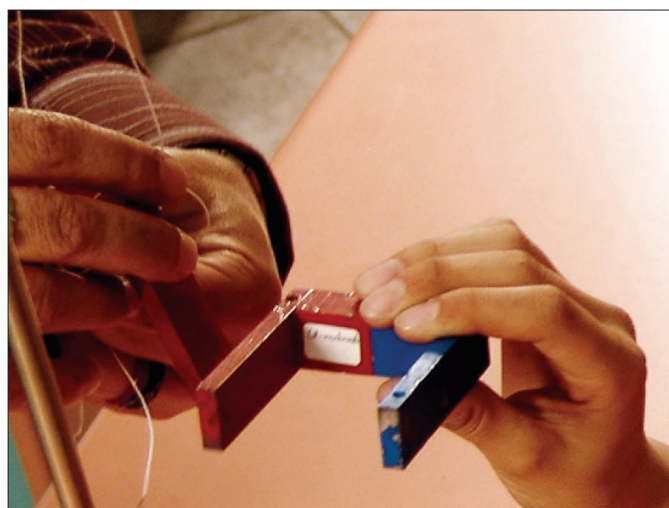
Scotland's minority population, women would be expected to defer to their husbands when it came to interacting with officialdom. "Often women are less confident about their language skills, and so they would prefer their husbands to deal with school," says Fairweather. Asked about the barriers they face in getting involved with the school community, she says some women have responded with the likes of, 'I've got to do the housework so I've not got time to engage with the school.'

But Gathered Together has started to help some of those women overcome both their fears and cultural expectations, and respond strongly to the project. "They're also the ones that would probably have closest contact with their child, and they're interested and very passionate about how their child's doing," says Fairweather. "They just need support and encouragement to get more involved."

The project is also helping to bridge inter-generational gaps that can open up in minority families between first and second-generation immigrants. Fairweather tells the story of an Algerian woman who has become actively involved in the parent council at her son's schools. "She was saying that because she's from Algeria and comes from that heritage, and then her son is growing up Scottish with a completely different heritage and different values, she found that there was a kind of distance growing between them."

"But by getting involved in her child's education, she feels a lot closer to him and she understands the environment that he's in every day, and that's made a big impact on their relationship. That brought home the reason that we're doing this project – it's to help parents have that closeness with their child as well as obviously being involved in their education and making sure that their child realises how important school is."

Ousta says Gathered Together is attracting interest from around Europe, with groups in Greece and Germany getting in touch to ask whether similar schemes could be launched in their own countries, and could also inspire imitators closer to home. LGBT and disability rights groups are keen to see if the approach could work for them, something that Ousta is enthusiastic about – the context is less important than the approach, he says. "It's a cultural shift we're trying to make." ■



"It's nothing to do with racism or discrimination – it's a gap in terms of empowering or enabling participation"

areas have been identified, covering the Glasgow, Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen, Stirling, Clackmannanshire Falkirk and Fife council areas. Through BEMIS and the SPTC's existing networks, the project is reaching out to parent councils and ethnic minority communities alike, offering training and support to try and broaden engagement.

The goal is to work with 90 per cent of parent and local ethnic minority organisations within each pilot area within two years, delivering support in order to increase engagement. BEMIS participation and development worker Marion Fairweather says interest has been considerable, with as many as six training sessions already being delivered in Glasgow alone.

The project has thrown up a few benefits that weren't anticipated at the outset. In some of the communities that make up

Interview: Peter McColl

Working title

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Scotland's most outspoken university rector wants action on governance

Is Peter McColl the most remarkable rector in Scottish higher education? It may seem an absurd question to ask when you place him alongside his current peers: ice-cream tycoon Maitland Mackie at the University of Aberdeen, celebrated actor Brian Cox at Dundee, and for a little while yet, the colourful former Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy at Glasgow.

Indeed, if in a couple of weeks students at the University of Glasgow vote to replace Kennedy with fugitive NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, the entire field will be dwarfed by a global gesture of symbolic activism not seen since Winnie Mandela or Mordechai Vanunu held the post.

What, then, makes Peter McColl so remarkable?

The fact that he has something to say about the way Scottish higher education is governed. Of all Scotland's rectors, symbolic or otherwise, Edinburgh's is the only one elected by both staff and students, giving the holder a particularly powerful voice in the sector. It's a voice that McColl is intent on using.

In the first two years of his three-year term, Royal Voluntary Service public affairs manager and Green Party activist McColl has helped students push for better accommodation and for the first ever, a freeze in international tuition fees at a Scottish university. "For a lot of students who were subject to variations in exchange rates, and who may have been struggling to pay the fees when they were going up ten or 15 per cent per year, to have the university say they were going to stop that was a really big thing." But the role isn't about acting on the issues students bring to him, McColl says – it's to make sure their voice is heard, and that the university's institutions are sufficiently democratic that they can take action themselves.

