

Experiences of Ethnic Minority Parents Knowledge of the education system

KEY FINDINGS

- 34% of parents felt they understood the education system in primary school very to extremely well
- 42% of parents felt that they did not understand the secondary school education system at all
- 49% of parents did not know what exams their children will sit
- When asked what options were available to their children on finishing school the majority of parents cited university or college. There was very low awareness of Modern Apprenticeship opportunities and vocational training
- 20% of parents had been given information about the Curriculum for Excellence
- 14% of parents stated that they had not received any information prior to their child starting school, 40% of parents had got information from friends, neighbors and family and 35% from school or nursery
- When asked what information they would like parents cited more information about the school system, clarification on what happens at each stage of school and how to support their children with choosing subjects and post-school options

KNOWLEDGE OF THE SCOTTISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

Of the families interviewed in the questionnaire 157 of them (96%) had at least one parent who was not born in the UK. For families new to the Scottish education system it is vital that they have access to information about how their children are being taught and assessed so that they are able to work with the school to support their children's learning.

We wanted to explore what parents knew about the education system and identify if there were any key gaps in their knowledge.

UNDERSTANDING OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Parents were asked to state how well they understood the education system at a primary and secondary level

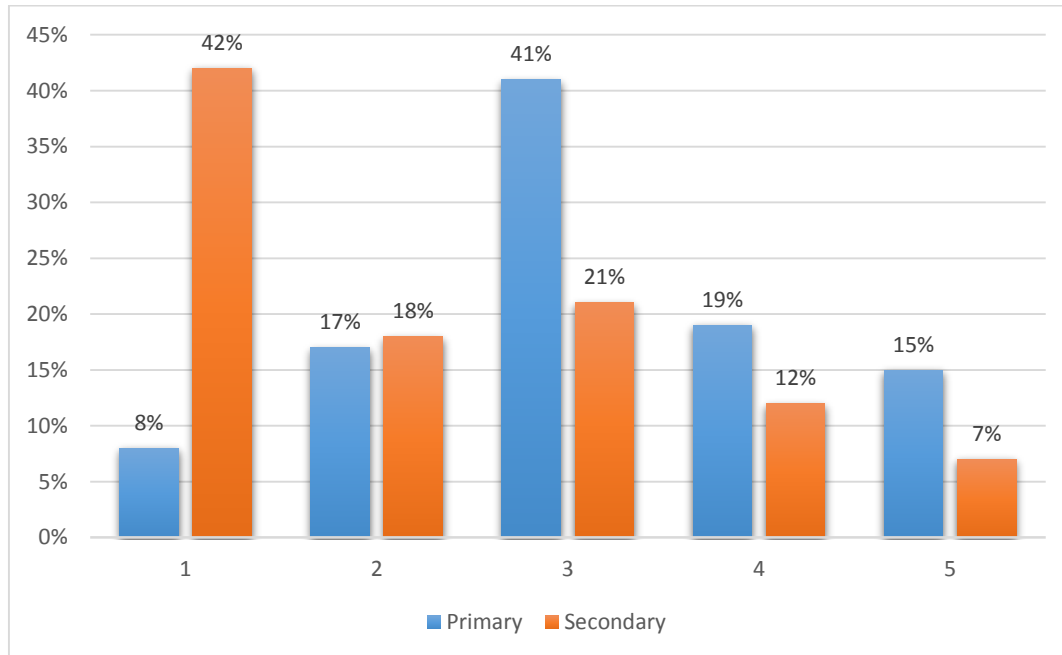


Figure 1: On a scale of 1-5 how well do you understand the education system?

As can clearly be seen from the above graph parents feel they understand the primary system far more than the secondary with only 7% of parents stating they understood the secondary system very well compared to 15% of parents who felt they understood the primary school system very well. It is worth noting that only 49 of the families interviewed had children in secondary and this lack of direct contact with high school would explain why many of the parents expressed less confidence in understanding the secondary education system.

