

# Gypsy, Roma and Traveller: the UK's Forgotten Higher Education Minority

A response to the Commons Select Committee on Tackling Inequalities faced by  
Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

## 1. Introduction

We are academic researchers of higher education based in the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) at the University of Sussex, UK. CHEER members have published widely, and to international esteem, on widening participation and factors relating to the differential access and success in higher education of marginalised groups across the globe including women, low economic status communities, mature students, lone parents, people with disabilities, refugees and, specifically, Roma communities in Europe (See <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/cheer/researchprojects>).

Since 2015 we have led a Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions funded international, multi-partner project entitled *Higher Education Internationalisation and Mobility: Inclusion, Equalities and Innovations* (HEIM), focusing on the Roma community in Europe and their access to international higher education opportunities. Further details about the project can be found at: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/cheer/researchprojects/rise>.

While the 28 commitments stated by the ministerial working group on tackling inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers concern educational disadvantage more broadly, the lack of focus on higher education specifically means that the opportunities and exclusions for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) young people and their communities are not always considered. Consequently, we present evidence from our research generally, and specifically from the HEIM project, and on how GRT communities continue to be excluded from the opportunities offered by higher education.

## 2. Executive Summary

- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are significantly under-represented as a minority group in higher education in the UK.
- GRT communities are often excluded from widening participation policies, strategies and interventions for inclusion and support of under-represented groups in UK higher education.
- There is an urgent need to provide national direction and impetus for widening access, supporting retention and enabling the achievement of GRT students in UK higher education.
- Knowledge exchange/policy learning could be promoted between the UK and Central and Eastern Europe on how to encourage, support and prepare GRT communities to enter higher education in the UK.



### 3. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Exclusions from Higher Education

**3.1** The availability and continuity of data in the UK (and more widely in Europe) is a major problem for policy research into Gypsy, Roma and Traveller exclusions from higher education. The University and Colleges Application Service (UCAS) data has separate ethnicity categories for ‘Gypsy and Traveller’ and ‘Irish Traveller’ (NI only) but nothing at all for Roma (UCAS, no date). In the majority of publicly available datasets, Gypsies and Travellers are included within the category of ‘White’ although disaggregated data are available, on request, from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

**3.2** From the limited and uneven availability of data, it is possible to see that Gypsy Roma and Travellers are heavily under-represented in higher education in the UK. The exact extent of this is difficult to specify as the data available are only partly comparable with census ethnicity data. Issues include the categories employed (as described above), the geographical areas covered (the census is by UK region, and HESA data for the whole of the UK), and the dates at which the data is collected (HESA reports annually). Moreover, we acknowledge that GRT communities are often outside national census data e.g. as a consequence of mobility or of stigmatisation that means some people do not wish to declare their GRT ethnicities.

**3.3** Nevertheless, from the data that we do have it is possible to arrive at a viable estimate of the extent to which Gypsies and Travellers participate in higher education compared to their equivalents in Great Britain. From Table 1 we can see that in the academic year 2015-16 the proportion of Gypsies and Travellers who were students in higher education was approximately 11 times lower than the whole population. Numbers appear to be rising each year but despite this **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students are far less likely to go to university than the population as a whole.**

**Table 1: Students in Great Britain – whole population and Gypsies and Travellers**

	All ethnicities	Gypsy, Traveller
Population	63,258,400 <sup>a</sup>	61,892 <sup>b</sup>
Number of UK domiciled students (2015-16)	2,280,830 <sup>c</sup>	200 <sup>d</sup>
Percentage who are students	3.6%	0.32%

a. 2015 Great Britain Population - Office for National Statistics (2017)

b. Figure collated from UK census analysis from the: Scottish Government (2013) and Office for National Statistics, (2014)

c. HESA (2017); d Figure supplied by HESA.

#### **4. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller: A Forgotten Higher Education Minority**

**4.1** Current policy guidance from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) requires education institutions to consider targeting additional groups in their Access Agreements such as ‘students from Gypsy and Traveller communities’ who are ‘currently under-represented and/or disadvantaged in higher education at a national level’ (OFFA, 2016, p. 13). This statement acknowledges a policy and academic concern around ensuring that widening access funding and initiatives target the most marginalised minorities. However, the requirement only to ‘consider’ does not represent a strong enough impetus or intervention agenda for higher education institutions to support the inclusion of Gypsies, Travellers and Roma in UK higher education.