"I don't think the rector is doing the job



right if they have a long list of achievements. I think what the rector needs to do is to point to a list of achievements by the staff and students at the institution that they've helped to facilitate."

He was well-schooled in the soft power a rector can wield long before he took the role: as a student, McColl campaigned to get fellow Green Robin Harper elected, and then served as rector's assessor for another Green, Mark Ballard. His decision to stand himself was predicated on the idea of an active, campaigning voice – he was asked to run by a leading figure in the Edinburgh Uncut movement, a non-aligned student group behind many of the anti-austerity protests in the city in recent years.

"I think the role of rector is one of the really special things about the Scottish higher education system," says McColl "It's something that I think a lot of other corporate governance could learn from."

Before the concept can take the private sector by storm, however, it will need to expand beyond its narrow beachhead in the Scottish university sector. Just five universities have rectors, something that the 2012 Von Prondzyski review of higher education

governance said should change.

Two years on, and the majority of his recommendations, including that one, remain unimplemented. "I think it's important that creating rectors across the sector is something we begin to have a debate around. I think that's an important issue for a lot of people in the sector." McColl says the current system lacks clarity. Officially, he and his peers are chairs of the university courts, the governing bodies of their institutions. This isn't always the case in practice – Edward Snowden would find it difficult to participate, for instance – and McColl isn't party to meetings of the committee of court chairs, the group representing all 19 Scottish university courts.

The group wields considerable influence, and last year was the key player in commissioning the first Scottish code of governance for universities, a document that McColl's electorate – staff and students – weren't particularly impressed with. "It's not good to have people coming to me saying, you are the chair of court, why are you not going to these meetings, when the university is sending somebody else. That's something that needs to be clarified, and I hope that the Government will clarify that."

The Scottish Government has promised a higher education governance bill to push Von Prondyzski's proposals through, but it did not feature in its programme for the current parliamentary session, pushing the enactment of any reforms beyond the independence referendum, and likely into 2015. "We have an assurance from the Cabinet Secretary that it will be implemented, and that seems to stand – when I've spoken to him, that's what he's said. I'd quite like to see what the timescale is for that," says McColl, who adds that he "will be disappointed" if work hasn't begun by referendum polling day. "I think we need to move on this sooner rather than later."

University governance reform is a dry topic even in policy circles, and it can sometimes be presented simply as a wonkish effort at spring cleaning by the Scottish Government. McColl, however, is keen to remember what's at stake. "It's not terribly sexy, but I think it's got relevance and importance, especially if you look at what happened at the Edinburgh College of Art and the problems when you have a real failing of governance." It's often forgotten that a part-publicly funded institution effectively failed and had to be rescued through merger with another university, thanks to poor leadership and

people to understand what was happening much better, and again that's something that Edinburgh has been pretty good at."

Sir Timothy O'Shea, principal of the University of Edinburgh, has effectively had his pay frozen for several years. "That's the sort of restraint that's appropriate at a time when universities are arguing for restraint," McColl does accept that universities need to compete with highest-paying roles in public and private sector management to secure the right leaders, but adds: "On the other hand, I think universities could very easily afford the sort of pay demands that staff and unions are asking for, and I think that would be my priority, not university principals getting pay rises running into double figures."

Debates over principals' pay are nothing compared to those over tuition fees, already a charged topic before they were drawn into the question of Scottish independence. Like all Green Party supporters, McColl is in an invidious position: because the referendum debate is dominated by the SNP's vision of independence, his desire for Scottish independence rests on the success or failure of Scottish Government policy to win over the public. When it comes to tuition fees, however, those are policies that McColl not

"I think that the view you would get from a group of rectors is a very different view from the view you would get from a group of university chairs, and that is one of the key arguments behind having more directly elected chairs of court"

financial management. A similar failure at a quango or public body would likely have had serious and immediate consequences.

Efforts to reform university governance have instead been more sedate, and the consequences are already being felt. Headlines last month about 'inflation busting' pay rises for 'greedy' university principals brought an aspect of governance into the public eye, with particular embarrassment given ongoing rolling strikes by lecturers over a 1 per cent pay offer.

It's a headache that could easily be avoided, says McColl, if more was being done to respond to Von Prondyzski's calls for accountability on principals' pay, including student and staff membership of remuneration committees. "It's important that we have full engagement in remuneration. That may not actually curtail rising principals' pay – but I think it would be a good democratic principle and it would allow

only thinks are wrong, but also bad politics.

