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## Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

# From Margins to Belonging: Roma Access to Higher Education in Northern Ireland

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### KESS Policy Briefing

*...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland*

## Key points:

- The combined number of pupils from Roma and Irish Traveller communities in Northern Ireland who progress to higher education each year is under five, too low to be published by the Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) under statistical disclosure rules. Aggregated across five years, the progression rate is 4.7%. There is presently no policy, no routinely published data and no statutory obligation on universities to address this low representation.
- Disaggregated figures exist within DENI's own data, but published outputs report only a broad 'White' and 'Minority Ethnic' split, leaving Roma and Irish Traveller numbers invisible within it.
- The gap begins long before higher education: only 4.3% of Roma and Irish Traveller leavers achieve three or more A-levels, compared to a Northern Ireland average of 39.2%.
- Scotland, Wales, England and the Republic of Ireland have each put in place named inclusion strategies, dedicated funding, or legal requirements for Roma and Traveller communities. Comparable provision does not currently exist in Northern Ireland.
- Participatory research with Romanian Roma families in South Belfast has shown that these individuals are not disinterested in education. Where young people do not progress into higher education, it is often because of overlapping and structural barriers, rather than a lack of aspiration.
- Some of the organisations that reach these communities through long-term engagement, such as early years, health mediation and intercultural education services, have no guaranteed funding and depend on cycles of renewal to deliver services these communities need.
- Roma and Irish Traveller histories are almost entirely absent from NI school and university curricula. Roma and Irish Traveller children learn little of their own history at school and neither does the majority population.

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## Introduction

This briefing draws on participatory research with Romanian Roma families in South Belfast and on comparative policy frameworks, legislation and peer-reviewed literature across the UK, Ireland and Europe. The research evidence comes from two linked initiatives: [a participatory film co-produced with Roma families](#) (2025) and a Roma Mentorship Programme delivered with community partners (2025-26)<sup>1</sup>, alongside a [Gypsy, Roma and Traveller \(GRT\) Inclusion and Belonging in Higher Education \(HE\) Symposium](#) held at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in May 2026. Irish Traveller communities are named throughout this briefing because they face connected structural inequalities and are treated together in aggregated data and policy frameworks, though the two are distinct and should be recognised as such.

## Background

Roma and Irish Travellers in Northern Ireland (NI) are among the most educationally marginalised in the UK, yet, presently, there is no legislative proactive duty on government or institutions to address this and no publishable disaggregated data on progression to higher education to evidence it. The 2021 Census recorded 1,529 Roma (0.08%) and 2,609 Irish Travellers (0.14%) (NISRA, 2022). Roma communities in NI are not homogeneous, and they comprise a diversity of national, religious and cultural groups, including Roma communities from Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia, as well as smaller numbers from other countries including Ukraine, Poland, the Czech Republic and Serbia.

When figures were requested in 2026, the Department of Education (DENI) confirmed that fewer than five pupils per year, from both communities combined, have consistently progressed to higher education over the last five years (DENI, personal communication, May 7th, 2026), but the numbers are too small to publish under statistical disclosure rules. Only by combining five years, from 2020/21 to 2024/25, could a figure be released, showing that 14 of 300 Irish Traveller and Roma school leavers progressed to higher education, a rate of just 4.7% (DENI, personal communication, June 3rd, 2026)<sup>2</sup>, [compared to a national average of 40.2% of all school leavers](#) (Department of Education / NISRA, 2026). Furthermore, while DENI collects disaggregated data on Roma and Irish Traveller school leavers in its underlying database, published data reports only a broad 'White' and 'Minority Ethnic Group' binary, which means the low numbers for both Roma and Irish Travellers are simply invisible within it.

In contrast, in England, where Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are named in widening participation guidance and disaggregated data is available and published annually, progression to

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<sup>1</sup> The Roma Mentorship Programme was delivered in partnership with the 'Speranța' Roma Health Project (Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Sorina Toma), Belfast South Sure Start (Jill Robertson), Education Authority NI (EANI) Intercultural Education Service (Abigail Linton) and Roma Support Hub / Forward South Partnership (Dr Jacqueline Monahan), funded by the QUB Civic Contribution Fund.

<sup>2</sup> These are destination figures, not an official record of enrolment. Ethnicity is self-reported by the pupil or parent and recorded by the school.

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higher education has increased [from 6.9% in 2019-20 to 24.3% in 2023-24 for Gypsy and Roma, and from 10.7% to 18.5% for Travellers of Irish Heritage, compared to a national average of 38.1% in 2019-20 and 40.5% in 2023-24](#) (Department for Education, 2023-24). Despite the increase, both remain among the lowest groups progressing to HE and [with the lowest attainment of any ethnic group at every stage of schooling](#) (Brassington, 2022; Gov.uk Ethnicity Facts and Figures, 2024).

