

## A comparison of how young people from different ethnic groups experience leaving school

Experiences and decisions made when leaving school can have powerful reverberations throughout the course of one's adulthood. Relatively little is known about how young people from minority ethnic communities understand and respond to this transition. This research, by Clare Cassidy, Rory O'Connor and Nike Dorrer, examined how young people from different minority ethnic groups experience growing up in Scotland. It compared these experiences with those of young white people to consider similarities and differences in the transition to adulthood. The study found:

- While most minority ethnic young people, like their white peers, chose to attend further or higher education after leaving secondary school, their choice of courses was less varied and concentrated primarily around the medical sciences. Family and community expectations also featured more in the decision-making process leading to these choices for minority ethnic young people.
- Young Pakistani people, in particular, were less likely than their white peers to move away to study and were more likely to express concerns about absence of family support and distractions from education goals and/or religious commitments away from home. Chinese young people were concerned that they were not yet independent enough to leave the parental home.
- The social networks of Pakistani and white young people contained the highest numbers of members from their own ethnic group. For all ethnic groups, except whites, the numbers of their friends from the same ethnic background decreased over time. There remain, however, considerable barriers to ethnic mixing among young people in Scotland, particularly in further and higher education.
- Young people from all minority ethnic groups were more likely to identify with their religion and ethnicity than were their white peers. People from different minority ethnic groups had different experiences of discrimination and perceptions of how others viewed their group.
- Minority ethnic young people claimed and accorded high importance to their Scottish identity, which they often expressed in terms of duality and diversity. Identification with being Scottish was associated with higher levels of self-esteem, particularly among Pakistani and Chinese young people.



## Background

There has been considerable research on the transition to adulthood, but there are significant gaps in our knowledge. These have implications for current policy and practice development. Research has focused on educational and occupational outcomes and has not systematically examined how experiences vary according to ethnicity and gender.

This research explores the transition from secondary school among young people. It:

- systematically examines differences between and similarities among young people from different ethnic groups;
- brings to the fore the perceptions, experiences and aspirations of young people, as well as looking at robust statistical data on a broad range of indicators;
- identifies a number of issues policy-makers and practitioners seeking to support young people in transition need to address.

The study involved two waves of data collection: 'Wave 1', between January and June 2003, when participants were all at secondary school in Glasgow; 'Wave 2', which followed approximately one year later.

## Education and occupation

When first interviewed, most participants across all ethnic groups wished to attend university. Only a few had changed their plans when interviewed again a year later. Most participants chose to attend a university in their home town. Pakistani young people, however, were more likely to study away from home. Compared with the other ethnic groups, white participants chose a greater variety of university courses. Participants from minority ethnic groups concentrated career choices largely around the medical sciences.

Questions about how participants had chosen their career path revealed that family and community expectations played a greater role for minority ethnic than for white participants. For some minority ethnic participants, securing autonomy and relying on the family as a business resource were important factors in their decision.

*Interviewer: "Why do you want to do that (start own business)?"*

*Participant: "I think I have been brought up in an environment where my family has always owned a business that they work in, just a family business, and we have got a lot of businesses, property, restaurants and all that. So I have never really been accustomed*

*to the idea of working for someone, so I think I would find it very difficult always being on time and having to be disciplined by my boss who is not like my Dad. I think that would be a big thing."*

*(Pakistani male, interviewed in Wave 2)*

## Home and family

Most participants across all ethnic groups lived at home with their parent(s) for the duration of the study, despite the fact that almost two-thirds of the participants had left school between Wave 1 and Wave 2. Pakistani participants lived in households with the largest number of people.

Qualitative analysis revealed that, in contrast to their white peers, Pakistani participants were more explicit about reciprocal caring commitments and negotiating individual needs and cultural/religious expectations. Their responses reflected concerns that, in the absence of family support, moving away from home carried risks, such as diverting attention from educational goals and/or religious commitments.

