



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...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



From Margins to Belonging: Roma access to Higher Education in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

- Roma and Irish Traveller pupils are among the most marginalised in NI education, and among the least likely of any group to reach higher education.
- Their progression is not captured in published data, and no legislation places a duty on government or universities to act. Roma are not named at all. Irish Travellers, though recognised in the Race Relations Order, are absent from education policy.
- This briefing draws on participatory research with Roma families in South Belfast and the GRT (Gypsy, Roma and Traveller) Inclusion Symposium at Queen's University Belfast (May 2026) and sets out six recommendations for the Assembly in order to address these gaps.



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The data gap/the data 'invisibility'

Roma and Irish Travellers in Northern Ireland

Roma: 1,529 (0.08%) Irish Travellers: 2,609 (0.14%) (NISRA, 2022).

< 5 pupils per year from Roma or Irish Traveller communities progress to HE in NI each year. Annual numbers are too low to publish.

Aggregated across five years, the rate is **4.7% (14 of 300 leavers), against a NI average of 40.2%** (DENI, personal communication, June 3rd 2026; Department of Education/ NISRA, 2026).

'Invisibility': Roma and Irish Traveller pupils are counted within the published 'Minority Ethnic' figure but remain invisible in the data. Without disaggregated data, the scale of underrepresentation cannot be measured, and institutions face no obligation to act



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NI: School leavers progressing to higher education

■ NI average ■ *Roma & Irish Traveller



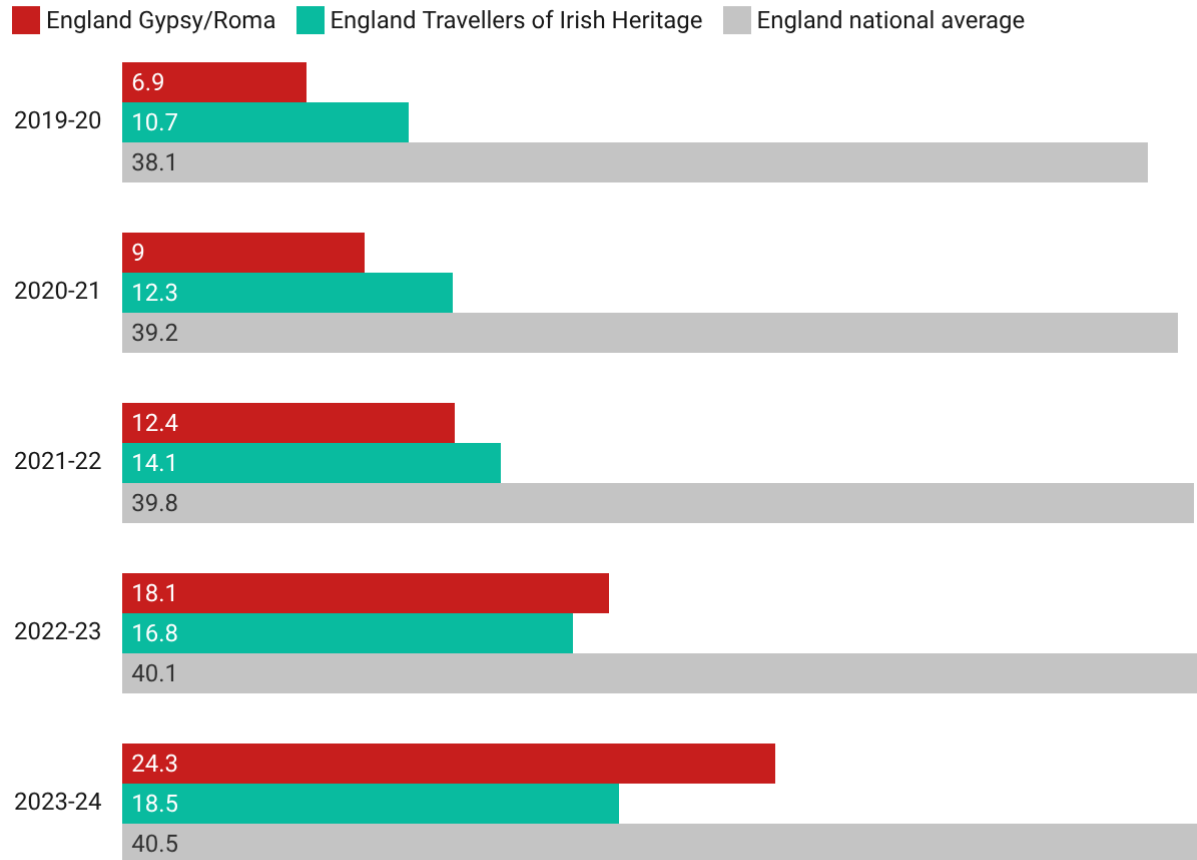
Roma and Irish Traveller figure is a five-year aggregate (2020/21–2024/25, 14 of 300 leavers); annual figures cannot be published. NI average 2024/25.