The gap in educational attainment is also shown to begin well before university. In NI, over the same five-year period (2020/21-2024/25), just 4.3% of Irish Traveller and Roma leavers achieved three or more A-levels at grades A\* to C (DENI, personal communication, June 2026), [against a Northern Ireland average of 39.2% in 2024/25](#) (Department of Education / NISRA, 2026). The same gap shows up earlier, at GCSE-level: over the same five-year period, 11.7% of Irish Traveller and Roma leavers achieved at least five GCSEs at grades A\* to C including English and maths, compared to a Northern Ireland average of 71.9% (DENI, personal communication, June 2026; Department of Education / NISRA, 2026). Because A-levels are the principal route into higher education, this attainment gap means very few Roma and Traveller leavers reach the point of being able to apply to university.

This low representation is a consequence of numerous overlapping barriers affecting Roma and Irish Traveller communities in Northern Ireland, and beyond. Comparative research across the UK and Europe has consistently documented the structural barriers that Roma face, rooted in a longer history of [anti-Roma racism \(or anti-Gypsyism\)](#), a specific and persistent form of racism, distinct from other kinds of racial discrimination, that runs through education, housing and healthcare ([ECRI GPR No. 13, revised 2020](#); [FRA, 2018](#)). The invisibility of Roma and Traveller histories in school and university curricula, documented across [21 Council of Europe member states](#) (Spielhaus et al., 2020), for example, reflects the same structural exclusion.

The argument driving this briefing is that legislation cannot address structural inequality without first acknowledging its existence. The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 prohibits individual acts of racial discrimination but places no proactive duty on government or institutions to address structural racism<sup>3</sup> (TEO, 2024). [The Executive Office's \(TEO\) Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025](#) named Irish Travellers and Roma as groups who might need specific programmes of work (OFMDFM, 2015, p.31), and TEO established a Roma Thematic Group and a Travellers Thematic Group. These groups do valuable work, but they cannot deliver without legislation that names these communities and the funding to back it. Furthermore, the recent draft Framework for Race Relations, consulted on by TEO in 2026, listed Irish Traveller as a named ethnic category in its survey [but did not include Roma](#) (TEO, 2026b, Q.10), leaving them invisible in the very consultation meant to address racial inequality. And while the draft names Roma and Irish Travellers in service delivery and community cohesion interventions, it does not do so in relation to legislation ([TEO, 2026a](#)). The Equality Commission has already called for legislation reform to go further than the Order in providing effective protection (Equality Commission NI, 2026, p.32), and

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<sup>3</sup> Structural racism refers to the way policies, practices and institutions can produce unequal outcomes for different ethnic groups, even where no one intends to discriminate.

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Council of Europe recommendations call for explicit acknowledgement of anti-Roma and anti-Traveller discrimination specifically ([ECRI GPR No. 13, revised 2020](#)). The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has similarly called on the UK, expressly naming Northern Ireland, to adopt tailored measures for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils and to collect disaggregated data ([UN CERD, 2024, paragraphs 45-46](#)).

Other jurisdictions across the UK have put in place at least some provisions in relation to these issues. Scotland has a Race Equality Framework 2016-2030, [an Anti-Racism Delivery Plan 2026-2030 naming Gypsy/Traveller communities as a strategic priority](#), and a [dedicated Gypsy/Traveller Action Plan 2024-2026](#) (Scottish Government, 2024; 2026). Wales has [the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan](#) (2022, updated 2024), naming GRT communities as a specific priority, [supported by an £11 million grant for minority ethnic and GRT pupils in 2024-25](#) (Welsh Government, 2024a; 2024b). In England, the [Office for Students names Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities as an underrepresented group in widening participation guidance](#), though targeting them in Access and Participation Plans is optional (Office for Students, 2022). The Republic of Ireland published [its National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II in 2024](#), a whole-of-government plan with 80 actions across nine themes. Travellers and Roma are named priority groups in the [National Access Plan 2022-2028](#) (HEA Ireland, 2022), supported by [ringfenced PATH 5 funding and backed by the Higher Education Authority Act 2022](#) (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2024). Despite the clear disparity Roma and Irish Travellers face in attainment and access, no comparable provision currently exists in NI.

## Findings

### I. Participatory Film and Roma Mentorship Programme

The findings below draw on two projects: ['I Want to Be a...'](#) (2025), a participatory research film co-directed with Dr Michael Holly (QUB), made with Romanian Roma families in South Belfast and in collaboration with Education Authority NI (EANI, Abigail Linton and Brid Maher); and the Roma Mentorship Programme (January-June 2026), which brought nine Roma pupils aged 9 to 14 and their families onto the Queen's University Belfast campus for university visits and mentoring sessions. Both projects worked with this age group because the conditions determining whether HE seems possible are established in primary and early secondary school. The film was developed through a participatory process. Seven families took part in collaborative workshops between November and December 2024, in which the format and themes were shaped together, and three families chose to continue filming between January and March 2025. The mentorship programme grew out of that work and was delivered as a civic engagement initiative.

