

More than luck: enabling
access and success in
Higher Education for Gypsy,
Romany and Traveller
(GRT) communities

great.

A Sir John Cass's Foundation report
written by [Dr Graeme Atherton](#)

Contents

	Foreword	4
	Executive Summary	6
	Recommendations	10
1	Introduction	15
2	Access & participation in Higher Education	17
3	Inequality and the communities of Gypsy, Romany, Traveller (GRT) people	18
4	The educational attainment and progression of learners from GRT communities	20
5	Access to HE for GRT learners– what do we know?	24
6	How Higher Education providers are supporting access and participation in HE for GRT learners	29
7	Access to HE and the regional challenge: looking at London	39
8	Extending access and participation in HE from GRT communities: Identifying the challenges	46
9	Summary and Recommendations	50
	Appendix	55
	Author biography	56

Foreword

As we write this foreword, Sir John Cass's Foundation is on the cusp of dramatic change. Since public attention was drawn to our Founder's connection to the slave trade in the early eighteenth century, the Board has taken two significant actions. First, the statue of Sir John Cass (1661–1718) above our offices in Aldgate has been taken down. Secondly, and in consultation with partners, we are changing our name.

We were already investigating our founder's involvement in the slave trade when evidence of the killing of George Floyd in the USA and momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement swept across the world, and as we re-form, our grant making will give greater attention to issues of modern-day and historic slavery. But a change of name, when we announce it, does not imply a dramatic change of direction. Our focus has always been on addressing educational disadvantage, especially among young people in London. That will continue.

Indeed, Dr Graeme Atherton's report which was commissioned last year continues the work of the Foundation which concentrates on groups of young people who are under-represented in higher education, such as looked after children, young offenders and prisoners, and those excluded from school. In this case, people in the category 'GRT' (Gypsy, Romany and Traveller) are largely hidden in much of urban Britain, and often only mentioned in local media in relation to accusations of trespass or in other pejorative terms.

This report helps by showing the facts of the matter in relation to educational progression by GRT young people. It makes clear recommendations, both nationally and for higher education institutions in London. The recommendations are practical, and, intriguingly, do not in many cases call for an injection of funds. The challenge is to adapt existing access plans and improve awareness, measurement and reporting. It is also suggested that the Mayor of London should convene a task force.

The Foundation is pleased that the Minister of State for Universities has said that the Department for Education would be interested in our work. We are keen to engage with the GRT community and to collaborate with partners in the higher education & third sectors, to bring about some of these necessary changes.

John Hall
Treasurer & Chairman

Richard Foley
Chief Executive

August 2020

Executive summary

Introduction

Addressing inequalities in participation in higher education (HE) has been a central concern for policymakers since the early 2000s. However, little attention has been paid over this time to the participation in HE of those from Gypsy, Romany and Traveller (GRT) communities.

This report will examine whether the advent of greater policy focus in recent years on the inter-connected social inequalities that GRT communities are subject to, together with changes in how widening access work is delivered and regulated has led to such work with this group increasing. In the light of the impact of Covid-19 on education it will point to the need for a specific focus on GRT communities if any tangible progress is to be made in increasing the participation of GRT learners in HE.

How the study was conducted

The report focusses on access to HE for those from GRT communities nationally. It does include however a detailed section on what is known regarding access to HE for GRT communities in London. The report was commissioned in 2019 by Sir John Cass's Foundation¹ whose mission is to promote the education of young people in inner London through its grant programmes for individuals, educational institutions and organisations.

1

For more information on the work of the Foundation please go to: www.sirjohncassfoundation.com/

Key Findings

Access to HE for GRT communities is not increasing

Evidence on progression to HE for those from GRT communities indicates that only very small numbers of learners from such communities progress to HE. Data from the Department of Education shows that from 2009–10 to 2017–18² for all other white groups the trend in HE participation is upwards. However, for Travellers of Irish heritage it has declined and Gypsy/Roma groups it has remained static.

Less than 30% of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) mention GRT learners

All HE providers were required by the higher education regulator the Office for Students (OfS) to submit an Access and Participation Plan (APP) in 2019 for the period 2021–2025. Learners from GRT backgrounds are one of the groups who can be included in such plans. Analysis of the content of over 100 of these APPs shows that only a minority include any reference to GRT learners.

Less than 5% of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) include reference to any activities to support access to HE for GRT learners

Of the 30% of APPs which mention GRT learners the majority refer to the challenges faced in terms of obtaining data on the numbers of GRT learners. This leaves only a very small number of APPs which include any reference to actual activities.

²

This diagram (see page 27) is produced using data taken from the Department of Education Widening Participation in Higher Education 2019 dataset which can be found at www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education-2019

No APPs include targets related to access and participation in HE for GRT learners

Analysis undertaken by the OfS itself of the 2020–21 to 2024–25 APPs shows that none contain any numerical targets relating to the access, participation or success in higher education of those from GRT communities.

Only 2 of 29 Uni-Connect partnerships are undertaking activities with GRT learners

Uni-Connect brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners to offer activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college. Over £200m has been invested in the Uni-Connect programme since 2017. A survey of the 29 partnerships indicated that only 2 are undertaking specific work with GRT learners.

Only 2 London HE providers indicate any work with GRT learners in their APPs

London has the highest number of learners aged 18–30 from any region in England progressing to HE and they are the most ethnically diverse. It also has the highest number of HE providers of any city in the UK and one of the highest number of any city in the world. Analysis of the 2020–21 to 2024–24 APPs of London HE providers shows that only 2 HE providers from London mention GRT communities.

Recommendations

The exceptionally low levels of HE participation amongst those from the GRT community is a product of deep rooted structural inequalities. Increasing HE participation would require significant changes in policy and practice across the educational system. However, HE has a crucial role to play here. This research has shown that HE does not appear as engaged in addressing participation of those from GRT communities either nationally or in London as it could be. There are 5 recommendations listed below which could enable greater engagement from HE in supporting access and participation for GRT learners.

1

Ensure there is a specific strand of work focused on GRT participation in Uni-Connect from 2021 to 2025

The present structure of the programme with a dominant strand that targets resources at particular geographical areas does not lend itself to a focus on GRT learners. A national collaborative widening access to HE outreach programme should have built within it the provision to support learners from all under-represented groups at an appropriate level. After the completion of its second phase in July 2021 the programme should in any further phases include a dedicated strand of work focused on GRT learners.

2

Ask all HE providers to outline how they are supporting access, participation for GRT learners in their annual APP statements to the Office for Students

It would be in keeping with the strong commitment the OfS have shown to addressing all aspects of inequality in access and participation to address head on the issues associated with groups who have low numbers of learners and ask all providers to state how they are addressing such inequalities for learners from GRT communities. The APPs for 2021–2025 have been produced, but providers have to submit annual updates on progress. In these annual updates, a statement outlining how providers are integrating work with GRT communities into their strategic commitments to access and participation could be included.

3

Establish a national GRT HE access and participation initiative

Work has already begun led by a small number of HE providers, community organisations and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) to initiate a national GRT Access and Participation Network. One mechanism being developed by this group is a pledge for HE providers which outlines their commitment to access and inclusion for GRT students. The pledge due to be launched later in 2020 covers a number of themes including:

- ▶ encouraging student and staff to serve as visible GRT role models and identifying senior GRT champions
- ▶ encouraging the formation of GRT student societies
- ▶ including Roma as a separate ethnic classification when data is collected from students.

Such a pledge is an important tool but needs to be part though of an ongoing programme of work to share practice between HE providers and community organisations, improve data collection and reform HE structures. This initiative, while it should be led and owned by HE, will need supporting by policymakers. Given the new Covid-19 environment, such support implies resources, at least in the outset, to allow the initiative to develop momentum and sustainability.

4

Integrate focus on GRT community learners in the new national strategy to tackle Gypsy, Roma and Traveller inequalities

In June 2019 the government announced that they are *'launching an ambitious programme of work, to be undertaken across government, which will aim to tackle the serious disparities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.'*³

As this programme develops it is important that the issue of inequalities in access to HE features in it.

5

Mayor of London to establish a GRT education task force

London has the largest number of HE students of any region in the country and by a significant difference the most diverse intake. To address the challenges related to educational performance for GRT communities outlined in this report a regional dimension is crucial and given both nature of London's HE sector and the importance of the elected Mayoral role, London may be an appropriate place to start in developing this regional approach. The Mayor's Office does not have responsibility for schools, colleges or HE but is in the ideal position to convene the kind of cross sector dialogue on GRT education which is urgently needed in the capital. The creation of a task force bringing together school, colleges, universities and representative of GRT communities which could stimulate cross sector commitments to a London wide plan would be clear evidence of the commitment of the Mayor to upward social mobility.

