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CIPD Applied Research Conference 2021

'Lots of little jobs' – building local skills ecosystems for the precarious worker

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Introduction

'*The world needs a wash and a week's rest,*' wrote W.H. Auden in his 1947 poem, *The Age of Anxiety*. Almost three-quarters of a century later, that is the reality for many whose full-time work ideas have fragmented into several little short-term jobs, exacerbated by COVID-19. The polarisation between those who enjoy security and prosperity and those who do not has increased (Allas et al 2020). Scholars have raised concerns over the impact on the (particularly marginalised) worker of the expansion of non-standard employment, poverty cycles, and lack of training and development (Egdell and Beck 2020), resulting in dualisation, the division between workers with stable jobs and insecure jobs (Chung 2018). By marginalised, we refer to workers who tend to be at the lower or outer edge of the labour market in uncertain, unpredictable, and risky work, from the worker's perspective (Kalleberg 2012). We argue that in light of Brexit, increased poverty, and weak skills development, understanding and involvement by employers in their local ecosystem is even more imperative. A skills ecosystem is a community of interacting living parts comprising producers, consumers, and decomposers and non-living components that define the ecosystem's environment.

We share the human resource development (HRD) interventions undertaken jointly by a university and a non-governmental organisation (NGO) between 2016 and 2019 within the City of Liverpool. The context of the research in a skills ecosystem is relevant. We worked with a local NGO based in Toxteth, Liverpool, a highly diverse area characterised by very high levels of multiple deprivation (McCurdy 2020). We found little research in HRD that has challenged the life chances of education and training (Simmons et al 2014) for those in the lower socio-economic groups or, indeed, been involved in offering solutions for those in this growing group of workers. We share our understanding of the lived experience of one of the most disadvantaged groups in the UK, the Roma (Cromarty 2019).

Virtually all of the Roma in this study were in irregular, insecure work with high work–labour ratios. This may infer the participants worked in small, less regulated environments; instead, many worked in FTSE 100 UK companies. Participants' work was generally deemed independent (in contractual terms noted as self-employment) and organised through labour market intermediaries, commonly termed agencies, with evidence of some 'abusive' and 'exploitative' practice such as poor working conditions, rather than directly with an employer.

How are human resource management and development supporting disadvantaged groups?

Research suggests that temporary employees are less likely to receive employer-funded training (Moore and Khan 2020). The lack of support is possibly due to a lack of HRD research (Petriglieri et al 2018) combined with a lack of government policy (Wolf 2011), culminating in HRD being for a privileged few, often in permanent employment.

One of the issues over the past decades has focused on cutting business costs by using numerical flexibility (Atkinson 1984). This practice has contributed to a 'race to the bottom', that is, cutting costs in labour practices (Harrison and Collins 2019), with strategies including zero-hours contracts (which have witnessed a fivefold increase in nine years), outsourcing, and self-employed status (Office for National Statistics 2018). At one level the explosion in flexible work is positive. It offers a degree of flexibility and choice that the traditional 9-to-5 model never has. But this way of working can also leave people vulnerable and insecure. Paradoxically, in trying to secure a decent living through this model, the insecurity only

deepens. Thus, some argue that it is generally one-sided (employer) flexibility (Low Pay Commission 2019).

Skills ecosystems

Local skills ecosystems recognise the mutual dependency between the active components such as HRD professionals, government and workers. The CIPD, in its latest Profession Map, states that HR professionals should *'take a visible lead in solving ethical dilemmas'* and *'consider the ethical impact of decisions in the short and long term'*, something that we agree with. We argue that HRD professionals should develop the reach and impact of the skill ecosystems within which an organisation sits, incorporating training opportunity language into temporary workers' recruitment systems.

Roma

Roma migrants from Eastern Europe have been arriving and settling in Liverpool for over ten years, mainly since the European Union's (EU) expansion in 2004. Roma as a category has only been included in national census collections since 2021. A lack of self-ascription in equality monitoring (Roma is generally not provided on monitoring forms as an option to tick) means that there are only guestimates of the number of Roma in Liverpool.