Neither project provides a representative sample of NI Roma communities, which are very diverse, and Irish Travellers are not represented in this research, a limitation that future research will address. Nevertheless, while small-scale and qualitative, these findings are consistent with larger studies showing that structural barriers, rather than a lack of aspiration or academic ability, discourage

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Roma and Travellers from progression into higher education ([Greenfields et al., 2022](#); Morgan, McDonagh & Acton, 2023; Moreira et al., 2025; [Traveller Movement, 2020](#)).

Four themes emerged from the research process:

1. Aspirations shaped by unfamiliarity: None of the parents across both projects had attended university and some had not completed secondary school. For families living within a short distance of QUB, the campus was not a familiar space. University did not feature in what they saw as possible for their children, shaped by their own experience of education and the absence of anyone to explain how higher education works. One couple said they wanted their children to have support they never had, to finish school and progress into further or higher education. One student, aged 13, excelled at school and already wanted to become a solicitor, but her family had no way of knowing how to navigate the path to university. Another student wanted to become a police officer, 'to help people'. The children were all interested and invested in school. None had been part of a university or college widening participation scheme, despite the families living in areas of multiple deprivation.
2. Communication barriers beyond language: While children spoke English well, mothers struggled to communicate in English, often relying on interpreters or on their children to translate. Letters from schools were sometimes missed or misunderstood, which affected relationships with schools over time. Children could function in school while their parents' involvement was invisible to teachers, not because they did not care, but because language barriers made the usual channels inaccessible. EANI's Intercultural Education Service (IES) provided mediation and support, but barriers remained in schools where teachers and principals had limited understanding of families' circumstances and cultural contexts. These patterns are consistent with the wider NI evidence on minority ethnic pupils' experiences of admissions, parental engagement and curriculum (Loader et al., 2023).
3. Fear as a barrier to education: One parent described being afraid to send their child to school when first arriving in NI, not knowing how their children would be treated or how they would cope. Fear diminished over time, through repeated contact with people in grassroots organisations that families had come to trust. Children attending schools that celebrated diversity, including International Roma Day, spoke warmly about their teachers. One child, having experienced consistent kindness from a teacher, said they also wanted to become a teacher, so that they could be kind to other students in return.
4. Intermediary roles as crucial for building trust: In a school where a dedicated family worker was present, families who had kept their distance began to trust and connect with the school. One of the mothers who took part in the film has for years supported other Roma mothers to navigate schools and related institutions, encouraging parents and children to attend school. She said: 'For me, it is okay now, I'm okay with everything, I can cope [...] My kid is fine now, but it's other Roma kids who need support, who need someone.' Support delivered through trusted community partners that worked directly with Roma often reached families that no generic scheme had reached.

## II. GRT Inclusion Symposium (8 May 2026, QUB)

[The symposium](#) was the first event in Northern Ireland to bring together researchers, practitioners and policymakers from across the UK and Ireland, specifically around GRT participation in higher education. A Northern Ireland-focused roundtable drew on frontline experience across education, health and community services. Three themes ran through the day's discussions:

- Data invisibility: NI has no mechanism to track Roma or Irish Traveller learners through school into HE. Without publishable disaggregated data, the scale of underrepresentation cannot be measured, and institutions face no obligation to act.

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- Intersectional, joined-up policy: For Roma and Irish Traveller communities, the discrimination they face and their invisibility in data and policy are interconnected, and both shape their exclusion from education. A bill that addresses only one of these, without acknowledging the persistence of anti-Roma and anti-Traveller discrimination, would not reach the structural injustices at play.
- Named statutory accountability: Voluntary cooperation between HE institutions and communities has not produced systemic change. [The Gypsy, Traveller, Roma, Showmen and Boaters \(GTRSB\) Higher Education Pledge](#), discussed throughout the symposium, offers one possible model, but it remains voluntary and, to date, no NI institution has signed it.

Lived experience and individual stories also shaped the day's discussions. Winnie McDonagh, an Irish Traveller who graduated with a university degree from QUB, talked of growing up in a context in which higher education was not encouraged, where families feared discrimination and authorities, and where Traveller pupils go largely uncounted in education data, in part because families fear the consequences of disclosing their ethnic identity given experiences of discrimination or bullying. She spoke of one teacher who became a safe space and helped her through her exams; without that teacher, she said, she would not have done her A-levels or gone to university. Winnie graduated with a degree in social work, despite the discrimination she faced from peers and teachers, and now works in public services. Martin McDonagh, Chair of the Traveller Thematic Group at TEO, argued that institutional and legal obligations need to go beyond access alone, towards environments where Traveller students feel welcomed and supported, not just accepted. In the absence of accurate and publishable statistical data, these accounts show how invisibility, discrimination and the lack of targeted support combine to make the path to higher education much harder.