³
Ministry of Housing,
Communities and Local
Government (2019) Press
release *New national strategy
to tackle Gypsy, Roma and
Traveller inequalities*
6th June 2019
[www.gov.uk/government/
news/new-national-strategy-
to-tackle-gypsy-roma-and-
traveller-inequalities](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-national-strategy-to-tackle-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-inequalities)

Introduction

Since the early 2000s addressing inequalities in participation in higher education (HE) has been a central concern for policymakers. It has been a cause championed by successive Prime Ministers with significant amounts of money spent on activities to widen access to HE for under-represented groups.⁴ However, little attention has been paid over this time to the participation in HE of the group which has the lowest attainment of any in the school system in the UK i.e. those from Gypsy, Romany and Traveller (GRT) communities. Despite the wealth of evidence that points to the multiple disadvantages faced by those from GRT communities in the education system they have been on the periphery of the access to higher education agenda over the last 20 years. While other groups whose performance and progression in the HE system has been at exceptionally low levels, in particular looked after children/care leavers, have benefited from concerted efforts to support their entry into HE⁵ this has not happened where those from GRT communities is concerned. There may be multiple reasons why access to HE for GRT communities has not received attention and investment. However, there is no a priori reason why it should not.

This report will examine whether the advent of greater policy focus in recent years on the inter-connected social inequalities that GRT communities are subject to, together with changes in how widening access work is delivered and regulated has led to work with this group increasing. Most importantly it will examine what is necessary for work on access to HE to become more prominent and what could be done to potentially to improve levels of participation in HE for this group. In the light of the impact of Covid-19 on education it will point to the need for specific focus on GRT communities if any tangible progress is to be made in this area. The report was commissioned in 2019 by Sir John Cass's Foundation⁶ whose mission is to promote the education of young people in inner London through its grant programmes for individuals, educational institutions and organisations.

The title of the report refers to the story of Chelsea McDonagh's higher education progression documented in section 7.4 of the report. Chelsea talks about how she feels lucky to have made it to higher education, and many of her peers also had the potential to progress but did not have the

⁴ Atherton, G, (2018) *The Success Paradox: why we need a holistic theory of social mobility*, Bristol: Polity Press

⁵ For more information on work undertaken to support access and participation in HE for care leavers please go to: www.nnecl.org/

⁶ For more information on the work of the Foundation please go to: www.sirjohncassfoundation.com/

opportunities to do so. Luck cannot be the deciding factor when the higher education progression of those from GRT communities are concerned. The purpose of this report is to contribute to higher education progression being more than luck with opportunities provided for far more of those from GRT communities than there are at present.

1.1. How the report is structured

The report focus on access to HE for those from GRT communities nationally. It does include however a detailed section on what is known regarding access to HE for GRT communities in London. As well as being home to a significant number of those from the GRT communities, London has the largest number of HE providers of any city in the UK. It also leads the way in terms of admitting students from diverse backgrounds.⁷ If progress is to be made in making HE accessible to GRT communities what happens in London will inevitably be vital.

In terms of the structure of the report it begins with a very brief overview of the access to higher education policy context, before looking at evidence concerning educational achievement/progress of those from GRT communities. It then turns to what existing evidence shows where participation in HE for those from these groups is concerned before looking at what HE providers are doing themselves and through collaborative networks to extend access. Finally, the report looks at the challenges and opportunities that exist regarding extending access to HE for GRT communities particularly in the light of the Covid-19 epidemic, outlining a series of recommendations for both providers and policymakers.

⁷ Atherton, G & Mazhari, T (2019) – Working Class Heroes, Understanding access to higher education for white students from lower socio-economic backgrounds: London: London Higher www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Working-Class-Heroes-Understanding-access-to-Higher-Education-for-white-students-from-lower-socio-economic-backgrounds.pdf

2

Access & participation in Higher Education

The increase in HE participation that followed the re-branding of many ex polytechnics as universities in the 1990s propelled inequalities in HE onto the policy agenda. While the target introduced by the Labour government in 2001 to open up HE to 50% of all 18–30 year olds⁸ was not an access target as such i.e. it did not focus explicitly on a group(s) under-represented in HE it symbolised the new commitment to this agenda. Through the 2000s via, in the main, a national government funded programme that brought schools, colleges and HE providers together in regional partnerships to undertake activities that would increase understanding and awareness of HE amongst young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds,⁹ Labour maintained its focus on the issue. Into the 2010s even though tuition fees increased to make England the most expensive place on average in the world to enter higher education the focus on who went, and did not go, to HE remained. Rather than government funded activity however, the concentration now was on HE providers leading on their own work investing tuition fee income via ‘Access Agreements’. These agreements were monitored up to 2018 by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA).¹⁰ They outlined what a HE provider (this includes universities, colleges of higher education who do not have university status and Further Education Colleges delivering HE) was doing in terms of ‘outreach’ work with schools/colleges/communities such as school visits, mentoring projects, summer schools, work with parents as well as the financial support through bursaries or scholarships it offered. In mid-2020 the government signalled that supporting 50% of young people to enter higher education was no longer a target.

⁸
BBC News Monday 8th March 1999, *Blair wants student boom*
www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/292504.stm

⁹
Passy, R, (2012) *Widening Participation, Aimhigher and the Coalition Government: narratives of freedom and efficiency, Power and Education, Volume 4 Number 1 2012*
www.journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/power.2012.4.1.83

¹⁰
For more information on the Office for Fair Access go to www.webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/*/http://www.offa.org.uk/

3

Inequality and the communities of Gypsy, Romany, Traveller people

The first point to recognise is that there is not a single, homogenous Gypsy, Romany, Traveller community rather a number of communities characterised by differing histories and contrasting presents. These include those of Gypsy heritage but differing celtic background, Romany groups who have been based in the UK for many generations (it is important to recognise that there are records of Gypsy groups on the UK since the 16th century) but also those Romany people who descend from Europe, in particular including groups who have come to settle in the UK as part of the influx of eastern European people in the last two decades.¹¹

The community also includes travellers of celtic, particularly but not only, Irish heritage with the latter sometimes referred to as 'Mincier' or 'Pavees'. Alongside this range of multiple communities there are the Traveller groups such as new age travellers, showmen and waterway travellers who each have very distinct cultures and are mainly, but not entirely, bound by a particular way of life more than ethnic heritage.

In terms of the population size of the GRT communities, the 2011 census included for the first time an ethnic category entitled 'Gypsy, Traveller and Irish Traveller communities'. The census counted around 63,000 people in the UK identifying as members of these groups, of which 58,000 were living in England and Wales.¹² However, it can be said with some confidence that this number under-estimates the actual size of the overall GRT community population. It is estimated by some researchers that there may be between 100,000 to 300,000 Gypsy/Traveller people and up to 200,000 Roma people living in the UK.¹³ Of particular interest to this report is what the official data shows about the age distribution of GRT communities with nearly 40 per cent of the population being under 20 years old.

¹¹ UK House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, UK Parliament, (2019) *Seventh Report of Session 2017–19: Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities*, London: House of Commons 2019 – www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/360/full-report.html

¹² Cromarty (2019) *House of Commons Library Briefing Paper on Gypsies and Travellers*, London: House of Commons

¹³ University of Salford (2013) *Migrant Roma in the United Kingdom: Population size and experiences of local authorities and partners*, p7,

For the purposes of tackling inequalities in access to HE for these communities there are two other main contextual factors to consider. Firstly, there is the issue of the accommodation arrangements of GRT communities. The census suggested that the majority of the group live in settled accommodation and do not travel, or do not travel all of the time, but nonetheless consider travelling to be part of their identity. As the House of Commons Library 2019 Briefing Paper on Gypsies and Travellers stated:¹⁴

'At the 2011 Census, the majority (76%) of Gypsies and Irish Travellers in England and Wales lived in bricks-and-mortar accommodation, and 24% lived in a caravan or other mobile or temporary structure.'

The second issue is the racism that those in the GRT communities encounter. In 2014 Sir Trevor Phillips (as Chair of the Commission for Race Equality) described racism towards Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities (GRT Communities) as *"the last respectable form of racism"*.¹⁵ Research produced in 2016 by The Traveller Movement argued that hate crime against GRT communities members was chronically under-reported with over 80% of police forces having no category for GRT communities when looking to record the ethnicity of offences making the true picture virtually impossible to obtain here.¹⁶

It is the interlocking nature of disadvantages that GRT communities face which is most important to understand here. The House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee report on inequalities in the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community put it starkly when they stated that:¹⁷

'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people have the worst outcomes of any ethnic group across a huge range of areas, including education, health, employment, criminal justice and hate crime.'