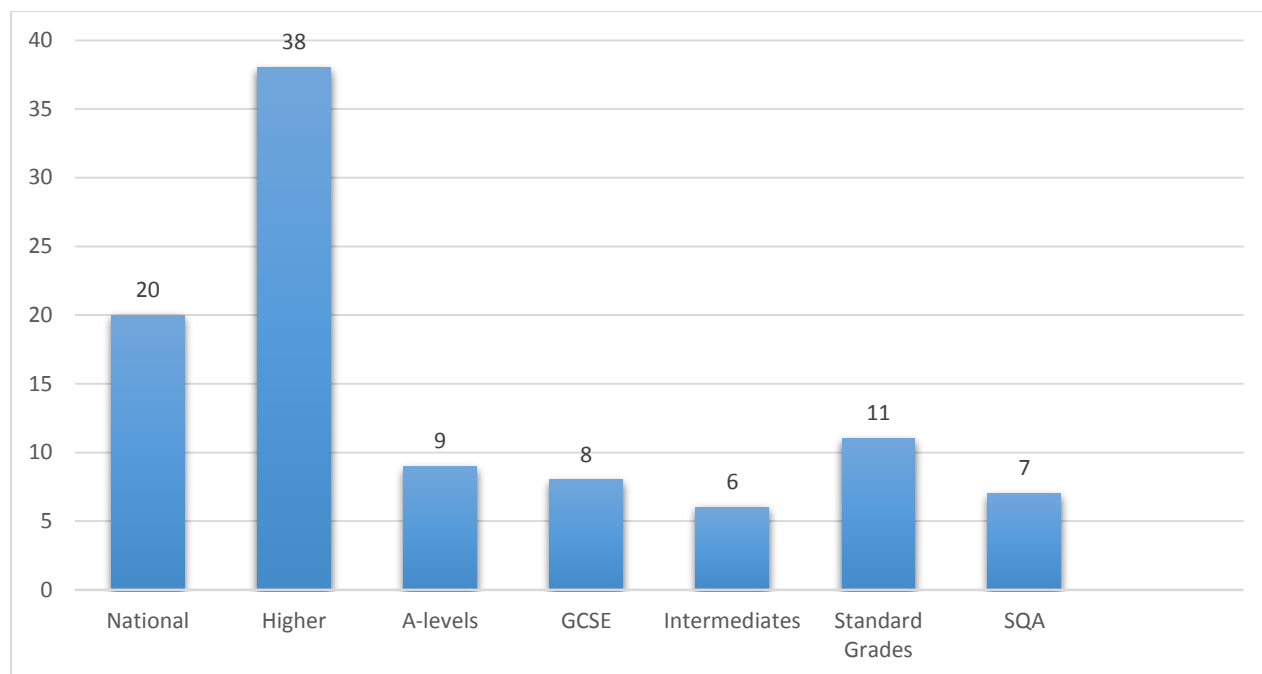


Figure 2: What types of secondary school exams do you know?

81 respondents (49%) said that they did not know what exams children sit in secondary school, of those who did give an answer 17 respondents mentioned exams that are used in England (A levels and GCSEs) but are not used within Scotland. This could be the result of media coverage of education in England and limited understanding of the differences in education and exam systems between the two countries. There have been significant changes to the exam system with the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence, this has meant that exams like “intermediates” and “standard grades” have been phased out- parents who do not have children going through the exam system may well not have been aware of these changes.

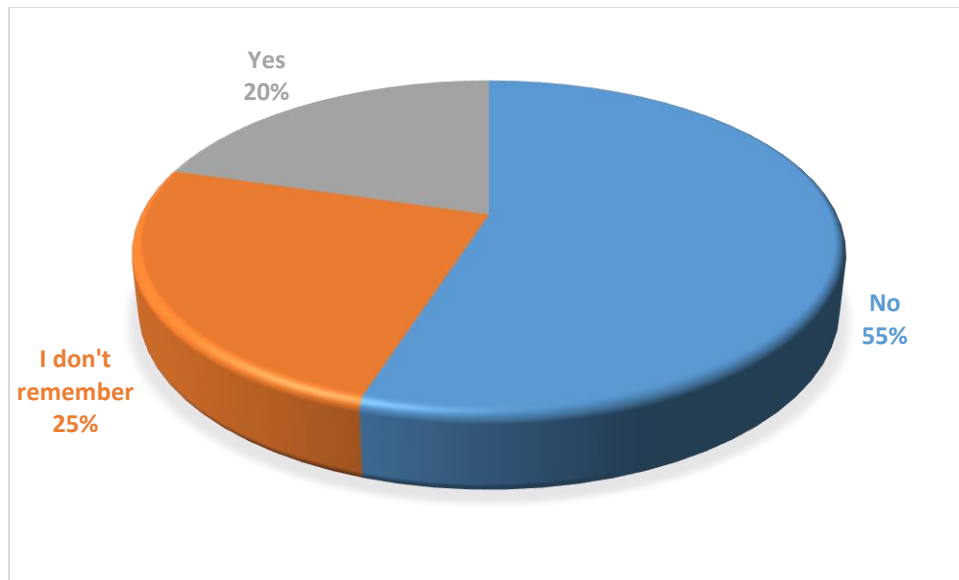


Figure 3: Have you been given some information about the Curriculum for Excellence? (Sample size: 162)