Source: Dept of Education / NISRA, Qualifications and Destinations of NI School Leavers 2024-25; DENI (personal communication, June 2026) • Created with Datawrapper

■ NI all school leavers ■ NI Minority Ethnic Groups ■ NI White school leavers ■ *Roma & Irish Traveller



England: HE progression rates 2019-20 to 2023-24

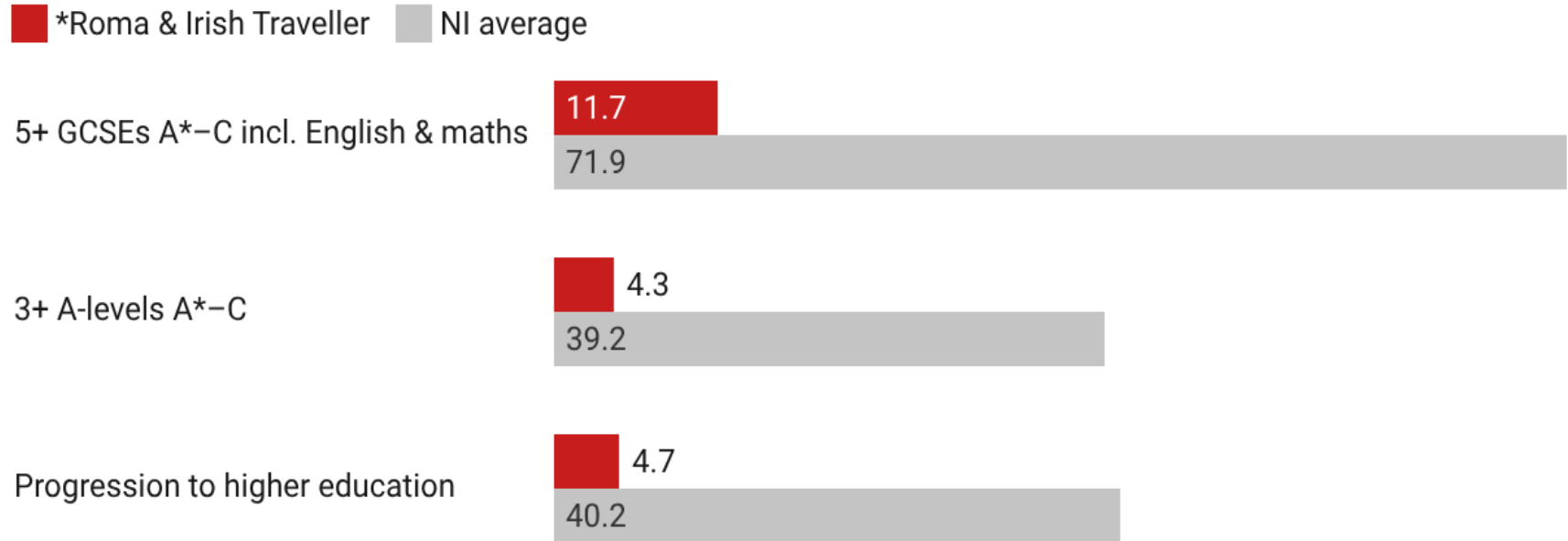


Both communities named in widening participation guidance. Both remain among the lowest progressing to HE of all ethnic groups.

Source: Dept for Education, Widening Participation in Higher Education 2023-24 • Created with Datawrapper



NI: Early attainment gaps drive persistent inequalities in progression to higher education