¹⁴
Cromarty (2019)

¹⁵
BBC News (2014) CRE examines treatment of Gypsies, 17th October 2004
www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/3751214.stm

¹⁶
The Traveller Movement (2016) *Inclusion of Gypsies and Travellers in ethnic monitoring systems of Police forces in the UK*, London: The Traveller Movement

¹⁷
House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities – Seventh Report of Session 2017–19 (2019)

4

The educational attainment and progression of learners from GRT communities

The lack of accurate data which can capture the reality of life in the UK for GRT communities is a recurring theme across social policy areas, including education. According to the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee:¹⁸

‘Vulnerable groups of children are often missed from large-scale statistical analysis of children at risk of poverty and deprivation because they are not included in the sampling frame for survey data, because they are present in too small numbers, or because the characteristics that would identify them as at risk are not recorded. Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children across Europe are missed for all three reasons.’

The data that is available however shows overwhelmingly that GRT communities face challenges more acute than any other. While acknowledging the limitations in the data available, analysis of the data collected in the 2011 census by researchers from the London School of Economics shows that across 4 ‘dimensions of disadvantage’ children in the GRT communities are far more likely to experience 1, 2, 3 or 4 dimensions. In particular, they are 10 times more likely to experience 4 dimensions of disadvantage than non GRT communities. The four dimensions of disadvantage examined in this analysis were housing, household economic activity, parental/own education, and parental/own health and disability. Diagram 1 opposite shows how for example for those aged 0–15 who do not belong to the GRT community 67% experience none of the four dimensions. However, for children in the GRT community 15% experience four dimensions, 24% experience three dimensions and 37% two dimensions of disadvantage.

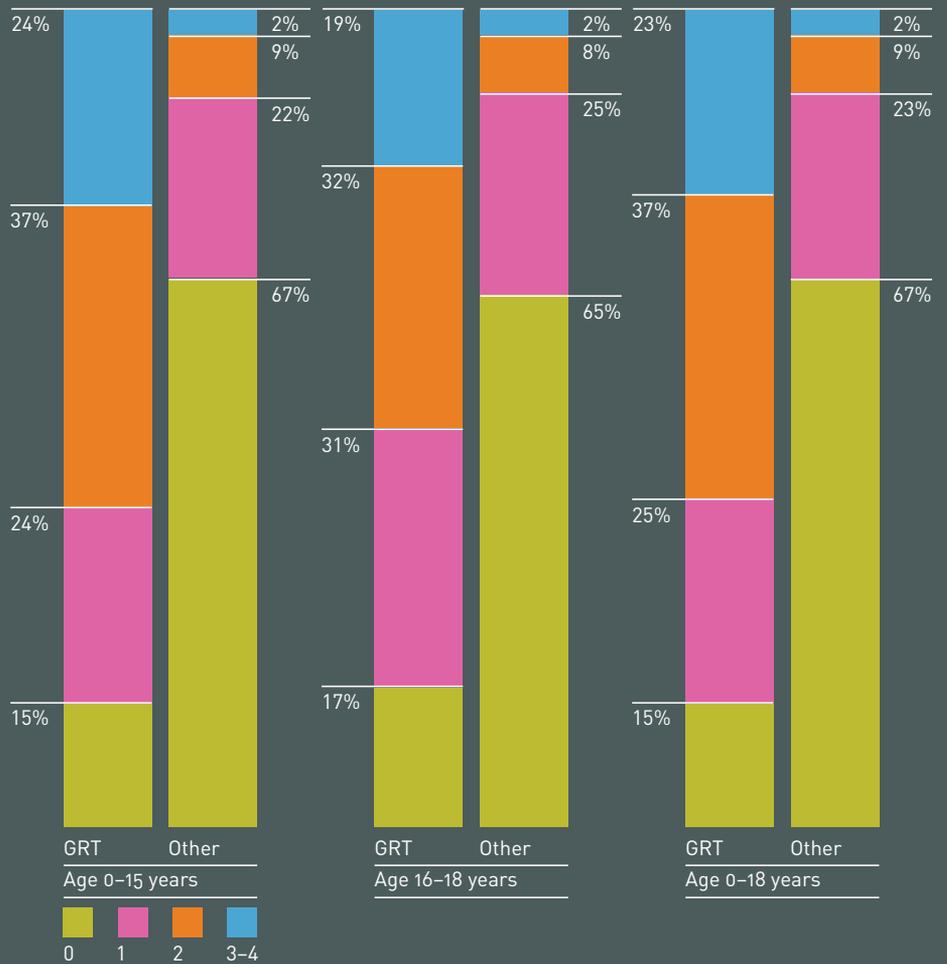
The impact of these multiple disadvantages has a profound impact on the educational outcomes of those from the communities. As Diagram 2 overleaf shows, such inequalities start at the beginning of compulsory education and widen over the course of it.

18 House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities – Seventh Report of Session 2017–19 (2019)

19 Burchardt, T, Obolenskaya, P, Vizard, P and Mattaglini M (2018) Experience of multiple disadvantage among Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children in England and Wales, London: London School of Economics

Diagram 1

GRT Communities and Multiple Disadvantage¹⁹



As with other low income groups who overall do not perform well at school there is a degree of scepticism regarding the value of education amongst parents, based on their usually negative experiences of the education system. This scepticism is, understandably, well developed in the GRT communities as it combines with experiences of prejudice from teachers and other pupils. Education is also not always seen as required for the roles that young people are expected to take within the community with these roles having a strong gender specific component. The situation is summed up well by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee report:²¹

‘We have heard compelling evidence that the education of boys and girls in Gypsy and Traveller communities is heavily gendered, with boys being removed from school to join their fathers in business and girls being removed to look after younger children and to become homemakers’. House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities – Seventh Report of Session 2017–19 (29)

20
House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities – Seventh Report of Session 2017–19 (2019)

21
House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities – Seventh Report of Session 2017–19 (2019)

22
Eyles A, Gibbons, S & Montebruno, P. (2020) Covid-19 school shutdowns: What will they do to our children’s education? London: London School of Economics

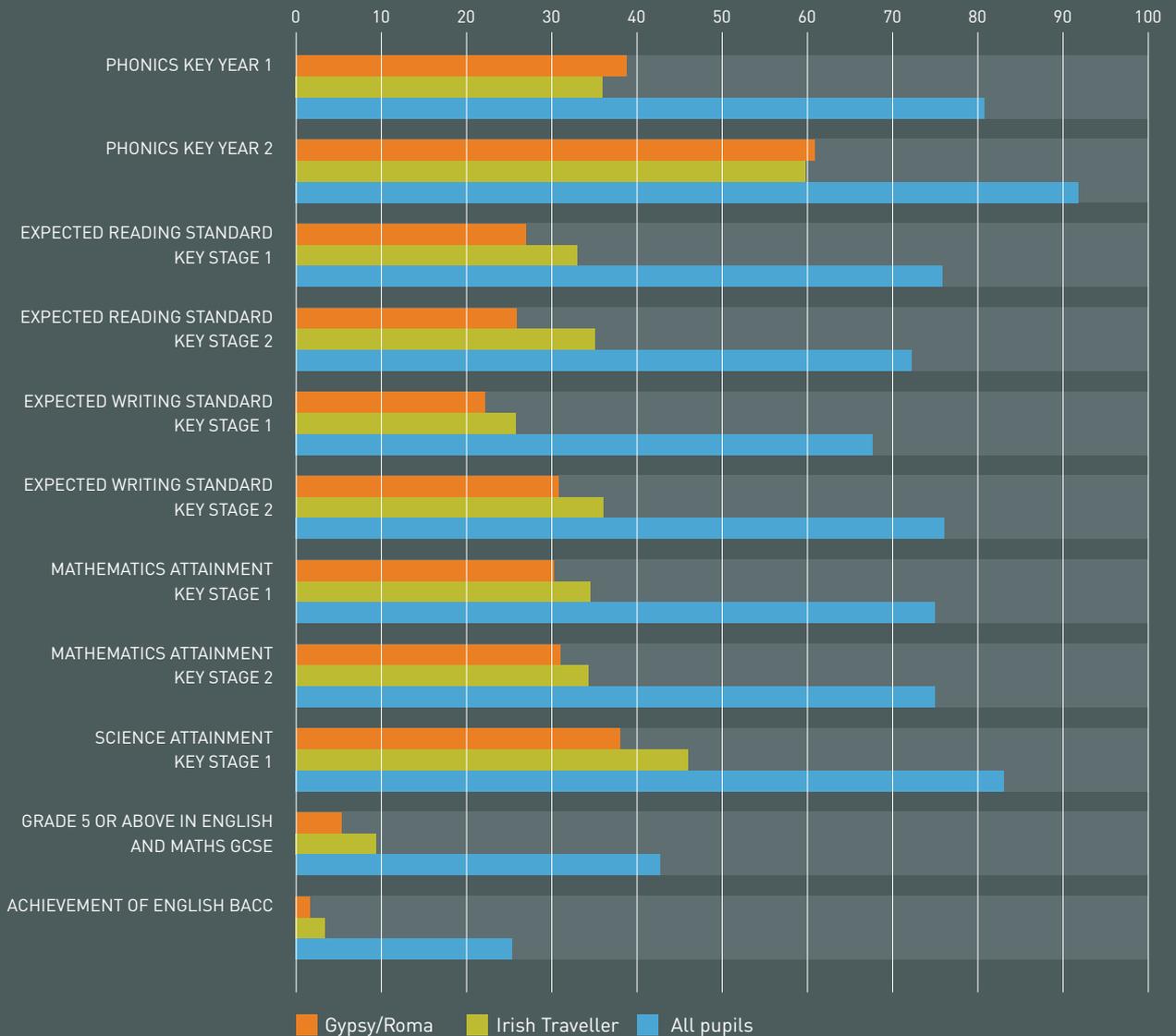
One of the major consequences of the above situation is that some children from GRT communities start to leave the school system well before the school leaving age, with the likelihood of home schooling being far greater amongst this group.