*Interviewer: "We have all got hopes and fears for the future in relation to work and university: what do you think your hopes are for a year's time?"*

*Participant: "That I make it through second year, like without all the drama that happened this year?"*

*Interviewer: "What was the drama?"*

*Participant: "Well I started drinking, like my first alcohol was in Fresher's Week. Too much running around with girls, I need to cut that down, cut down on the alcohol. I did cannabis and I don't think I will do that in the future; it wasn't bad or anything, but I don't want to get into bad habits. And basically I was putting my social life before my studying, and because of that I failed the December exam and I also failed the May exam, and I had a specialty to do at the end of May. If you get above 60 in that then you are through to second year and I got above 60, so ..."*

*(Pakistani male, Wave 2)*

This finding raises the question of whether universities provide ways of socialising and support suitable for the particular needs of young people from minority ethnic groups.

Compared with Pakistani young people, moving away to study seemed to be more usual for Indian participants. They often explained their choices in terms of career opportunities. Compared with those from other ethnic groups, Chinese participants expressed more concern that they were not yet independent enough to leave the parental home.

All participants reported good family relationships, but those from minority ethnic groups made a great distinction between the types of issues that could be discussed with family members. Minority ethnic participants may need to negotiate their family relationships not only in generational terms but also in terms of a dual cultural position.

### Social networks and leisure

Across all ethnic groups, most had kept the same network of friends at both time points, but siblings and parents seemed to play a decreasing role in their social lives. Pakistani and white participants reported significantly higher numbers of friends from their own ethnic group. However, for boys from minority ethnic groups, the number of their friends from the same ethnic group decreased over time. This wasn't the case for girls from minority ethnic groups; girls also tended to have more friends of the same ethnicity. Qualitative analysis suggested that there are still considerable barriers limiting ethnic mixing among young people in Scotland, particularly at university.

Interviewer: "What percentage of your close friends do you think are from the same ethnic group as you?"

Participant: "Quite a high percentage I would say. There are a lot of people I know and I keep in contact with and I talk to who are from a different ethnic group from me, but the percentage that I would say are friends, I would say about 80 to 90 per cent."

Interviewer: "Why do you think that is?"

Participant: "I have no idea. In school ... I think in university it is a funny thing, because I have noticed it a lot ... I don't know if it is the same with all universities, but [here] everybody seems to divide up, for some reason, I don't know why. But in school it was very different, everybody was kind of together and stuff and everybody was having a laugh."

(White male, Wave 2)

Participants from all groups spend a lot of their leisure time with friends. Pakistani and Chinese participants were least likely to state that their socialising activities included going to the pub or a club. In addition, Chinese participants mentioned activities based in town less frequently.

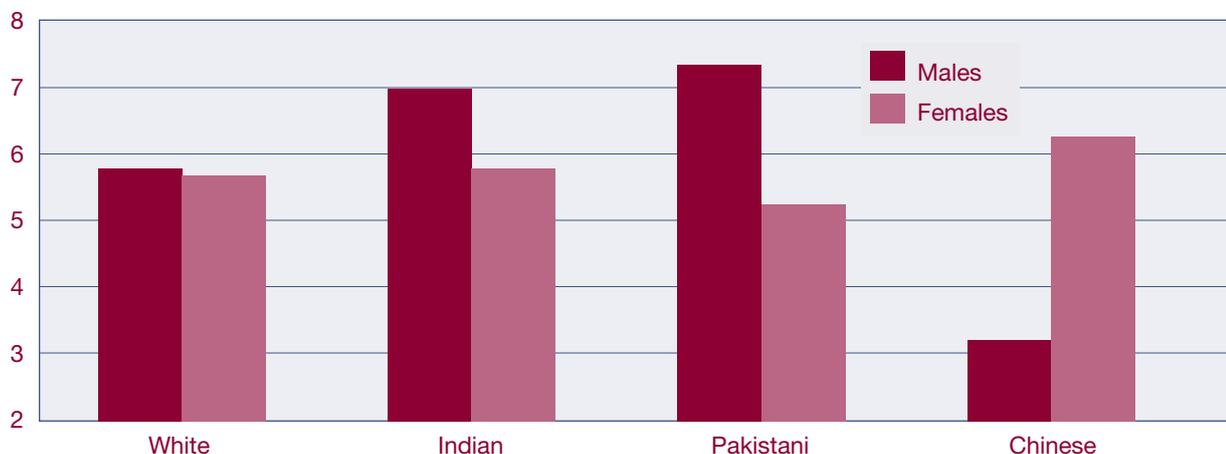
The findings suggest that there is a need to gain a greater understanding of both structural and psychological factors that may contribute to lack of ethnic mixing in further or higher education.