"Some of the anxieties have been overstated" about a feared "stampede north" of 'fee refugees', McColl says. "I was a student in Belfast the first year that the Irish abolished their fees, and in that year the UK introduced fees, and there was absolutely no movement," he says. "Politically, it would be better to say, 'we'll take the hit on the fees and kill the issue' so it no longer looks like we're trying to shut out English, Welsh and Northern Irish students, which to me looks really, really bad."

If the SNP believes in free tuition that should mean free tuition for everyone, says McColl. If the bill for supporting that conviction is £150m then that is, as Education Secretary Michael Russell told the *Scotsman* in 2012, "a price worth paying".

"When California decided to give free tuition to out-of-state students, the result was effectively Silicon Valley. Now, they could have skimmed a few dollars in the 1950s and

IN BRIEF

EIS launches workload campaign

Scotland's largest teaching union has launched a campaign to highlight the workload faced by teachers dealing with budget cuts and the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. Launching the EIS campaign at a rally in Glasgow, the union's Glasgow secretary Hugh Donnelly said workload and cuts were a "toxic combination", and that "there is no fat left to trim".

College numbers fall

The number of students at Scottish colleges has continued to fall, raising fears about opportunities for women and part-time learners. There were 140,000 fewer students at college in 2012-13 than in 2007-08, with the vast majority of the fall made up of part-time students. Female enrolment over the same period was down by almost 120,00. The Scottish Government said it had kept its pledge to keep full-time equivalent places above 116,000 although these also fell slightly.

Principals' pay under scrutiny

University principals in Scotland took home average pay rises of four per cent, while offering staff a one per cent pay deal, according to figures published by *The Herald*. The largest pay rise was for Heriot-Watt University principal Steve Chapman, whose pay package rose 24 per cent, however, some principals had pay freezes extended. Rolling strike action by university lecturers has continued, with two two-hour walkouts.

UK 'xenophobia' is 'revolting'

Education Secretary Michael Russell has attacked UK immigration policy as being "driven by UKIP and by a nasty xenophobia" which "revolts" him. In a speech to a conference on higher education and the Scottish independence referendum, Russell said restrictions on student visas, which have seen the first ever decrease in the total number of overseas students in the UK, were damaging Scottish universities.

Regulator ends schools probe

The charities regulator OSCR has finished its investigation of the charitable status of Scotland's fee-paying schools by confirming that six schools met the charities test. In just over a year, OSCR has investigated 40 independent schools and educational trusts. Three schools remain under direction to increase their charitable activities through greater tuition fee bursary funding, including Loretto. Fettes was also told to increase its funding for poorer pupils.

Fee refugees could take 80% of places

Education Secretary Michael Russell has claimed that up to 80 per cent of all university places in Scotland would be taken by students from the rest of the United Kingdom if rUK fees weren't charged in an independent Scotland. Russell said that scoping had been undertaken for the Scottish Government which showed that the number of rUK students would rise from roughly 14,000 to over 90,000. ■

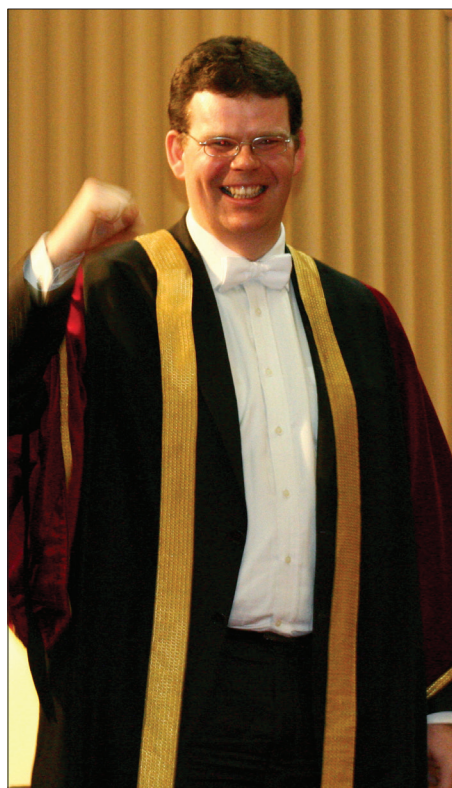


Photo by Ric Lander (Flickr)

1960s, but they wouldn't have ended up with Apple and Microsoft. I think if you're looking at creating the type of society that we want, having people come here for education – people who are likely to stay – is a good thing.”

According to some commentators, the issue of rUK fees after independence goes to the heart of whether an independent Scotland could afford to maintain free tuition at all. Some have even suggested that the intervention of Universities Scotland in the debate with its own legal advice suggests that universities are opposed to free tuition. While he doesn't speak for the university, McColl says that his conversations with senior Edinburgh officials haven't revealed that view.