Covid 19 will only exacerbate the challenges in supporting GRT learners to progress to HE. Research suggests that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will fall even further behind as a result of the enforced closure of schools and colleges.²²

Finally, it is important to recognize the validity of the choices that parents and families of those in GRT communities make in this context. Achievement in the formal education system may be presented as a universal good by the state and be a view subscribed to by the majority of the population. This does not mean though that it is. A lack of qualifications does not necessarily mean an unhappy and unfulfilling life. It does however, in 21st century Britain, cut off many, if not the majority, of occupational route and make engagement with social institutions more difficult.

Diagram 2

Educational attainments for GRT communities over the life course²⁰



5

Access to HE for GRT learners – what do we know?

Understanding levels of participation in HE by those from GRT communities labours under similar difficulties to those seen above with compulsory education where the availability of data is concerned. Accepting these difficulties some data does exist. Before looking specifically at HE participation it is important to look at progression for young people after secondary education has been completed at the end of Key Stage 4. Diagram 3 opposite shows destinations after Key Stage 4 by ethnic group.²³ It shows the extent to which the experiences of GRT communities really differ from all other ethnic groups. For travellers of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma only 57% of young people stay in formal education after 16 while the average for all other ethnic groups is over 90%.

Turning specifically to progression to HE it is important to recognize that data on progression to HE by ethnicity, gender and other background characteristics is produced by multiple bodies specifically the Office for Students, Department of Education, UCAS and the Higher Education Statistics Agency. Where the progression of those from GRT communities is concerned there is a challenge with obtaining accurate data. The numbers progressing are very small and collecting the information mainly relies on self-reporting. The lack of distinct categories offered in most monitoring forms does not aid the situation. When coupled with concerns prospective students have regarding prejudice or racism this leads to an overall reticence to identify as a member of a GRT ethnic group.

However what data is available from the various agencies that produce information regarding the participation in HE from GRT communities is summarised overleaf.

²³
Department of Education
(2017) *Destinations of key
stage 4 and key stage 5 students,
England, 2015/16*, London:
Department of Education

Diagram 3

Sustained education and employment destinations after Key Stage 4 by ethnicity



5.1

Data from UCAS

UCAS collect information from students at the point of entry to HE. UCAS do not at present have a separate category for Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller students. Nor is there a category for Roma students. Table 1 shows that while the numbers are low for applications and acceptances they did increase over the 2013 to 2018 period.

Table 1

UCAS data on participation of Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller students²⁴

Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Applicants	70	80	100	120	125	110
All acceptances	50	60	70	80	95	70

5.2

Data from the Department of Education

The Department of Education produces two sets of data relevant to HE progression. The first looks at the progression of all learners aged 15 into HE. The second looks at the progression of learners studying at Key Stage 5. The latter measure includes only those who have remained in education at Key Stage 5 so the percentage entering HE from any particular group is always higher where this measure is concerned.

In Diagram 4 the percentage of 15 year olds entering HE from Traveller of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma groups is compared to entry rates for other white students from 2009–10 to 2017–18.²⁵ The very low rates of progression are an obvious concern, but equally worrying is that while for all other white groups the trend is upwards over the period for Travellers of Irish heritage it has declined and Gypsy/Roma groups it has remained static.

This data set also includes progression rates by free school meal (FSM) background and to high tariff universities. In terms of the FSM measure what is noticeable is that for all other ethnic groups there is a significant difference

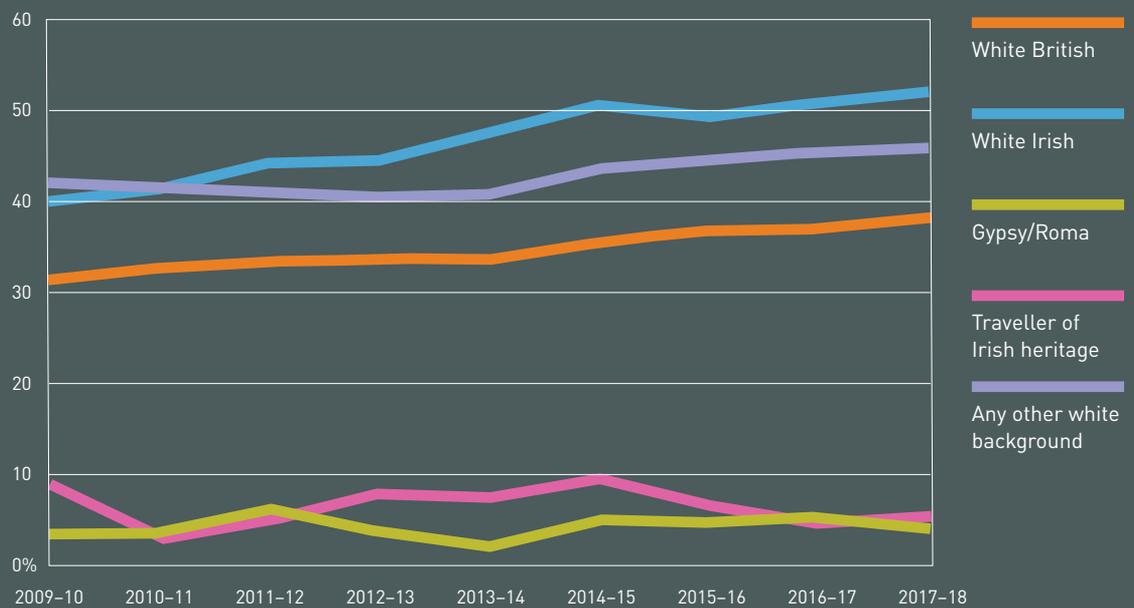
²⁴ Data obtained directly from UCAS.

²⁵ This diagram is produced using data taken from the Department of Education Widening Participation in Higher Education 2019 dataset which can be found at

www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education-2019

Diagram 4

Progression to HE for 15 year olds students from white backgrounds at age 19 from 2009–10 to 2017–18



between non FSM and FSM progression, for the two groups of interest here that is not the case. In 2018–19 for example only 1% more non FSM Gypsy/Roma learners than FSM went to HE, while for all white students the difference between FSM and non-FSM groups was 24%. For progression to high tariff institutions the data from 2018–19 shows that no students from Gypsy/Roma backgrounds progressed to such universities and 1% for of those who were Travellers of Irish heritage did. Again it should be emphasised that it is likely that this data under-estimates the true levels of participation but nevertheless it should be of real concern.

5.3

Data from HESA

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collects information from higher education providers on the composition of their student bodies. Data from HESA returns released in 2016 suggested that only 3 to 4% of GRT young people aged 18–30 accessed HE in 2014/15, whereas 43% of the national 18–30 year old population did so.²⁶

While the data outlined above is from differing sources it points to the very low levels of participation in HE by learners from GRT communities. This picture is only partial though, and it is likely there are more students from GRT communities in HE than the data shows. In addition the level of granularity required to fully capture the diversity within the GRT community is not there at present meaning that it is not possible to say with any level of certainty the extent to which showpeople, live-aboard Boaters and new Travellers participate in HE.

²⁶ Mulcahy et. al. (2017) *The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education: A report on barriers from early years to secondary and beyond London* – www.kcl.ac.uk/study/assets/pdf/widening-participation/the-underrepresentation-of-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-pupils-in-higher-education.pdf.

6

How Higher Education (HE) providers are supporting access and participation in HE for GRT learners

In order to establish a picture regarding how HE providers are supporting access and success into HE for those from GRT communities three approaches were taken in this study.

A survey of the membership of the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) members.

NEON is the professional organisation for access to higher education in the UK with over 100 members.²⁷ When the survey was distributed in July to October 2019, it was to 76 HE providers who were members of NEON at the time. The questions used in this survey are outlined in Appendix 1.