### Identity, ethnicity and religion

Between the two interviews, the importance of how their peers (siblings and friends) saw them increased for participants across all ethnic groups. Although broadly similar in terms of what they considered the most important elements of their identities overall, there were striking differences between minority ethnic and white participants in relation to religious and ethnic identities. For minority ethnic participants, religion and ethnicity were much more important than for their white peers. Indian and Pakistani participants, in particular, considered religion to be very closely tied to ethnicity. For many, religion had become more important than ethnicity.

Indian participants reported fewer experiences of prejudice and discrimination and more positive perceptions of how others viewed their ethnic group than did their Pakistani peers. Chinese participants also strongly identified with ethnic and, to a lesser extent, with religious identities. Interestingly, despite experiences of racism, Chinese participants had the most positive attitudes toward ethnic groups other than their own. Minority ethnic participants felt themselves to be Scottish and accorded this aspect of their identity high importance, in some cases, more than their white peers.

Figure 1: **Rated importance of scottish identity by gender and ethnicity**



Note. Importance was rated on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 10 (very important)

Minority ethnic participants tended to identify 'being Scottish' more broadly than their white peers, including markers such as accent, cultural knowledge and a connection to people of Scottish origin.

Interviewer: *"Can I ask you about being Scottish? How do you feel about being Scottish?"*

Participant: "I love being Scottish!"

Interviewer: *"You love being Scottish?"*

Participant: "I love the accent. I think it actually sounds really rough and you scare people off (laughs) ... I absolutely love it."

*(Pakistani female, Wave 2)*

While other people may not readily acknowledge these minority ethnic young people as Scottish, many minority ethnic participants appeared to draw on and 'negotiate' between aspects of two cultures, resulting sometime in hybrid identities such as 'Scottish Asian' or 'Scottish Muslim'.

Interviewer: *"How about being Scottish then, because you said that is not so important?"*

Participant: "It is important, it is just that when people look at me it is like ... it is not the first thing that would stick out, that I am Scottish. The first thing that would stick out is that I am Asian, because of my colour, but yes, I mean I am proud to be Scottish, definitely. I have been brought up very westernised, yet I have been brought up very traditional as well."

Interviewer: *"So you have two identities?"*

Participant: "Yes, there are two identities, yes. But I am more involved with the other identity, so that is why I said that was more important."

*(Indian female, Wave 2)*

Interviewer: *"Why do you think you feel Scottish?"*

Participant: "I'm not patriotic but I was born here and brought up here, it's part of my life. I suppose the diversity of it all, my friends and my family and all that, my influences and my environment and that, I makes me who I am and a lot of people see me as Scottish Pakistani as well, so I suppose, yes, it does give me that extra mark I suppose."

*(Pakistani male, Wave 2)*

## About the project

The study involved two 'waves' of data collection: the first was between January and June 2003 when participants were all at secondary school in Glasgow, the second followed approximately one year later. In both waves: a questionnaire gathered information on self-esteem, general health, stress, social support, depression, coping strategies, attributions for negative life events, ethnic identity, religious identification and perceived discrimination; interviews focused on education, home and family, social networks and leisure, access to information and services, ethnicity and identity and future plans and aspirations.

The analysis is based on those participants who completed questionnaires and attended interviews at both time points (n=134). The largest ethnic group in the sample was white (49 per cent), followed by Pakistani (25 per cent), Indian (12 per cent) and Chinese (7 per cent) and other/mixed ethnicity (7 per cent). This last group comprised three Arab, two Korean, one Bangladeshi and one Burmese young people. Sixty-one per cent of the sample was female. The age of the sample at Wave 1 ranged from 15 years and 7 months to 18 years and 9 months, with a mean age of 17 years.

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## For more information

The full report, **Young people's experience of transitions to adulthood: A study of minority ethnic and white young people** by Clare Cassidy, Rory O'Connor and Nike Dorrer, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of the Black and Minority Ethnic Young People series.

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