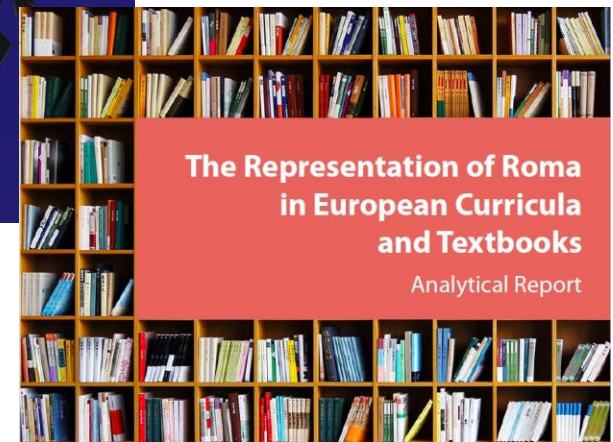
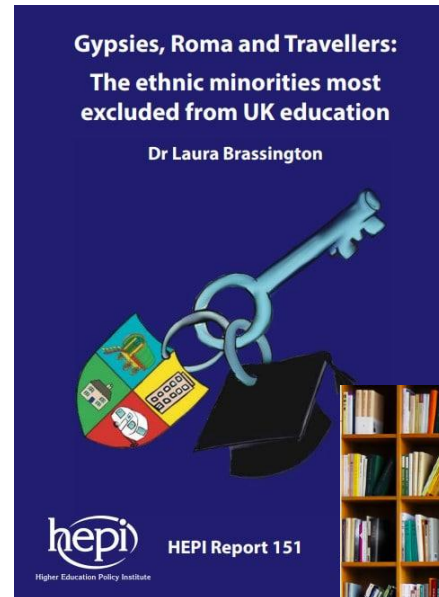


**Roma and Irish Traveller figures are five-year aggregates (2020/21–2024/25); NI averages are 2024/25. Figures are school-reported.*

Source: Dept of Education / NISRA 2024-25; DENI (personal communication, June 2026) • Created with Datawrapper

The broader context

- Low progression reflects overlapping structural barriers facing Roma and Irish Traveller communities, in NI and across Europe, across educational cycles.
- These barriers are rooted in a documented long history of anti-Roma racism running through education, housing and health (ECRI, 2020; FRA, 2018).
- One expression of that exclusion is the near-total absence of Roma and Traveller histories from curricula, documented across 21 Council of Europe member states (Spielhaus et al., 2020).
- For families who migrated from CEE countries to NI, caution toward schools carries this history too. Rebuilding trust in institutions takes time, support and consistency.



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Gaps in NI law and curriculum

1. The Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 prohibits individual acts of discrimination but places no proactive duty to address structural racism.
2. The draft Framework for Race Relations (TEO, 2026) names Roma and Irish Travellers in service delivery interventions, but not in relation to legislation.
3. The consultation survey for that Framework listed Irish Traveller as a named ethnic category but did not include Roma (Q10).
4. Roma and Irish Traveller histories are almost entirely absent from NI school and university curricula (see also Loader et al., 2023).

Progression to higher education is decided long before students turn 18. The research presented here worked with children aged 9-14 and their families because that is where the path to university is opened or closed.



I Want to Be a...

Participatory film · Co-produced with Romanian Roma families in South Belfast · (Oct 2024- April 2025)

- Co-written with Abigail Linton (EANI Intercultural Education Service) and Brid Maher (EANI). Co-directed with Dr Michael Holly (QUB, Film Studies). Involvement of families throughout.
- The film began with workshops. Seven families helped shape the format, themes and approach together. Three families chose to share their stories on film.
- Conversations between Roma children, families, school staff and principals about schooling, aspiration and what gets in the way.



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Roma Mentorship Programme QUB

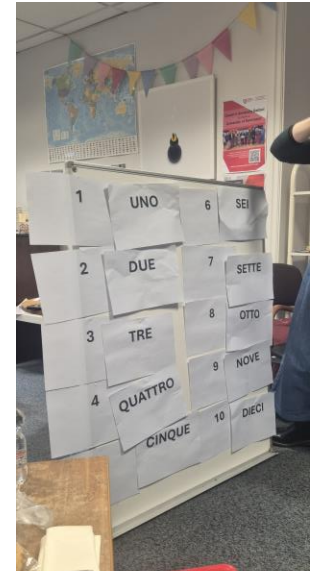
(January-June 2026, QUB Civic Contribution Fund)

Context: Roma families live within walking distance of QUB, but most of those involved had never set foot on campus.