A survey of the 29 local Uni-Connect partnerships

Uni-Connect brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners to offer activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college. It began in 2017 and the second phase of the programme is due to complete in July 2021. It has two strands

- ▶ targeted higher education outreach within the local areas where we can have the most impact
- ▶ outreach hubs within the 29 local partnerships to help schools and colleges access the higher education outreach they need and provide a platform for wider collaboration.²⁸

An analysis of Access and Participation Plans from 2021–2025

All HE providers are required by the higher education regulator the Office for Students (OfS) to submit an Access and Participation Plan (APP) in 2019 for the period 2021–2025. This is how the OfS describes the APP and its role:²⁹

‘Access and participation plans set out how higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education. They include the provider’s ambition for change, the targets it has set, the measures it will put in place to achieve that change, and the investment it will make to deliver the plan.’

²⁷
For more information on the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) please go to www.educationopportunities.co.uk/

²⁸
For more information on the Uni-Connect programme go to www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/

²⁹
Office for Students (2019) Regulatory notice 1 Access and participation plan guidance www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/obcce522-df4b-4517-a4fd-101c2468444a/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance.pdf

The APP is the successor to the Access Agreement which providers were required to submit to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) from the late 2000s onwards. The APP is a crucial document. It outlines the targets in access and participation in HE which shape the approach of the institution to this issue. In completing the APP HE providers are given guidance regarding which groups of learners can be included in the plan and those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities are specified as one of these groups. As the guidance released in 2019³⁰ states:

‘...there is a wider set of student groups where the national data indicates there are particular equality gaps and support needs that can be addressed in access and participation plans. These are also included in the OfS definition of under-represented groups:

- ▶ Carers
- ▶ People estranged from their families
- ▶ People from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities
- ▶ Refugees
- ▶ Children of military families.’

³⁰
Office for Students (2019)

6.1

Survey of NEON members

There were 25 completed/partially completed surveys from the HE providers in the NEON membership. In Table 2 the activities of the HEIs who are undertaking work in the area is briefly described. The remaining respondents were either not undertaking work yet or had no immediate plans to do so.

Table 2

Survey responses from NEON HEI members

Name of Organisation	Activities undertaken
University of Surrey	A two days campus visit pilot event for GRT students to feed into work with the Race Ethnic Minority Achievement team at Surrey County Council to plan a series of targeted progression events with primary and secondary schools. Also starting a GRT network of staff and students within the university.
York St John University	A bursary to for young people from GRT communities with £500 on enrolment, £500 at the start of semester 2 and £1000 in final year.
King's College London	A new specific programme called RomBelong focuses on engendering a sense of belonging in GRT students. We also prioritise students from GRT backgrounds onto all of our main programmes and offer them specific mentoring support from an on-course undergraduate/postgraduate GRT student when they are on these programmes.
University of Derby	A Multi Faith Centre at the University of Derby which raises awareness of the community to HE staff, school staff and staff in a range of council sectors in the Derby City area.
Lancaster University	Funding an arts organisation to deliver sessions to GRT young people.
Sheffield Hallam University	Targeted interventions with pre 16 GRT students in the local area after running a small pilot in 2018/9. 2-3 small targeted activities with a range of GRT students dependent on the needs identified in the school. We will be likely working with pre-16 students, as our pilot and focus group highlighted the level of understanding of pathways, careers and HE was limited, and less than their peers.

→

University of East Anglia	A multi-faceted approach including guaranteed place at residential access summer schools (yr9–11), Funded places at enrichment subject-specific summer schools (yr12), Access to transport funds when attending University Open Days, enrichment events, and other access activities GRT students are a target group for the IncludingMe outreach programme of activities for the most under-represented learners. The programme offers fully funded individual student shadowing visits, small group visits, and talks and workshops for parents and professionals.
Anglia Ruskin University	Working with a local charity based in Peterborough who support the Roma Community on a programme called ROGA (Roma of great Ability) http://www.compas.org.uk/roga/ . The project is being expanded to the Roma communities in Ipswich.
Brunel University London	Work with community groups and women's refuge with very small numbers. GRT are considered when looking at community outreach plans particularly with regard to mature learners.

As Table 2 shows there are some examples of interesting practice supporting access to HE for GRT communities from HE providers. There may also be further examples of such work across the HE sector which this survey has not captured. However, at the same time it appears only a very small minority of HE providers are undertaking specific work to support access to their institutions for those from GRT communities.

Furthermore, with the exception of King's College London who have displayed some public commitments to supporting GRT students and the University of East Anglia, the work described above appears in the form of single projects rather than programmes involving linked/mutually re-inforcing activities.

6.2

Survey of Uni-Connect partnerships

There were 12 responses from the Uni-Connect partnerships approached. However, only 2 partnerships described coherent activities that were being delivered at the time of the survey. These responses are outlined below in Table 3.

Table 3

Survey responses from Uni-Connect partnerships

Name of Consortia	Activities undertaken
Sussex Learning Network	The project set out to provide an opportunity to bring together key stakeholders in the local community with existing experience around the GRT community and educational progression. This included expertise from a local University Education and Widening participation department; a secondary school with an existing commitment to supporting the progression of its GRT pupils; and a GRT focused organisation active in the local community; as well as members of the community and academics and activists from within it. The school identified their GRT learners across KS3 but the offer to participate also extended to older years and these young people were invited to be part of a specially developed programme of bespoke activities.
LiNCHigher	The consortia supports the Lincolnshire Traveller Initiative (LTI) and fund a number of pupils to complete Princes Trust Awards. We have also trained one parent to deliver the Princes Trust awards on different sites. We have also funded trips to local colleges e.g. Lincoln College and Boston College where they took part in interactive taster sessions of different subjects. For Phase 2 we are looking at funding some individuals to complete their functional skills in Maths, English and IT. Within the cohort one pupil has already started full-time college in Gainsborough, a further 2 have been accepted and start at Boston college in September 2019 and 3 more are currently applying. Considering that none of the above pupils attend school this achievement is massive and unprecedented in Traveller communities.

Table 4

Survey response from Welsh NEON member

Name of Consortia	Activities undertaken
South West Wales Reaching Wider Partnership – Swansea University	There is a Gypsy and Traveller Unit attached to one of the schools we work with and we have engaged with a group of students who attend this unit. It is not really a defined project but an evolving one in which we respond flexibly to the needs of the group and offer bespoke opportunities. So for example this year we delivered a STEM taster workshop and also arranged for the group to visit a local FE College to look at progression opportunities, meet staff and become comfortable with the campus etc as this would be the next step for the students.

On the basis of the responses received to the survey the majority of Uni-Connect partnerships are not undertaking specific activities with GRT communities. As would be expected from an initiative based on collaboration the examples above all display a degree for partnership working with schools, colleges or organisations working with GRT communities.

6.3

Assessment of 2020–21 to 2024–25 Access and Participation Plans

The information in this section is drawn firstly from NEON’s detailed analysis of the content of Access and Participation Plans. Table 5 documents any reference to GRT communities in the APP’s examined in relation to four areas in which the Office for Students suggest that HE providers should provide information in these plans. Access refers to outreach work undertaken prior to entry to HE, attainment to work that HE providers will do to support learners to achieve their academic potential in their assessments, retention to activities to ensure that all students complete their courses and finally progression to activity which supports students to enter graduate employment after HE.

Table 5

HE providers for whom GRT communities feature in their Access and Participation Plans

HE Provider	Access	Attainment	Retention	Progression	Other
Anglia Ruskin University					✓
Bath Spa University	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brunel University	✓	✓			
Buckinghamshire New University		✓			
City College Norwich					✓
Future Works					✓
Gloucester College				✓	
HCA					✓
King’s College London	✓				
Lancaster University					✓
Leeds Trinity University	✓				✓
Nottingham College					✓
The University of Sheffield					✓
University of Central Lancashire					✓
University of Derby					✓

→

HE Provider	Access	Attainment	Retention	Progression	Other
University of Essex					✓
University of Hull					✓
University of Liverpool					✓
University of Nottingham					✓
University of Plymouth					✓
University of St Marks & John					✓
University of Suffolk					✓
University of Surrey	✓				
University of York					✓

As Table 5 shows the majority of references to GRT communities are classified as ‘other’. These comments refer in almost every case to the challenges faced in terms of obtaining data on the numbers of GRT learners. This lack of data makes formulating numerical targets related to either of the four categories above and GRT learners highly problematic. This problem is discussed further in section 8 below. In total just under 30% of the APPs analysed included any reference to GRT communities. Hence, despite GRT communities being one of the designated target groups by the Office for Students over 70% of APPs examined contained no reference to them whatsoever.

6.4

Office for Students (OfS) analysis of Access and Participation Plans

The OfS undertook their own analysis of 2020–21 to 2024–25 Access and Participation Plans and released the results in January 2020.³¹ The OfS analysis looked at the numerical targets relating to the access, participation or success in higher education of those from GRT communities. It showed that none of the 171 plans contained a target related to GRT learners.