The Curriculum for Excellence was introduced into Scottish education in 2010-2011, it is a new approach to education focusing on building the four capacities- to enable each child to be a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor. The Curriculum aims to provide a holistic experience for learners linking subject areas- for example incorporating maths into a physical education lesson.

When asked about the Curriculum for Excellence the majority of the parents did not appear to be well informed, 55% said that they had received no information about it. 98 parents (60% of respondents) stated they did not know what the Curriculum for Excellence was.

No idea at all- but I know from someone who told me it is very hard to understand (Mother, Pakistan)

Those parents who did give an answer were generally uncertain, acknowledging that they had heard of it but were not sure of the content or what it means

Exam? I don't know (Mother, Poland)

Kind of- not sure, school stuff (Mother, Pakistan)

There was a general perception that the Curriculum for Excellence was very complicated and several parents stated that they would not be able to understand it.

Not much information as I have been told that it's very complex- I wouldn't understand it (Mother, South Africa)

31 (20%) of the parents displayed a reasonable understanding of the Curriculum and the principles behind it

They want to give children general knowledge and to help them to be more aware not only of education, but also of relationship to the community I think they are trying to teach different aspects of culture, religion (Mother, Greece)

Improving the way of teaching and developing advanced education and also teaching health and well-being (Mother, Bangladesh)

Two parents also expressed concern around the CfE and the variation between different school and teachers

What I am unhappy with is the fact that the delivery of the Curriculum very much depends on the ability of the teacher (Mother, Poland)

Post-school choices

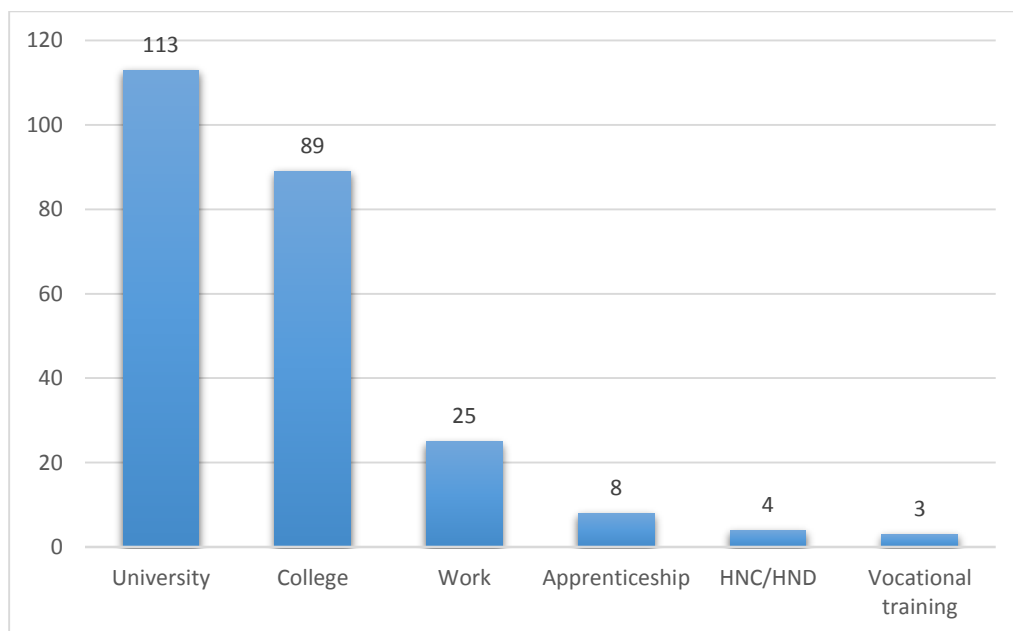


Figure 4: What educational choices are available after secondary school?

When asked about what options would be open to their children after secondary school the vast majority of parents cited university, many parents were also aware of college as an option but this was seen as being a second choice if their child was unable to access university. Only 8 parents were aware of the Modern Apprenticeship scheme.