Roma's umbrella term is an endonym adopted by the First World Romani Congress in London in 1971; linguistic and genetic analysis suggests that the Roma are initially a Hindavi people from northern India (Hancock 2014). As the largest ethnic minority in Europe, since the accession of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries to the EU in 2004 and 2007, Roma's number in the UK has grown (Baksi 2018). However, Roma is not recognised as an ethnic classification, meaning that there is no accurate record of their population, although the Council of Europe estimates that 225,000 Roma live in the UK. In Liverpool, Roma are primarily employed in insecure and precarious work, as witnessed with other Roma communities. Roma migration has occurred against a backdrop of severe exclusion and discrimination within home countries. The need to migrate to find paid work is significant, augmented by a strong desire to escape persecution. Across Europe, there are countless examples of extreme Roma discrimination in employment, education, and housing (Brown et al 2013, Cromarty 2019, Klimovský et al 2016).

Parents can be unaware of their children's educational opportunities and how education will impact their potential earnings. With high work–labour ratios and the need to meet basic physiological needs (Maslow 1943), some Roma, like other migrants, prioritise immediate needs today over higher-paid employment in the future. Many Roma families travel between European countries, which means that young people are taken out of school to move to another city or country.

Research approach

The data is from a case study approach (Rollnick and Miller 1995, Yin 2017) with one NGO and the Roma, a 'hard to reach' group living in Liverpool, Merseyside, UK.

Integral to this study is the relationship of the researchers with the NGO and, in particular, the city's Roma support worker. As well as educating us on the history of Roma, she enabled us to gain access to the Roma community and, with her introduction and enthusiasm, earn a degree of trust. Building trust and relationships with the local Roma took

time. By 2019 the case study led to Romani Support, Youth Workers and Roma Champions' employment to act as mediators and interpreters for Liverpool's Roma community.

To attempt to influence the culture and promote education benefits to long-term employment and quality of life, we provided a two-day training in motivational interviewing (MI). The training involved 15 of the community's key people, such as parents, mentors, and support workers, driven to change the culture. This was facilitated by a consultant clinical psychologist (Dr Kim Jolliffe), who focused on its practical use.

Motivational interviewing (MI) is defined as a person-centred counselling style for addressing ambivalence to make a change (Miller and Rollnick 2013). However, it is an approach that can guide a skilled conversation that is likely to lead an individual to change. Its roots are in the treatment of substance use problems. It is useful in all aspects of behavioural and attitudinal change.

We engaged in a series of informal conversations with local stakeholders that led to formal engagement with local stakeholder groups and the formation in 2017 of Liverpool Roma Employability Project (LREN) and, in 2018, the Roma Education Aspiration Project (REAP). LREN focused primarily on adult Roma employability and REAP on education and training for the young Roma.

We carried out 30 semi-structured face-to-face interviews The interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. We recorded and transcribed all interviews and made extensive handwritten notes. Because of the language barrier, albeit at a varied level, an interpreter was present at all the interviews. The formal interviews were analysed to seek connections between the emergent themes.

LREN and REAP were brought together through an employability education event. Ninety-seven young and mature adults attended an employability event at the university, of which 92 were Roma. The HR Professional Student Network Group (PSNG) from Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) provided volunteers, who provided a triage system of introducing, escorting and signposting attendees (Collins and Harrison 2019).

What we did: creating an opportunity for disadvantaged groups in a local skills ecosystem

This section will detail the formal and informal interventions used in working with the local community and how these critically created impact. As well as other achievements, detailed below, as a direct result of this case study work, LJMU has what they understand to be the first Roma student to attend a Liverpool university.

Motivational interviewing (MI)

By way of background, MI was founded by Dr William Miller in an alcohol unit in the 1980s (Rollnick and Miller 1995). Popular opinion at the time was that this client group did not have implicit ability to make change as they were 'in denial', 'lacking motivation', 'pathological liars' and 'resistant' to ideas offered by others. These features were considered part of inherent personality traits rather than a process within an individual. Dr Miller reversed this notion and began speaking to clients to elicit their knowledge of their behaviour and motivation for change, with surprisingly good results. Since developing the conversational style with Dr Stephen Rollnick, over 1,000 randomised control trials have shown it

efficacious in assisting people from various groups to make healthy change and lifestyle choices.

Dr Jolliffe introduced MI as a helpful conversational style. The group of attendees learned to talk to their peers in their community about possible changes that would enhance their quality of life. The teaching included the fundamentals of resisting, giving advice and suggestions or solving problems for the individual, while at the same time drawing from their values and goals through conversation. None of the Roma champions had previously experienced this type of training, and the feedback was extremely positive. They were extremely grateful for a training opportunity, which was somewhat alien to their culture.