The lack of attention placed on GRT communities the APPs was recognized by the Director for Fair Access and Participation who stated that:

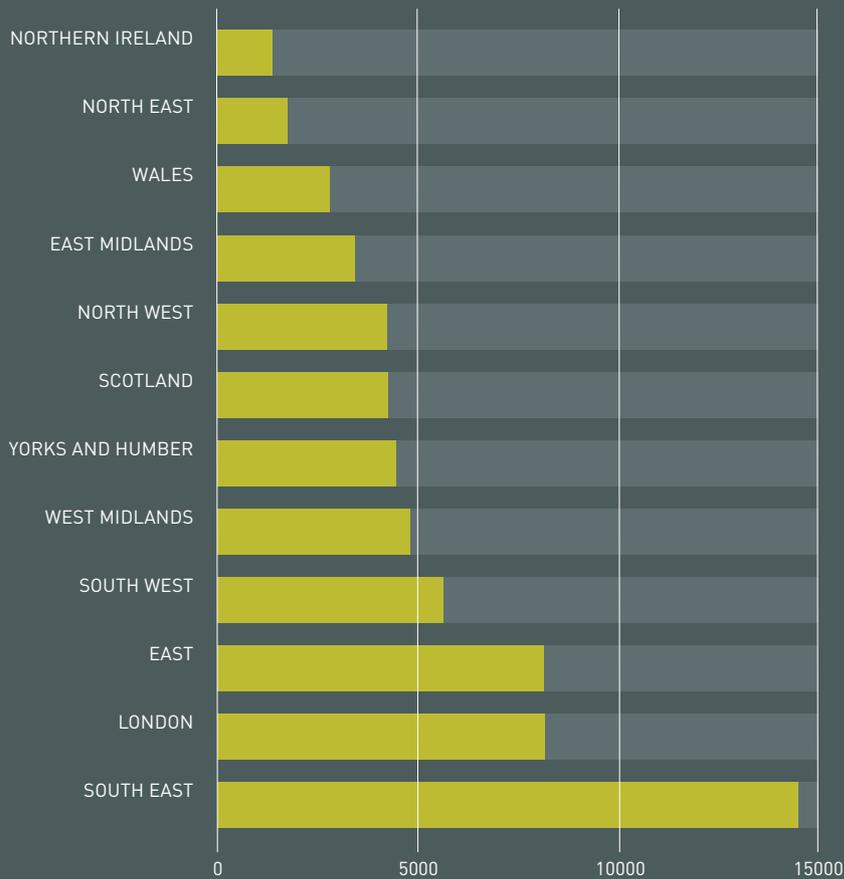
‘A number of other issues also need closer attention. Some smaller groups are still critically underrepresented in higher education – for example, care leavers, people estranged from their families, young people from military families, and people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. There is a need for better understanding of the very specific and complex barriers these groups face in accessing and succeeding in higher education.’

(Office for Students 2020:5)

³¹
Office for Students (2020)
Transforming opportunity in
higher education An analysis
of 2020–21 to 2024–25 access
and participation plans
[www.officeforstudents.org.
ukmedia/2efcda44-8715-4888-
8d63-42c0fd6a31af/
transforming-opportunity-
in-higher-education.pdf](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/2efcda44-8715-4888-8d63-42c0fd6a31af/transforming-opportunity-in-higher-education.pdf)

Diagram 5

GRT population by region in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
data from the 2011 census



7

Access to HE and the regional challenge: looking at London

The composition and lived experiences of those of GRT heritage in the UK differs regionally. As outlined in the introduction one of the purposes of this report is to attempt to understand how differences in GRT experience manifest themselves regionally looking at the case of London. This section shows that data gaps become even more pronounced at regional level but what evidence there is suggests that overall, despite London leading the way where access to HE is concerned nationally, there is less evidence that it leads the way in terms of access for GRT learners.

7.1

The GRT community in London

According to the 2011 census London and the South East region of England had both the largest number of Gypsies and Irish Travellers and the largest number per 10,000 people.³² Diagram 5 opposite shows the number of those from such groups by region according to the 2011 census.

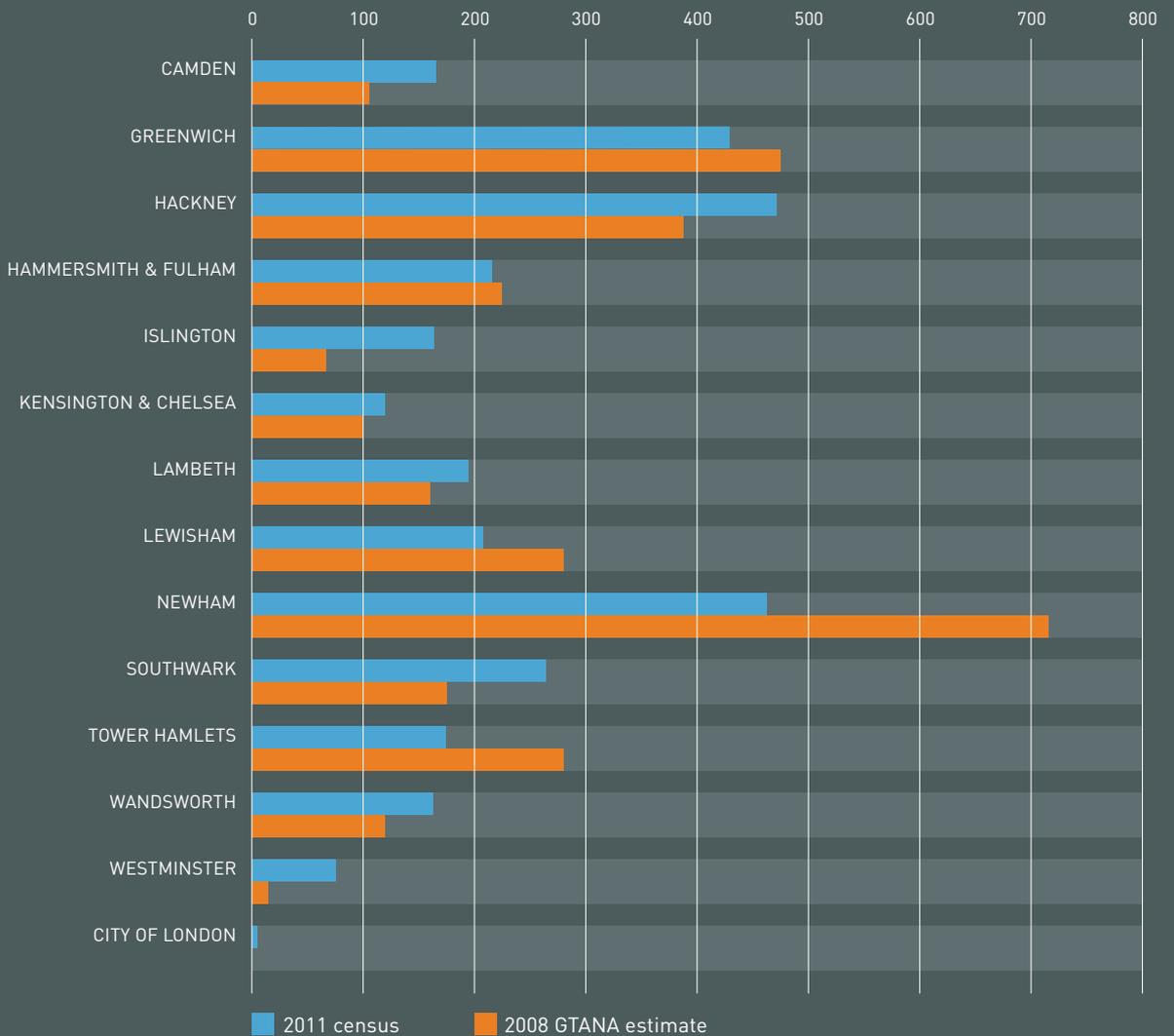
However, when data from the 2011 census is compared with that gathered for the 2008 London Boroughs' Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment (GTANA),³³ shown in Diagram 6 overleaf, it is clear that there are significant differences across local authority areas in London. These differences highlight the challenges in defining accurately the GRT population.

³² House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Tackling inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities – Seventh Report of Session 2017–19 (2019)

³³ Fordham Search (2008) London Boroughs' Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/london_boroughs_gypsy_and_traveller_accommodation_needs_assessment_-_final_report_-_2008_-_fordham_research.pdf

Diagram 6

GRT community population estimates in selected London local authority areas



7.2

Access to Higher Education in London

In terms of HE participation overall, London leads the rest of the country by some margin.³⁴ The relatively high number of learners entering HE from London reflect to a significant extent the strong performance of London schools at GCSE level.³⁵ London also has a very high number of HE providers in the city. No region in the UK, and few if any in the world, have as many HE providers as London. There are over 40 different Higher Education Institutions in the city, with in addition over 20 more providers of HE level courses. This critical mass of HE provision offers students who may wish to remain close to family or community in particular an unparalleled range of opportunities.

