

# Evaluating policy and practice supporting Roma students to access international Higher Education – Spending a month at the Roma Education Fund, Budapest

In March 2015 I took a month out of my PhD research in order to be seconded to the Roma Education Fund in Budapest - an organisation committed to the closing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma communities. My role involved investigating key issues affecting the inclusion of Roma students in international higher education opportunities. Although this is not the focus of my PhD research (which looks at UK undergraduate students and their engagements with critical thinking at university) this was an important opportunity for me to gain experience working in an international research team with non-academic partners, as well as to broaden my understanding of equity and inclusion in the context of international higher education. Although the project included expenses, I received some additional funds from the Sussex doctoral school Impact and Knowledge Exchange fund which enabled me to fully participate in the project.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

The secondment related to a 3-year project about *Higher Education Internationalisation and Mobility* (HEIM), which focuses on how principles of equity and inclusion can be applied to internationalisation strategies and programmes in higher education, as well developing research and innovation capacity in this field. HEIM has a particular focus on the Roma community in Europe as a critical example of a marginalised group, and is a collaboration between three universities (Sussex, Umeå and Seville) and the Roma Education Fund (REF). The 'Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions' funded project, based in the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) at Sussex has several components including secondments, staff exchange, research training and capacity-building, co-authored papers and collaborative inquiry.

## MY ROLE

The research team comprised me as an early stage researcher, along with my colleague Dr Tamsin Hinton-Smith and Professor Louise Morley representing Sussex, as well as an early stage and experienced researcher each from Umea and Seville. We were all based together in the REF offices in Budapest with the intention that experienced researchers could support early stage researchers, colleagues working in other countries could share the perspectives from their own countries and we could all learn from REF colleagues. The broader intention was that REF colleagues could also learn from us as academic researchers. As well as discussions between colleagues, we also met with a number of other colleagues working in Roma education and inclusion including Roma rights organisations and activists, policy makers, academics working on initiatives to support Roma students accessing higher education and Roma university students themselves.



Photo after meeting colleagues at the Central European University (CEU), Budapest who run the Roma Access Programme, to support Roma to access and succeed in postgraduate education. (L-R Emily Danvers (Sussex), Dr Matyas Szabo (CEU), Dr Mayte Padilla-Carmona (Seville), Merziha Idrizi (REF), Anders Norberg (Umea) and Alejandro Soria-Vilchez (Seville).

Each country team was tasked with writing a country specific briefing report on higher education internationalisation and mobility, with a particular focus on access and inclusion of Roma students. The reports were intended to scope broad issues and policies and synthesise key resources in order to frame further research on Roma students and international higher education for the remainder of the HEIM project and to suggest recommendations for good practice at a national level. Each country also had to write a journal article for publication. The Sussex report focused on the following questions:

1. How are Roma students conceptualised in UK HE policies and practice in relation to widening access, inclusion and internationalisation?
2. What good practice exists in Europe around implementation of policy to support Roma students in HE?
3. What can these selected case studies of good practice tell us about the barriers and enablers to supporting the inclusion of Roma students in international higher education?
4. What lessons can be learned by drawing parallels between the UK and European case studies to support inclusion and internalisation for marginalised groups?



Photo of a meeting to discuss the project in progress. (L-R Alejandro Soria-Vílchez (Seville), Dr Mayte Padilla-Carmona (Seville), Professor Louise Morley (Sussex), Emily Danvers (Sussex) and Dr Stela Garez (REF))

## KEY FINDINGS ABOUT ROMA STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The following findings are reproduced in the full report, available on the [HEIM website](#).

### *UK Higher Education*

- Gypsies, Travellers and Roma<sup>1</sup> in the UK are a highly deprived group who experience multiple disadvantage and discrimination, particularly in relation to education, health and employment.
- Gypsy, Traveller and Roma school pupils in the UK experience poor achievement as a consequence of marginalisation and discrimination. 12% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils achieved five or more good GCSEs<sup>2</sup>, including English and mathematics, compared with 58% of all pupils. (Department for Education, 2012 cited in Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012). Gypsy, Roma and Traveller school pupils experience '*racist, prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes both in their local communities and in school*' (Deuchar and Bhopal, 2012:747). These factors impede access opportunities to higher education.
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people are far less likely to go to university than the population as a whole. Between 3 and 4% of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller in the UK population over 18 is accessing higher education (HESA, 2014). This compares to 43% of those aged 18-30 for the population as a whole (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014b).
- Progress on Roma integration and inclusion in the UK (in response to the EU National Framework for Roma Integration) is exceptionally slow or even absent in many policy areas.
- There is a lack of national direction and impetus for widening access to, and supporting the retention and success of, Gypsies, Travellers and Roma in UK higher education. This is witnessed in a lack of policy attention or targeted interventions for their inclusion and support. The insular, national focus of widening participation policies in higher education fails to account for the needs of disadvantaged groups from outside the UK e.g. refugee and migrant populations.