**4.2** Findings from a HEIM report have identified key barriers and enablers affecting GRT communities in accessing and succeeding in higher education in the UK and Europe. Barriers include a lack of disaggregated data on GRT educational exclusion across Europe, the difficulties of meeting the complex needs of a diverse population, the broader influence of educational and social disadvantage structuring access to higher education and the role of political will in implementing policies for GRT inclusion. Key enablers include good quality, de-segregated schooling for GRT children, transparent and accessible information about higher education opportunities, financial support and scholarships for GRT students and the promotion of GRT role models (including teachers) to inspire young people in their educational journeys. Crucially, the project report highlighted the lack of policy attention and targeted interventions for their inclusion and support in UK higher education policy and practice (Danvers, 2015).

**4.3** Findings from an impact seminar '*Including Roma Communities in European Higher Education: Celebrating Successes and Identifying Challenges*' held at the University of Sussex 19 May 2016 to discuss the inclusion of Roma communities in higher education indicated that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students represented a ‘forgotten’ minority in UK higher education policy and practices. GRT higher education students participating in the event reported experiencing multiple disadvantages at university - from a lack of cultural understanding by teaching staff to a silencing of GRT issues in university curricula. GRT is also frequently lacking as an identity category in many universities’ equal opportunities forms. Throughout Europe, the policy attention is usually focussed on GRT access to primary and secondary, rather than to higher education. This suggests more needs to be done to include GRT communities in higher education by fostering more inclusive practices that enable GRT histories and cultures to be acknowledged and respected. For further information, please see the seminar report <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=heim-impact-report-july2016.pdf&site=41>.

**4.4** Findings from HEIM academic research indicated that gender was a key factor shaping GRT women’s higher educational experience, with traditional gendered responsibilities expected for girls and women (Hinton-Smith *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, gender intersected with other factors including age, religion, nationality and socioeconomic background to produce a complexity of factors which define becoming and being a GRT student in higher education. Consequently, policies and practices to support GRT inclusion in higher education should recognise the diversity of GRT identities and experiences.

**4.5** There is a noticeable lack of both scholarship and empirical data that details the particular issues and requirements faced by GRT communities studying in UK institutions and young people thinking of accessing higher education in the future. This relative silence in the literature leads to GRT communities often not being on the agenda when discussing higher education inequalities.

**4.6** This contrasts with some of the many policy and practical interventions that HEIM has explored in Central and Eastern Europe e.g:

1. The Roma Education Fund (<http://www.romaeducationfund.hu>) – one of the partners in HEIM – is also a major form of support for Roma students e.g. by providing bursaries, scholarships and networks.
2. Romaversitas (<http://www.romaversitas.hu/?q=en/>). This is an Institute that has supported Roma Students in higher education for twenty years now in Hungary. It offers tutoring, language classes coaching and mentoring.
3. The Roma Access Program at the Central European University, Budapest (<https://rap.ceu.edu>). Over the past 11 years, it has prepared more than 250 outstanding Roma students to serve as role models for Roma communities and as integration leaders.
4. The Roma Initiatives Office in the Open Society Foundations (<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/topics/roma>) supports a range of initiatives to promote equal opportunities and challenge all forms of discrimination faced by Roma

Lessons can be learned from engaging with best practices and policies in other European and International contexts, as identified above, to support GRT communities in the UK to access higher education.

## **5. Recommendations**

**5.1** In order to develop support for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students to access the broadest benefits of higher education in the UK, we recommend providing further national direction and impetus for higher education institutions to include GRT within their widening access policies and initiatives. This includes the following:

- A specific requirement for higher education institutions to list Gypsy, Roma and Traveller as a marginalised group in their Access Agreements. This would represent an institutional commitment to GRT educational success and result in more targeted initiatives (including information and guidance, outreach and funding) to support GRT communities to access, and succeed in higher education.
- Development of training for university staff around diversity to address the lack of information about, and understanding of GRT communities.
- Allocated funding to research the specific barriers affecting GRT young people to access, and succeed, in higher education opportunities. Funding also allocated to exchange knowledge of research findings from projects examining opportunity structures for GRT communities.

- Stronger links between higher education institutions and policy organisations with GRT community and civil society organisations to form support networks and deepen understanding of some of the barriers and enablers for accessing higher education.

We are happy to provide further details and guidance on any of the above.

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