## Recommendations for Assembly Members

The following recommendations set out what reform of racial equality legislation, the proposed 16-18s in Education or Training Bill, and existing legislation could include:

1. Name Roma and Irish Traveller communities explicitly in legislation addressing racial inequality. Roma and Irish Travellers are distinct communities, and both should be named separately rather than absorbed into any single category. Low numbers accessing HE in NI also show that generic minority protection legislation (such as Section 75) has not reached these communities. [The Council of Europe's Strategic Action Plans for Roma and Traveller Inclusion](#) call on member states, including the UK, to adopt specific, targeted measures rather than relying on general provision alone, and to remove obstacles to equal access to education (Council of Europe, [2020](#); 2026). Section 75 guidance could also name Roma and Irish Traveller communities explicitly, placing an immediate obligation on public authorities, without requiring new primary legislation.

2. Invest in early intervention.

Research shows that perceptions of whether higher education seems possible are established in primary and early secondary school (Moreira et al., 2025), before pupils turn 16. Guidance under the 16-18s Bill could require the Department of Education to name Roma and Irish Traveller communities and specify early outreach obligations. The early years organisations and intercultural

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education services that reach families before secondary school, such as Sure Start, Toybox and community health projects, are the intervention points that matter most, yet none operates with guaranteed funding (see Recommendation 6).

3. Review widening participation priority groups to include Roma and Irish Travellers.

No NI university is currently required to identify Roma or Irish Traveller students within its widening participation priority groups. In contrast, in the Republic of Ireland, Travellers and Roma are named priority groups under the National Access Plan 2022-2028 (HEA Ireland, 2022), supported by ringfenced PATH 5 funding of €450,000 per year and backed by the Higher Education Authority Act 2022. The Department for the Economy's 2026 consultation proposed four widening participation priority themes, [none of which names Roma or Traveller communities explicitly](#) (Department for the Economy, 2026). Naming Roma and Travellers as priority groups in the final framework, and resourcing universities to respond, would be the most direct and impactful intervention.

4. Collect and publish disaggregated Roma and Irish Traveller education data.

Publishing disaggregated data is what makes the scale of the problem visible and intervention possible. The Equality Commission has already [identified ethnic equality monitoring as a priority in its position on race law reform](#) (Equality Commission NI, 2023). Where numbers fall below statistical disclosure thresholds, as they currently do for Roma and Irish Travellers in NI on an annual basis, data can be aggregated across years or across institutions to produce publishable figures without identifying individuals. The five-year aggregate DENI produced on request in 2026 demonstrates this is possible. Reformed racial equality legislation could include provision for DENI and NI HE institutions to develop and implement a data collection framework in partnership with Roma and Irish Traveller communities.

5. Revise curriculum to include Roma and Irish Traveller histories.

[Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec\(2020\)2](#) calls on member states to include Roma and Traveller history in school curricula. Wales, for example, has published [dedicated guidance to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners](#) (Welsh Government, 2024b). Roma history, culture and intellectual traditions are almost entirely absent from NI school curricula, a gap also identified by a recent QUB study (Loader et al., 2023). Queen's University Belfast has offered [a third-year undergraduate module on Roma communities since 2022-23, one of very few of its kind in the UK and Ireland](#). A revision of racial equality legislation could require schools to include Roma and Irish Traveller histories, with the [Education \(Curriculum Minimum Content\) Order \(NI\) 2007](#) a likely legislative pathway.

6. Fund community intermediary roles.

Community organisations and mediating services reach Roma and Irish Traveller communities across education, health, housing and early years, but none has guaranteed funding. Current equality schemes require public authorities to screen, consult and monitor, but place no obligation on them to fund the organisations that reach these families. Provision is also currently uneven across districts,

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so whether a family receives this support depends heavily on where they live. Reform to racial equality legislation could require public authorities to demonstrate, within their equality schemes, how they will fund the intermediary roles that reach Roma and Irish Traveller families. Consistent funding would ensure access does not depend on area.

## Conclusion

Racial equality legislation, including the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, would need to be reformed to reflect best international standards. As research has shown, lack of educational progression to HE is not rooted in lack of aspiration, but in the overlapping barriers facing members of these communities throughout their educational stages. Naming Roma and Irish Travellers as priority groups in widening participation initiatives, supporting accurate and collaborative data collection across all educational stages, sustaining the organisations that already reach them, and embedding their histories and cultures in school and university curricula would be significant steps. Other parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland have already committed to comparable measures. With these reforms, Northern Ireland has the chance to do the same, to address long-standing barriers and to build a more inclusive and cohesive future for all its communities.

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