

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Exploring Representations of Gypsy, Traveller, Roma, Showmen and Bargee Communities in Widening Participation Discourse

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Abstract: Gypsy, Traveller, Roma, Showmen and Bargee (GTRSB) communities are considerably under-represented in higher education. While research, practice and policy attention to this issue is growing, confusion surrounding appropriate definition and targeting of GTRSB students within widening participation initiatives, forms a key barrier to inclusion. This presentation reports on findings from a Society for Research into Higher Education Scoping project, which aimed to provide conceptual clarity around how GTRSB communities are currently represented in widening participation research, policy and practice. Outlining results from four project strands (a systematic literature review; a documentary analysis of constructions of GTRSB communities in Access and Participation Plans; an expert interview with an Office for Students representative; and a Delphi study to determine future research and practice priorities), we identify timely recommendations for work to support GTRSB students into and through higher education, with a view to achieving common understanding and purpose in this emergent area.

Paper: Universities are under increasing scrutiny in both public discourse (Weale 2020) and the academy (Universities UK 2019) for their failure to robustly challenge the racism and inequality which pervades in these settings. Gypsy, Traveller, Roma, Showmen and Boater (GTRSB) communities are minority ethnic communities who are particularly under-represented in higher education (HE). Figures must be treated with caution, as many GTRSB students avoid self-identifying for fear of discrimination. However, the most recent data suggests that only 3-4% of GTRSB young people aged 18-30 participated in HE in 2014/15, compared to 43% of this age group nationally, and only 70 Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller students entered HE in 2018 (Atherton 2020). Recent research (Mulcachy et al 2017, Forster and Gallagher 2020) and media [coverage](#) (Hall 2020) also highlights the isolation and exclusion felt by GTRSB staff and students in HE, due to the invisibility of GTRSB contributions within university environments and curricula.

Initiatives to increase the representation of GTRSB communities in HE are gaining momentum. A recent House of Lords roundtable event (Greenfields 2019) brought together GTRSB community members, HE representatives, and policy makers to promote action on this issue, and a national '[Good Practice Pledge](#)' (Buckinghamshire New University 2021) has since been launched, through which institutions can demonstrate and enact their commitment to supporting GTRSB communities into and within HE. However, work in this area is still in its infancy, and previous research suggests that confusion surrounding appropriate definition and targeting of GTRSB students in widening

participation schemes forms a key barrier to progress (Forster and Gallagher 2020). This is tied to the ambiguous position of GTRSB communities, as White minority ethnic groups, in relation to discourses of racism and racial equality (Goodman and Rowe 2014, Bhopal 2011), with GTRSB students neither benefiting from the same privilege enjoyed by the White British majority, nor visibility within initiatives to promote racial equality in HE (D'Arcy 2017). Further definitional confusion stems from the diversity of groups included under the GTRSB label, each with specific heritage and culture, and the need to consider variation in experience as ethnicity intersects with other identities.

This paper reports on findings from a Society for Research into Higher Education funded Scoping project, which aimed to provide conceptual clarity around how GTRSB communities are currently defined and represented in widening participation discourse, and arrive at some common recommendations for future work in this field. This aim was addressed through four project strands: a systematic literature review; a documentary analysis of Access and Participation Plans (APPs); an expert interview an Office for Students representative; and a Delphi study involving GTRSB students, widening participation specialists, and academics (n= 17).

A critical interpretive synthesis of the literature highlighted the dominance of an individual hero type discourse, which represents GTRSB students as 'trailblazers' and positions GTRSB participation in HE as an atypical event, requiring personal triumph over adversity. This narrative recognises the determination of GTRSB students in overcoming barriers to HE access and participation. However, it also serves to reinforce a falsity that that GTRSB culture is incompatible with academic success, and downplay the need for structural change; instead placing the onus on GTRSB students to act as 'role models' who 'give back' to the broader community.

Narratives of GTRSB participation in HE as an unusual event are also reflected in, and potentially reinforced through the treatment of these groups in Access and Participation Plans. Only 86 of the 245 plans reviewed (35%) make any reference to GTRSB communities, and of these, only 14 (16%) name GTRSB communities explicitly as target groups. Ambiguity in regard to the treatment of GTRSB communities as ethnic or 'other' groups was also evident in plans, with only 7% of plans referring to GTRSB communities as ethnic groups. Discourses driving a lack of systemic action to address inequalities experienced by GTRSB communities included the absence of data to assess performance for these groups; the small size or limited resources of institutions; and/or low numbers of GTRSB students. However, without systemic action, barriers to self-identification and the low numbers of GTRSB students in higher education are likely only to be reproduced, and the need to include GTRSB communities among the groups that higher education providers must assess their progress for, was a key recommendation emerging from consultation with experts in the interview and Delphi study.

Overall, this paper highlights important and potentially troubling absences of GTRSB experiences in the field widening participation, and sets out directions for future research, policy and practice to address them.

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