PROVISION OF INFORMATION

We asked parents what information they had received before their child started school- the majority (40%) of parents got information from friends, neighbours and family members.

My next door neighbour's daughter went to the school before my daughter- she told me how it works in the school (Mother, South Africa)

Many parents (35%) also received information from school or nursery. This took the form of leaflets, open days and meeting with the teachers

Nursery provided Curriculum for Excellence leaflet. Open day at school. At the beginning of P1 induction/ information session for parents (Mother, Serbia)

In choosing a school several parents spoke about getting information from a variety of sources to help find the best school

From other mums; went to see the schools in question (about 8 schools)- made appointments with head teacher and asked everything. Read online forums about parents' questions, wrote down questions and asked them at the school (Mother, Bulgaria)

14% of parents had no information about school before their children started

Never had information about school system (Mother, Romania)

For many parents the internet was a key source of information about the school and helped parents find out more through school and council websites

Internet council website, individual school websites (Mother, Bulgaria)

In the case of one parent, they were able to research schools on line before coming to Scotland

Websites before leaving Poland; also more info from other Polish parents here with older children (Mother, Poland)

In contrast other parents had limited means of finding out information, several spoke of receiving a letter from the council telling them to register their child at a local school and having limited information, particularly around the school system.

As we are asylum seekers we receive a letter from the City Council about schools in our catchment area (Mother, Palestine)

I didn't get any information, only thing I have been told to register my son in the nearest school to my home (Mother Iraq)

We asked parents if there was any information about the school system in Scotland that they would like to be provided. The most common response was more information about the school system, including the curriculum, how secondary schools “work” and teaching methods.

I don't know what they should know by what stage. I would like more specific information about the curriculum (Mother, Slovakia)

I need to know all about the education system in primary and secondary school (Mother, China)

15 parents specifically mentioned help to understand how the exam system worked and how their children were being assessed

Would like to know more about exam system, which are the important years, when the big decisions are made (Mother, Greece)

4 parents specifically mentioned providing information in their language or in simple, accessible English

How high school works e.g. about choosing options/ subjects the general system at high school. It would be good to have this information in Polish (Mother, Polish)

3 parents also wanted more information about how schools provide relationship and sex education.

I would like to know more about sex education in primary. I feel quite concerned as not much information has been provided (Mother, Syria)

4 parents felt they needed more information about choices for their children once they finish school- these were generally focused on getting a place at university.

I would like to be provided with an information pack exploring choices of subject at secondary school level, the options they have, university entry requirements etc. (Mother, Poland)

We also asked the parents what would be the most effective way of providing them with information about school. The majority of parents suggested written information in the form

of leaflets, newsletters or information online. Having the information in an accessible format was often mentioned

Information in writing along the lines of "Scottish school system for dummies"- aimed at people from other countries. Colourful leaflets like the NHS information with plenty of graphics (Mother, USA)