<sup>1</sup> There is considerable debate over appropriate terminology. 'Gypsy' can be perceived as offensive and consequently 'Roma' is used in EU policy and by the Roma Education Fund. However in the UK, 'Gypsies and Travellers' and 'Irish Travellers' are used as an ethnicity category in the census, and within national policy. In the latter context, Roma is used to refer to migrant groups to the UK from Central and Eastern Europe. Consequently, 'Gypsy, Traveller and Roma' is used in the report in reference to UK policy and practice and the term 'Roma' used when talking about the European context.

<sup>2</sup> GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) The standard qualification after completing secondary school in the UK aged 16.

### *Roma in Europe and their access to higher education*

- Less than 1% of Roma in Europe continue on to higher education. (UNDP *et al.*, 2011).
- Access to good quality, non-segregated primary schooling, is the most important issue affecting Roma students' educational and life opportunities, including their ability to access higher education.
- There are complex factors structuring the under-representation of Roma students within higher education including structural disadvantage and social exclusion.
- Affirmative action policies represent an important step in supporting Roma students to access higher education, as well as an official recognition of the ways Roma have, and continue to be, disadvantaged in the absence of such measures.
- Schemes that offer scholarships for Roma to study abroad (such as REF's International Scholarship Programme) are particularly important to enable disadvantaged groups to have access to (what is often the privileged space of) international higher education opportunities.
- The intensive and academically focused nature of the Roma Access Programme of the Central European University in Budapest is commendable and offers important lessons for those working with disadvantaged groups in UK higher education.

### *Findings and Recommendations*

- Key enablers to support Roma students to access higher education in the UK and Europe include good quality, de-segregated schooling for Roma children, transparent and accessible information about higher education opportunities, financial support and scholarships for Roma students and the promotion of Roma role models (including teachers) to inspire young Roma in their educational journeys.
- Key barriers include a lack of disaggregated data on Roma's educational exclusion across Europe, the difficulties of meeting the complex needs of a diverse population of Roma, the broader influence of educational and social disadvantage structuring access to higher education and the role of political will in implementing policies for Roma inclusion.
- In the UK specifically, there is an urgent need to provide national direction and impetus for widening access to, and supporting the retention and success of, Gypsies, Travellers and Roma in UK higher education.

### **SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE**

Gaining experience in research outside the academic world, such as in an NGO like the Roma Education Fund, was a great opportunity to see alternative ways of conducting social science research. I found that the research output required by REF to have impact upon policy makers and funders was much snappier, more 'fact' heavy and fast paced than required for academia. It made me reflect on the impact of my own research such as how I might communicate the findings of my PhD to an NGO or policy maker and ways to communicate more effectively to non-academic audiences.

Being positioned as an academic expert on a topic felt a huge responsibility at times, especially because I was new to the topic of Roma inclusion. However the nature of the knowledge transfer initiative meant that the focus on collaboration and support were really strong. This experience also provided a sense of perspective for my own research and what I was capable of. For example, the fact that I could produce 10,000 words of content in a month on a topic completely new to me before I started gave me some motivation for what I could achieve in my own thesis writing.

Because the secondment was related to the broad themes of my PhD but not the topic itself, I was initially worried that this knowledge transfer opportunity might be an intellectually stimulating distraction. However moving outside the narrow confines of my research topic gave me knowledge of a broader international context in which to situate the claims I want to make about higher education. In particular, engaging with questions of Roma inclusion prompted new thoughts about the inclusion of marginalised groups in critical thinking practices and has led to me rethinking an existing thesis chapter. It has also led to co-writing a paper for publication with the experienced researcher, allowing me to incorporate existing theoretical interests with work on Roma. More practically, taking a month out gave me some space to return to my thesis with a fresh perspective – one greatly informed by the knowledge and experience gained during this secondment.

## REFERENCES

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