“I don't think there's any desire from Edinburgh University for there to be fees. I think there are probably other universities that do want fees,” he says. “For Edinburgh University, one of the main concerns is about widening participation and getting people from non-traditional backgrounds, so fees are a very clear disincentive for people from those backgrounds.”

Widening access is at the heart of what McColl says is the university's biggest concern: to reverse the impression that has

grown amongst ordinary Edinburgh citizens that its status as an ancient and world-leading institution means it “isn't for them”. “The university has been fighting very hard against that image for the past 15 years. There's been a really concerted effort to try and make Edinburgh University appear, the way Glasgow University appears, to be a university for the city.”

That image problem is shared by many if not all of Scotland and the UK's ancient universities, who are seen as guardians of narrow privilege in an increasingly unequal society. The sight of university court chairs criticising widening participation measures in evidence to a Scottish Parliament committee last year did little to improve that image, even if universities themselves are working hard to make their admissions more reflective of society.

That, says McColl, is yet another reason to create more roles like his across the sector in Scotland. “I think that the view you would get from a group of rectors is a very different view from the view you would get from a group of university chairs, and that is one of the key arguments behind having more directly elected chairs of court, by staff and students,” says McColl. “That's what I think would be good governance.” ■

From the Chalkface

To boldly go...

In December, one of Scotland's major local authorities issued a circular with an appeal to its staff to – “Share your BOLD ideas”.

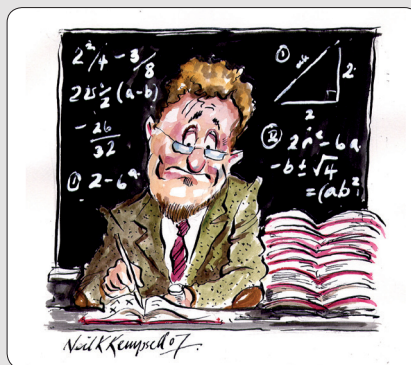
Staff were reminded: “We need to make significant savings and deliver better services with fewer resources. As demand for our services grows, we need to look closely at the way we operate so that we can achieve **Better Outcomes** through **Leaner Delivery** (BOLD).”

It should have been obvious that an acronym was coming, one which projected a vision which was the polar opposite of the set of ideas and objectives which underpinned it!

The missive stressed that the particular council needed to reduce spending by 8 per cent, £327m over the next four years. The BOLD team is being led by the council's Chief Executive and its Director of Corporate Governance (now there's a title redolent of the Ministry of Truth!) with representatives from each service area and it promised that ideas and suggestions could be treated anonymously.

Anonymity will certainly be essential for those advocating further cuts. If those willing to make such suggestions were to name themselves, social isolation in the workplace would be the least of the consequences.

The circular offered staff various BOLD ideas which had already been generated, including the removal of individual departmental budget control as a way



to get rid of 'silo' thinking and the creation of a council-wide booking system to maximise income from its venues.

These are precisely the centralising managerial tendencies which have robbed local schools and other resources of the capacity to manage their local budgets creatively but with due regard to the needs of the service and local communities which they serve. The centralising of finance and HR systems by the council robbed schools of the educationally-knowledgeable finance and HR staff. It saw teaching jobs advertised in the middle of school holidays by generic HR staff, ignorant of how education works.

It is a supreme irony that the new managerial culture reiterates the savings rhetoric but adds bureaucratic inefficiency to the base cost of services. At the same time, savings are being implemented in ways which impact directly on both teachers' workloads and on learning. Larry Flanagan of the EIS has described bureaucracy

as “the dead hand lying on top of Curriculum for Excellence”.

It should be stressed, from what I hear from colleagues, certainly across the central belt, that these experiences are near ubiquitous. At one level it is no wonder, given the now long-standing council tax freeze, that local authorities are being squeezed until the pips squeak. Such cuts may be inevitable. [I do not believe so. There are better ways of organising an economy and of organising public expenditure.] Even if they are inevitable, however, is it necessary to dress them in such dishonest language: **Better Outcomes** through **Leaner Delivery**? Where did 'leaner' delivery ever lead to better outcomes?

What is happening is that staff in schools are becoming drained. Those who can retire are getting out. Those who can wind down are doing so. Management is stretched to the limit. Classroom teachers are running hard to stand still. Teachers are not of course unique in feeling the pressures. That is the experience across the public and private sectors and in the public sector generally there have at least been no compulsory redundancies.

If 2014 is to be better than 2013, if morale in education is to be boosted, budgets need boosting and bureaucracy needs drastic pruning. If these reforms are beyond the capacity of the system, may we at least have honest, straight-forward language? ■

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