HE participation in London however is not just relatively high, it is also very diverse. Research undertaken by AccessHE, the regional network for widening higher education access in London in 2018 showed that over 60% of learners entering HE in London came from non-white backgrounds and this is forecast to rise to over 70% by 2030. London has also by far the most learners entering HE who are eligible for free school meals.³⁶ The rate of entry to HE for these learners in London exceeds that for those not claiming free school meals in most other areas of the country.

34
Department for Education
(2017) 'Widening
participation in Higher
Education'

35
Department of Education
(2017) 'Widening
participation in Higher
Education'

36
Atherton, G & Mazhari, T
(2018) Preparing for
hyper-diversity: London's
student population in 2030,
London: London Higher

7.3

Education and the GRT community in London

Obtaining a systematic picture of how GRT learners are faring in compulsory education across different regions is difficult. The data examined in section 4 above looking at the relative performance across the school system of learners from GRT backgrounds compared to those from other ethnic groups is not available at regional level. The number are small and releasing them is therefore problematic on data protection grounds.

Nevertheless, as part of this study 13 London local authorities were approached to try and build a more comprehensive picture of the educational attainment of GRT learners in the capital and the support available to them. Only 3 authorities replied and they indicated that they found it difficult to devote the specific resources they would like to enhance educational achievement for GRT communities. Nor could they provide any specific data. The low response rate reflects the decline over the last decade in the specialist Traveller Education Services units that were based in local authorities as funding has been drastically reduced for such services from central government. However, this approach based on specialist units taking responsibility for the education of GRT communities did also have its drawbacks.

As Tyler Hatwell from the London Gypsies and Travellers Unit stated:

‘While Traveller Education Services played an important role, they also encouraged local authorities to see the education of travellers as the responsibility of one person or department and not the whole authority’.

In the absence of regularly collected data at a London level from official sources, understanding the experiences of GRT learners in London means drawing on evidence from other sources.

37
The Traveller Movement
(2020) Barriers in education
– young Travellers in
London, London:
The Traveller Movement
www.travellermovement.org.uk/phocadownload/TTM%20Barriers%20in%20education_web.pdf

A study led by the Traveller Movement released in 2020 saw eleven peer researchers conduct forty-four qualitative interviews with young Travellers in London aged 15–25.³⁷ The research found that 61% of the young Travellers left school before 16 with 2 reaching higher education. Nearly 70% of the participants felt they had been bullied by their teacher. The report highlights well the differences in experiences that Travellers face with many being bullied in school but some describing support from their teachers. In terms of how education was viewed in the home again there were contrasting experiences as illustrated in the quotes below taken from this report.

‘My parents wanted me to learn to read and write because they can’t do it. They couldn’t help me with my homework. As they said you need your education cos the world is changing and you won’t get anywhere if you can’t read or write.’

‘I personally want to stay and my mother wants me to stay but my father wants me to work with him instead of going to school.’

In addition to the work above, there is other research underway that is trying to better understand the challenges facing GRT communities in accessing HE in London. As part of the Mapping for Equalities project described above research has been undertaken examining fixed period exclusions i.e. all temporary exclusions from school, up to 45 school days by ethnic background across London boroughs. The research finds that

‘in most boroughs, pupils who are most likely to be temporarily excluded from school are Gypsy/Roma or Irish Travellers pupils.’³⁸

38
Mapping for Change (2019)
Discrimination in London
schools against Gypsies
and Travellers
www.mappingforchange.org.uk/2019/07/discrimination-in-london-schools-against-gypsies-and-travellers/

7.4

Access to HE for GRT communities in London

The small numbers of learners entering HE from GRT communities means that data is not produced on Key Stage 5 progression by the Department of Education at regional level. Nor is data released at regional level here by UCAS or HESA.

However, given the relatively high numbers of those from GRT communities, the high levels of diversity in the student population and the proliferation of HE providers it is perhaps surprising that that London HEIs feature so little in the APP analysis in section 6.

King's College London (KCL) however is showing, relatively speaking, a very strong commitment to supporting access and participation in HE for GRT learners. As well as the work that KCL are undertaking there are also examples of learners who from GRT backgrounds who have progressed to HE at the institution and their experiences. Box 1 opposite describes, in her own words, the barriers faced by one student from a GRT background in progressing to higher education and how she has met them. Chelsea McDonagh was a Physical & Sport Education student at St Mary's University Twickenham. She graduated with first class honours and is currently doing an MA Education at King's College London and working as the Education Policy & Campaigns Officer at the Traveller Movement. Chelsea's story highlights the interlocking nature of the challenges that GRT students face and in particular how support is required not just to enter HE but throughout the HE journey.

There is a clear need for greater engagement with the access and participation in HE of GRT communities amongst London HE providers. This is something that is returned to in the recommendations for future action in section 9 below. London leads the way in most respects where access and diversity in HE is concerned. If there is to be significant changes in access to HE for these communities then greater engagement in London will be essential.

Box 1

Chelsea's Story

People assume that to be a Traveller and make it to and through Higher Education, that you must have merited it. I reject this idea. I think those of us who are lucky enough to get to this point have been just that: lucky. Those who have not made it this far are not any less capable or intelligent – they just haven't been given the same opportunities. I was fortunate to have really supportive teachers during secondary school where any instances of ethnicity-based bullying were dealt with swiftly. At college my lecturers went above and beyond their duties to provide me with the support I needed.

There is a lot of emphasis on pre university support through widening participation programmes, but we must remember that Traveller students require just as much support when they get to university, if not more. Many universities are very middle-class environments. This can make it feel as though university is not a place for someone like us. Supportive lecturers and tutors played a considerable role in helping me feel as though university was a place for me and ensured that I had the pastoral and academic support I needed. First generation Traveller students often need support in navigating HE systems. Being a member of the Women's Rugby Team helped me to make friends and develop a sense of belonging amongst my peers.

In the current climate it is not always enough to have an undergraduate degree and in many sectors having a postgraduate qualification is advantageous but it comes at a price and the current loan system on offer is not enough to sustain you unless you are working alongside your studies and have familial support. It would be good to see universities offer postgraduate scholarships and bursaries as this would show a real commitment to increasing the number of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in universities.

8

Extending access and participation in HE from GRT communities: the key challenges

8.1

Education, class, ethnicity and GRT communities

The challenges faced in extending access and success in HE for those from GRT communities, are to an extent similar to those other groups from lower socio economic backgrounds face. Financial realities and cultural relationships with education, grounded in both the past and the present, mean that formal education is a lower priority for many from these communities than the expected norm. This does not mean that the majority of people are against education as such, rather that it is not as important as those outside the community think it should be. This relationship with education is also found in a significant section of the white working class community.³⁹ It is an even more uneasy one for the GRT community as racism and discrimination acts to push young people and their families away from education making it even more difficult to give schooling or HE a higher priority.

For the HE sector while the investment in widening access work is significant, in the context of the whole education budget it is very small. Around £90 billion per year is spent on education while just over £500 million is spent on access and participation.⁴⁰ This means there are limits in what widening access work can do to address deep rooted inequalities. However, this does not mean that HE has no role to play in addressing them or that there isn't more to support greater HE participation by the GRT community. Recent reports such as *'The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education: A report on barriers from early years to secondary and beyond'*,⁴¹ produced in 2017 and *'Exploring how Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students can best be supported to participate and thrive in higher education'* produced by Northumbria University in 2020⁴² outline well some of the practical things that HE providers could do to enable access and participation in HE by those from GRT communities. Particularly important is what the Northumbria University report describes as *'a holistic approach is needed to ensuring GRT community members are supported and included in university environments'*.

- ▶ Working with families to support them to ascribe/identify their ethnicity at pre-entry and transition into HE
- ▶ Early, primary school based intervention and outreach aimed at raising aspirations or providing information, should focus more on primary school level.

39
Atherton, G & Mazhari, T (2019) – Working Class Heroes, Understanding access to higher education for white students from lower socio-economic backgrounds: London: London Higher www.educationopportunities.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Working-Class-Heroes-Understanding-access-to-Higher-Education-for-white-students-from-lower-socio-economic-backgrounds.pdf

40
Data on education spending overall from Belfield, C, Farquharson, C & Sibieta, L (2018) *2018 Annual Report on Education Spending in England*, London: IFS

41
Mulcahy, E, Baars, S., Bowen-Viner, K and Menzies, L. (2017) *The under-representation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education A report on barriers from early years to secondary and beyond* – London: King's College London

42
Forster, N, & Gallagher, N (2020) *Exploring how Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students can best be supported to participate and thrive in higher education*, Northumbria University

- ▶ Identifying GRT graduate role models who may be able to provide mentoring in schools.
- ▶ Targeting pupils who are home educated to ensure they are included in outreach activities
- ▶ University staff trained to help them understand which groups and ethnicities the term ‘GRT’ refers to and to include GRT issues and culture in curricula, where relevant.
- ▶ Informing parents about financial support and loan systems, as well as anti-discrimination and inclusion practice and the pastoral support offered to students at university.

