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GYPSY, ROMA AND TRAVELLER STUDENTS IN FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION



JESSICA DARNELL AND SCOTT FLEMING ON HOW CAREER GUIDANCE MUST ENGAGE IN DIALOGUES DEEMED TO BE 'INFORMAL AND WEAKER' WITH PRECARIOUS CLIENTS WHO NEED OUR SUPPORT.

The term 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' (GRT) is used in the UK to refer to approximately 300,000 people from diverse groups. They are amongst the most disadvantaged and suffer from many inequalities, but especially in relation to health and education. The 2011 census reported that 88% were born in the UK, 74% had moved into housing, and 40% were under the age of 20 (www.parliament.uk 2019).

Children and young people from GRT communities are the lowest performing groups in secondary education in the UK on all measures of attainment, progress, behaviour and attendance. They face significant barriers

throughout their education, which results in them being severely underrepresented in Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). As the Education Policy Institute explained in the Education in England Annual Report 2020, (https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/EPI_2020_Annual_Report_.pdf) 'Gypsy/Roma pupils are almost three years (34 months) behind White British pupils at GCSE level and Travellers of Irish Heritage pupils, who are two years behind.'

There are significant barriers to GRT pupils' achievement in compulsory education and hence to their access to HE:



- Cultural (e.g. cultural identity, mobility, language and system knowledge, norms, aspirations and expectations),
- Material (e.g. poverty, inadequate housing, homelessness, access to healthcare, the prevalence of special education needs),
- Prejudice and discrimination (e.g. self-exclusion from mainstream education because of discrimination, unconscious bias in HE).

Yet Kalwant Bhopal (<https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1080/01411921003786561>) has noted that there is some recognition of an increasing number of GRT parents feeling that formal education is necessary in the modern world, in spite of the prejudice and discrimination that exists. One Romany Gypsy graduate reflected on her experience:

“While I had a fantastic experience at [university] and I’m really pleased I went there... at the same time I did sit in a lecture theatre and have a lecturer make a joke about ‘pikies’ and had 200 people around me actually belly laughing while I sat there knowing I’m from that community and actually ‘pikiey’ is a derogatory term. It’s the fear of things like that, it’s one of the reasons that people pull kids out of school and why they are scared of university...so if universities are seriously committed to helping to raise aspiration and attainment, they’ve got to also be making sure that when the kids get there, things like that aren’t happening...”

Lincolnshire’s GRT Landscape

In 2017 LiNCHigher (www.thefuturefocus.co.uk/) and Lincolnshire Traveller Initiative (LTI) (<https://lincsti.co.uk/>) began working collaboratively to reduce the ‘gap’ between GRT students’ access to FE and HE compared to their peers attending mainstream education as well as levels of attainment.

In 2019/20, local government statistics (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/af49fff7-b004-462b-97f4-7a337df581bc>) indicated that there were only 42 GRT students enrolled in mainstream secondary education in Lincolnshire – though it is important to note that this figure is based on self-disclosure. Transition from primary education to secondary school often results in a large proportion of GRT children being registered by their families for Elective Home Education or GRT students simply ‘vanish’ from the system altogether without declarations to the Local Authority. This means the responsibility for supporting education falls either to the family, private tutors or alternative education providers like LTI. Understandably, many GRT youngsters consider FE and/or HE to be beyond their reach.

An adapted education programme delivered by the LTI includes accredited qualifications such as Prince’s Trust Awards, Functional Skills Maths, English and ICT and Arts Awards. However, as a charity with only one custom-built bus to provide teaching space for 8 students and limited resources (of all kinds), there is neither the capability nor capacity to offer the conventional mainstream school pathway into FE or HE to the geographically dispersed GRT communities across the county.

A government-funded initiative has been introduced to enable FE and sixth-form colleges to enrol and receive funding from the Education and Skills Funding Agency for students aged 14-to-16 years old. This is in addition to the continuing provision for 14-to 16-year-olds by arrangement with local authorities or parents/carers. A vital part of the education journey for GRT children is access to more practical forms of learning and opportunities to train for technical professions or trades. For many GRT students this is their first encounter with an educational institution since primary school. Currently there only two colleges in Lincolnshire offering a small element of this essential provision.

The LTI is a crucial point of access to GRT communities that has been built on an established trusting relationship – especially in support of tackling educational inequalities. It is an opportunity for those who may have faced traumatic experiences within formal education to rewrite their future with access to positively fulfilling choices, and ultimately to better outcomes. In 2019 six students were supported in their transition from ‘onsite or home education’ to studying at college. It’s vital that all young people receive high-quality education which allows them to reach their potential, and live a more fulfilled life regardless of background, in a safe environment.

Recommendations from Lincolnshire

Colleges and universities should consider the following to increase access for GRT students:

- Include a statement of intent in prospectuses to promote GRT inclusion
- Invite GRT youngsters to taster days and campus visits at which they are encouraged to consider making an application
- Publish and highlight different but equivalent entry qualifications (e.g. Functional Skills Mathematics, English and ICT, NVQ Level 2 and 3 awards)
- Emphasise entry requirements for courses where a portfolio of evidence of work, experience and skills is especially important (e.g. creative courses, health and social care courses)
- Review admissions and application processes to ensure they do not discriminate against GRT applicants (e.g. appropriate differentiated categories to highlight all ethnic groups instead of individuals having to identify as other)
- Prioritise HE outreach initiatives that focus on the primary education sector (to prevent drop off at the transition to secondary school)
- Raise awareness of GRT groups amongst widening participation teams and increase understanding of these groups’ perceptions of FE and HE
- Identify and support GRT graduate role models to provide mentoring in schools or community groups
- Identify and address barriers and develop enablers of access to 14-16 provision for those not attending mainstream education.

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Jessica Darnell is Senior Project Officer on the LiNCHigher project which is externally funded by the Office for Students based at Bishop Grosseteste University and Professor Scott Fleming is Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Bishop Grosseteste University. www.thefuturefocus.co.uk

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