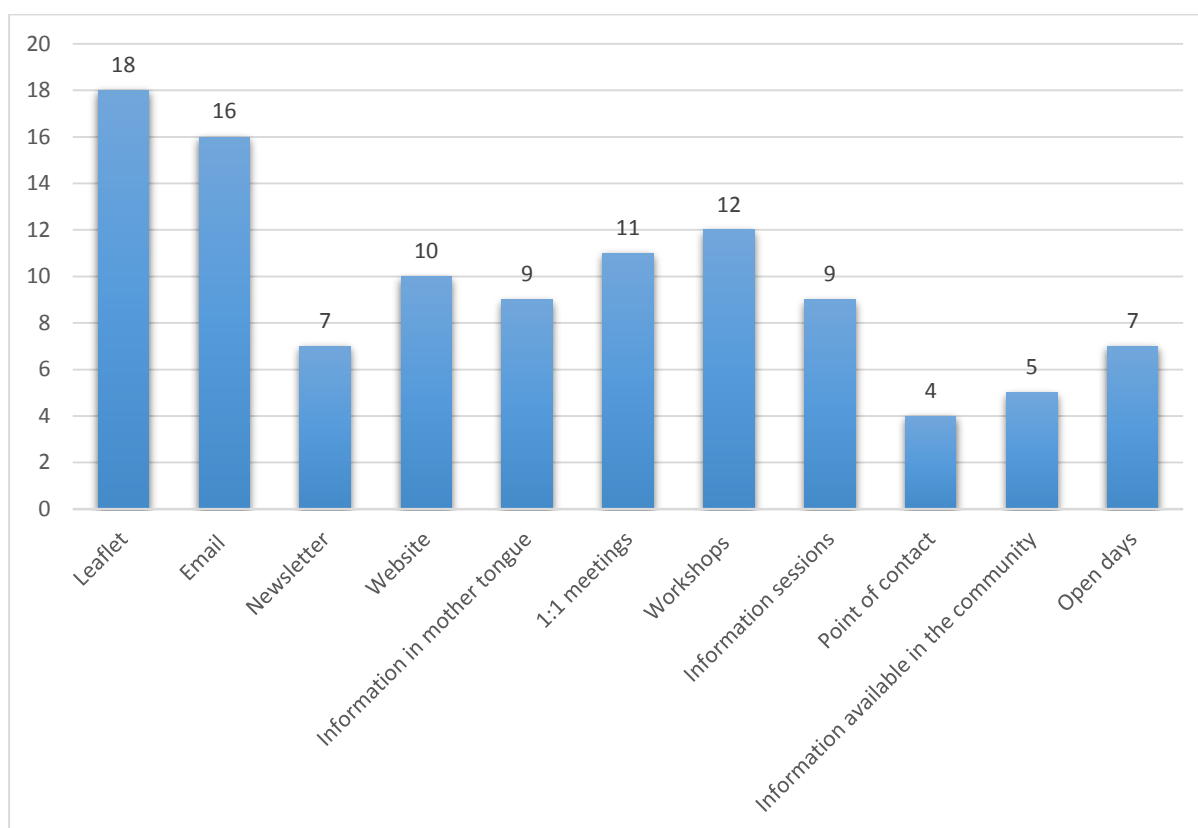


Figure 5: What would be the best way to provide parents with information about the school system in Scotland?

When asked the best way to inform parents about the school system in Scotland most respondents suggested several idea. These included providing both written information and the opportunity to discuss the information with a teachers

Information sheet or website; more regular updates on class website, so you could sit with your child and discuss what they have been doing in class (Mother, Poland)

Several parents mentioned the importance of having information in their own language, ideas included translated materials and providing interpreters for meetings.

Leaflets/ folders in different languages; bilingual school workers as contact points (Mother, Poland)

Letters in Urdu/ English can be translated. Meetings that gather parents (Mother, Pakistan)

Two parents specifically mentioned that they would like to see their child's text books, In Scotland text books are rarely taken home and parents felt that this would help them get a clearer understanding of what their child is being taught

The easiest way would be if they allowed children to bring home school work and textbooks. They only bring home worksheets and some jotters (Mother, Greece)

Several parents also suggested using other organisations to share information about the education system including community groups and housing associations

The information need to be provided well before the child starts school. Maybe at GPs, nursery, housing association, integration networks etc. (Mother, Syria)

1:1 education sessions, in the school or community groups, in informed environment (Mother, Nigeria)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of the questionnaire it is clear that the majority of respondents did not have a clear understanding of the Scottish education system, only 20% of respondents felt they knew what the Curriculum for Excellence was and 42% reported feeling they had no knowledge of the education system at a secondary level.

We feel that this is an area that needs to be addressed to ensure that parents from ethnic minorities are given the tools to be able to support their children's learning and work in partnership with the school and recommend the following actions:

- As highlighted in the OECD's report on improving schools in Scotland, there is a lack of clarity around the definitions of the Curriculum for Excellence. Teachers and schools need to be supported to develop the confidence to explain the education system to parents- including the ways their children will be taught, how they will be assessed etc.
- As one parent suggested, information leaflets along the lines of "Scottish school system for dummies" should be widely available in public areas, including GP

practices, libraries and community centres. Parents also advocated for providing this information in community languages such as Urdu, Polish and Arabic.

- Resources, particularly in secondary schools, need to be in place for schools to run information events (including interpreters, child care provision etc) to ensure that parents have the opportunity to ask questions and gain a full understanding of the Curriculum. There is an opportunity for partnership work with local community organisations to ensure that the families they work with are well-informed about the Curriculum.
- Improve access to information on post-school options- this includes teacher training on Modern Apprenticeships and supporting parents to be involved in careers meetings and discussions so that they are better able to support their children in making decisions
- Before a child starts school parents should be encouraged to visit the school, meet the teacher and Parent Council to get an understanding of how the school day will work, their responsibilities as a parent, where to access support etc. Resources should be available to provide interpreters for these meetings to enable ESOL parents to ask questions etc.