Aim: The programme asked one question: *what would it take to make the university feel like somewhere they could belong?*

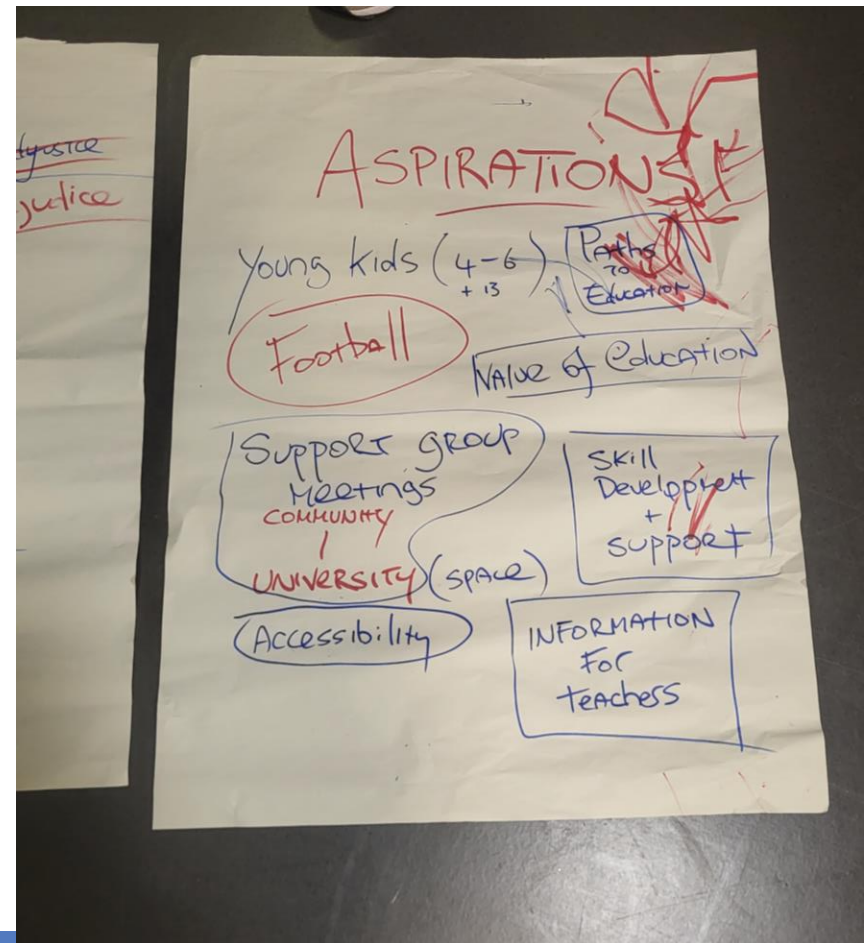
Co-Design: designed with families and community partners. Sessions brought young people and their carers onto campus together (language, filmmaking, campus tours).

Delivered with community partners: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust- Roma Health Project 'Speranta'; EANI Intercultural Education Service; Belfast South Sure Start Roma Programme; Roma Support Hub



Four themes from the projects

- 1. Aspirations shaped by unfamiliarity.** No parent had attended university, and for families living minutes from QUB the campus was not a familiar place. The children were interested and invested, but the path to higher education was unclear.
- 2. Communication barriers beyond language.** Children spoke English well, but mothers often did not, relying on interpreters or on their children in communicating with schools. School letters were sometimes missed, and parents' involvement, while invisible to teachers, did not represent a lack of care.
- 3. Fear as a barrier to education.** One parent described being afraid to send their child to school on arrival in NI. That fear eased over time, through repeated contact with grassroots organisations the family came to trust.
- 4. Intermediary roles as crucial for building trust.** Where a school had a dedicated family worker, families who had kept their distance began to trust and connect with the school. Trusted community partners reached families that no generic scheme had reached.



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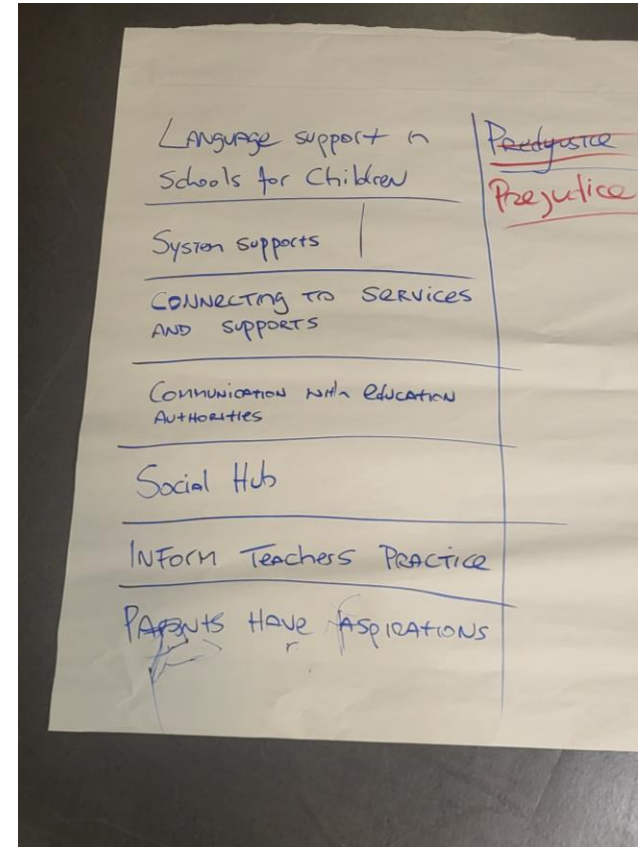
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“For me, it is okay now, I'm okay with everything, I can cope. My kid is fine now, but it's other Roma kids who need support, who need someone.”