Embedding attention to GRT culture and rights within the curriculum a but also the assets and contributions of GRT members to society.

However, the evidence outlined in this report suggests that only a minority of HE providers are presently taking forward any of these practice steps to support the access and participation in HE of GRT learners.

8.2

The policy approach to widening access to HE

The present policy approach to widening access are not proving effective enough at stimulating the kind of practical changes suggested above. The two main routes by which widening access work could address these challenges is via the Uni-Connect programme and APPs. The APP is at the centre of a strategic approach based on the use of quantitative data to drive institutional behaviour and investment. As Table 5 showed for those HEIs who even mentioned GRT communities in their APP, the majority just pointed to the lack of data regarding GRT education and progression. While as argued above the issues of self-identification is a problem even if all GRT students identified as GRT there would still be so few that HEIs would be unable to construct a target.

This is a structural problem in the present APP model that affects any group whose number is small. Others affected include looked after children, those with disabilities and also estranged students. There is recognition of students from the GRT and these other communities in the APP guidance but that does not, as the evidence shows, necessarily provide a mechanism to enable them to feature in the strategic priorities of HE providers.

Neither has the way in which Uni-Connect project has been delivered thus far supported a focus on the GRT community. Uni-Connect has concentrated in its first phase on improving the progression of young learners from the lowest areas of HE participation into HE. In some cases GRT learners will be found in these communities, and as shown above some partnerships have taken the initiative and made a concentrated effort to engage with GRT learners. However, this element of Uni-Connect which has been the dominant one in the programme, does not encourage work with GRT learners. The hub element of the programme, introduced in 2019 which asks partnerships to work more broadly with schools across an area, does create the opportunity for more of a focus on GRT learners. However, the reality is that in the next phase of this programme a specific focus on GRT learners is what is really needed.

9

Summary and recommendations

The exceptionally low levels of HE participation amongst those from the GRT community is a product of deep rooted structural inequalities. Increasing HE participation would require significant changes in policy and practice across the educational system. This research has shown that HE does not appear as engaged in addressing participation of those from GRT communities either nationally or in London as it could be. There are a range of practical actions that could be taken by HE providers in particular to support outreach work targeted at GRT communities and GRT students when they enter HE detailed in section 7 above but there is little evidence they are being attempted.

The recommendations below concentrate on the broader strategic changes that need to be in place for the practical actions to happen. Without these strategic changes then the practical actions, while desirable, are unlikely to be implemented across a critical mass of HE providers especially given the challenges that the HE sector will face over coming years as a result of Covid-19.

1

Ensure there is a specific strand of work focused on GRT participation in Uni-Connect from 2021 to 2025

A review of the Uni-Connect programme to establish whether it should continue beyond mid-2021 and if so what the programme should focus on, was due to take place in the first part of 2020. It has been delayed because of Covid-19.

As argued above the present structure of the programme with a dominant strand that targets particular geographical areas does not lend itself to a focus on GRT or other learners who are relatively small in number and unevenly distributed geographically. A national collaborative widening access to HE outreach programme should have built within it the provision to support learners from all under-represented groups at an appropriate level. This review is an opportunity for the OfS to shape a programme which does this. It should include a dedicated strand of work focused on GRT learners.

This strand of work could focus on bringing together the emerging good practice within partnerships identified above; ensuring that all partnerships are working on this issue; setting targets for engagement/progression and developing regional collaborative relationships with schools, colleges and organisations representing GRT communities.

2

Ask all HE providers to outline how they are supporting access, participation for GRT learners in their 2021 APP statements to the Office for Students

If the APP is to be the major strategic driver of access and participation over the foreseeable future progress on access and participation for GRT learners will be limited if they feature in only a minority of such plans. There are strong arguments for the data led outcomes approach the OfS is taking to improving access and participation in HE. However, it is in danger of crowding out work with learners of whom the numbers in pre-HE level and HE level education are small/hard to ascertain as the evidence above shows. The OfS has taken a stringent approach to ensuring that HE providers focus in their APPs on certain aspects of inequality– in particular access to HE for those from low participation neighbourhoods. It would be in keeping with the strong commitment they have shown to addressing all aspects of inequality in access and participation to address head on the issues associated with low learner number groups and ask all providers to state how they are addressing such inequalities for learners from GRT communities. The APPs for 2021–2025 have been produced but providers have to produce annual updates on progress. In these annual updates, a statement outlining how providers are integrating work with GRT communities into their strategic commitments to access and participation could be included.

3

Establish a national GRT HE access and participation initiative

While the policy challenges outlined above are essential to provide the environment in which access to HE for GRT communities can be increased, this will not on its own lead to change. HE providers working closely with the community organisations that support and represent the GRT community need to work together to move this issue up the higher education agenda. Work has already begun led by a small number of HE providers, community organisations and the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) to initiate a national GRT Access and Participation Network. One mechanism being developed by this group is a pledge for HE providers which outlines their commitment to access and inclusion for GRT students. The pledge due to be launched later in 2020 covers a number of themes including:

- ▶ encouraging student and staff to serve as visible GRT role models and identifying senior GRT champions
- ▶ encouraging the formation of GRT student societies
- ▶ including Roma as a separate ethnic classification when data is collected from students.

Such a pledge is an important tool in helping HE providers understand what they should be doing to support access and inclusion for this group and galvanise action. It needs to be part though of an ongoing programme of work to share practice especially in outreach between HE providers and community organisations, improve data collection and reform HE structures. This initiative while it should be led and owned by HE will need supporting by policymakers, ideally given the new Covid-19 environment, with resources at least in the outset to allow the initiative to develop momentum and sustainability. Such an initiative would be particularly important in supporting the delivery of recommendations 1 and 2.

4

Integrate focus on GRT community learners in the new national strategy to tackle Gypsy, Roma and Traveller inequalities

In June 2019 the government announced that they are *‘launching an ambitious programme of work, to be undertaken across government, which will aim to tackle the serious disparities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.’*⁴³ As this programme develops it is important that the issue of inequalities in access to HE features in it and links are made with any activities that are led from the HE sector in this area. As the evidence outlined in this report shows, inequalities in HE participation are a product of intersections between societal inequalities affecting GRT communities.

5

Mayor of London to establish a GRT education task force

London has the largest number of HE students of any region in the country and by a significant difference the most diverse intake. To address the challenges related to educational performance for GRT communities outlined in this report a regional dimension is crucial and given both nature of London’s HE sector and the importance of the elected Mayoral role, London may be an appropriate place to start in developing this regional approach. The evidence presented in the report shows that GRT progression does not appear to be a high priority for the majority of London HEIs and local authorities in London are experiencing major challenges in supporting traveller education per se. The Mayor does not have responsibility for schools, colleges or HE. However, is in the ideal position to convene the kind of cross sector dialogue on GRT education which is urgently needed in the capital. London is the ideal place to drive forward education attainment and progression for those from GRT communities. The creation of a task force bringing together school, colleges, universities and representative of GRT communities which could stimulate cross sector commitments to a London wide plan would be clear evidence of the commitment of the Mayor to social mobility.

⁴³ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) *Press release New national strategy to tackle Gypsy, Roma and Traveller inequalities* 6th June 2019 www.gov.uk/government/news/new-national-strategy-to-tackle-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-inequalities

Appendix

HEI Survey questions

- 1** What is your name?

- 2** What is your position?

- 3** What is your email?

- 4** What is your organisation's name?

- 5** What is your telephone number?

- 6** Is your institution (organisation) working to increase participation, retention and success in HE for students from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds?

- 7** If you are could you briefly describe the work you are undertaking?

- 8** If there is a particular initiative/project you are undertaking please could you describe it by answering the questions below:

What are the aims and objectives of the project?

How many students from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds participate each year and how many hours/days are they engaged?

Please describe how the targeting process for the project works.

Do you have evidence of the impact of the project and how was this evidence collected?

- 9** What do you see as the major challenges in supporting increased participation, retention and success in HE by students from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds?

- 10** Are there targets related to the participation, retention and success in HE by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students featured in your Access and Participation Plan? If it is, can you describe briefly what is stated in the plan?

- 11** What can the Office for Students and other policymakers do in your view, to support you in increasing participation, retention and success in HE by students from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds in HE?

- 12** What can NEON do to support members in increasing participation, retention and success in HE by students from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds?

- 13** Any other comments?

Author biography

Dr Graeme Atherton is Director of the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) and AccessHE. He has produced over 150 publications in the field of access to higher education and holds visiting professorships at Amity University London and Sunway University, Malaysia. He is a trustee of Upreach and of the National Union of Students (NUS).



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