Roma mother, South Belfast, from the film *I Want to Be a...*



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GRT Inclusion Symposium, QUB, 8 May 2026

First event in NI to bring together researchers, policymakers, practitioners and community organisations specifically around GRT (Gypsy, Roma, Traveller) participation in HE.

Data invisibility:

- NI has no mechanism to track Roma or Irish Traveller learners through school into HE. This leaves no institution accountable for them.

Intersectional policy:

- Exclusion from education is tied to housing, health and employment. Legislation covering only one of these will fall short.

Named statutory accountability:

- Voluntary cooperation has not delivered change. No NI institution has yet signed the GTRSB Higher Education Pledge.



“One teacher in particular changed the trajectory of my life. She became a safe space, helped me with exams when she didn’t have to, and from that I was able to do my A-levels and apply for university.”

Winnie McDonagh, Irish Traveller graduate, QUB



Comparing jurisdictions

	Named for university access	Named in an education strategy	In the curriculum	Ring-fenced funding	HE progression data
Northern Ireland	Not named in Widening Participation (WP) review	Named in 2015-25 strategy, nothing required	Absent	None	Not published
England	Named in OfS guidance, but optional	No national GRT strategy	Not required	None	School data only, not HE
Scotland	Uses deprivation, not ethnicity	Gypsy/Traveller Action Plan 2024-26	Awareness promoted, not required	Via action plan, not ring-fenced	Limited
Wales	Not a distinct WP group	Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan	Minority-ethnic histories mandatory; GRT in guidance	£11m grant, shared	Limited
Republic of Ireland	Named in National Access Plan	NTRIS (National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy) II + Education Strategy 2024-30	Committed in TRES (Traveller and Roma Education Strategy) 2024-30	~€450k/yr ring-fenced PATH 5	Limited



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Recommendations for the Assembly

1. Name Roma and Irish Traveller communities explicitly in legislation addressing racial inequality.

Generic minority protection, including Section 75, has not reached these communities.

2. Invest in early intervention.

Whether higher education seems possible is settled in primary and early secondary school, before pupils turn 16. Guidance under the 16-18s Bill could name both communities and set early outreach duties.

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

The Department for the Economy's 2026 consultation proposed four widening participation priority themes, none naming Roma or Traveller communities. In the Republic of Ireland, both are named priority groups under the National Access Plan, backed by ring-fenced PATH 5 funding. Naming them in the final NI framework, and resourcing universities to respond, would be the most direct intervention.

Recommendations for the Assembly (continued)

4. Collect and publish disaggregated data.

DENI holds Roma and Irish Traveller school-leaver data but publishes only a White / Minority Ethnic split. Racial equality legislation reform could require DENI and HE institutions to collect and publish it.

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

The Curriculum Minimum Content Order is a possible avenue: it was amended in 2022 to make CPR compulsory, showing the same mechanism can add required content

6. Fund community intermediary roles.

Roma Support Hub, Belfast South Sure Start, and other organisations run on short-term or civic funding. Reform of equality legislation could require authorities to show, within their equality schemes, how they will fund sustained engagement.

Conclusion

- The barriers to higher education do not start at university application, but they form across the whole system and this is evident in the case of Roma and Irish Travellers in Northern Ireland.
- The research presented here is small-scale and qualitative. But the findings are consistent with the wider UK and European evidence, and with the available NI data on access and progression to HE: 4.7% against a NI average of 40.2%.
- Roma and Irish Traveller communities in NI are diverse: effective support must be context-specific and developed with communities, not imposed on them.
- Addressing these structural barriers would mean reforming legislation rather than relying on civic initiatives, which are often short-term and unsustainable.
- The recommendations set out above follow directly from this: naming both communities in legislation, collecting and publishing disaggregated data to capture and shape possible intervention policies, funding the intermediary and relationship-based roles that work, and acting early.



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