MI places the individual as the expert on themselves and not the person instigating the conversation, such as the mentor speaking to a young person contemplating going to college. Central to its efficacy is a way of being with an individual (spirit of MI). It promotes partnership, valuing the person's autonomy, compassion and empathy, through reflective listening skills. Thus, rather than expend energy trying to convince someone of the merits of making change, motivation is elicited from the person.

There are some things that we might change if we repeated the experience. The Roma do not have a written language and it was not possible to translate any documents, which limits the prospect of them revisiting the skills. One participant was responsible for translating throughout, and we would recommend that an external translator should be employed for this purpose in the future.

Liverpool Roma Employability Network (LREN)

For the LREN initiative, we worked with the NGO to identify local stakeholders interested in increasing Roma education, training, and employability in the Liverpool local authority area. We hosted seven breakfast meetings between June 2017 and June 2019. Over 20 organisations were involved, including Jobcentres; Adult Learning Services; Big Issue; Community Learning Centres; Department for Work and Pensions; and Local Housing Associations. The breakfast meetings were either held at the university or NGO premises.

At the same time as working with the NGO we undertook research with the Roma. One thing that was clear from the interviews conducted with the Roma is that the workplace is a harsh environment, both physically and emotionally. The work is typically irregular and insecure: *'like two to three hours, not every time or every day'* (Leander), or *'he don't tell him to come every day'* (Silvanus). Thus most of the Roma tended to have *'lots of little jobs'* (Charity). The participants did not know when they might get work and, if so, for how long and if they would keep it. We mentioned how typically the group would think of immediate, commonly economic, needs rather than the future. Some may ascribe this to the culture of the group. However, this may be owing to the low-pay, insecure nature of their work.

At the diagnosis stage, technology was used to collate stakeholder views and create group goals:

- a self-confident, engaged Roma community who have equal access to all labour market opportunities including sustainable employment and self-employment (for example, using traditional craft skills) in Liverpool
- access to ESOL (speaking, reading and writing) to enable community integration, cohesion and access to employment
- training and development opportunities for men, women, mature and young linked to employment opportunities

- recognition by the wider community of the positive work ethic of Roma
- Roma completing/graduating from further education (FE) and/or higher education (HE).

Moreover, we found that low employability in the Roma community begins much sooner than working age owing to some of the issues raised earlier in this paper. We decided we needed to involve young Roma and their families, that is, both young and mature Roma together. This concept of working with young and mature simultaneously is different from Western society, which generally adopts a more individualistic approach. Owing to the significance of familial bonds in the group, that led to the start of the REAP project that ran alongside LREN.

Roma Education Aspiration Project (REAP)

The REAP project sought to answer several questions about aspiration, educational attainment, training, and employability. Roma project officers and native Romani speakers led weekly workshops, supported by guest speakers and several volunteers from the Roma and non-Roma communities. Guest speakers included a Roma lawyer, a Roma law student, and a Roma community health professional. These guests demonstrated the importance of education and the possibilities for young people to aspire and achieve career goals. Police officers and youth workers also attended, thus encouraging parents to have high expectations for their children. Furthermore, parents shared their experiences and why they believe education is vital for Roma young people.

At the beginning of REAP, there was some limited appreciation by the young and mature Roma of the value of education as a route to increased income, but in the final evaluation over 80% recognised this. None of the participants had envisaged applying to FE or HE at the start of the project. By the end of the project, over half of the participating young people stated that they intended to apply to FE or HE when they attained the required age. Also, we were delighted that, as a direct result of the project, one of the first Roma to attend a Liverpool university applied to Liverpool John Moores and was successful; she began her undergraduate studies in September 2019 (ITN 2020).

Employability education event

A further crucial contribution that challenged many assumptions about this group was an employability event. The event, held at the university, targeted those workers concentrated in lower-skilled and insecure work. Surprisingly the event, although planned to commence at 5pm, began earlier than planned. The event's atmosphere was quite different from other typical education and employability fairs, with attendees demonstrably asking for jobs.

The Professional Student Network Group (PSNG) volunteered and were briefed on their role to support individuals by 'buddying' with them. The students approached and guided individuals, introducing them to organisations, and helping at a practical level, for example building a CV, using a PC, translation, etc. This worked well and facilitated an effective outcome for the participants. Also, the PSNG and LJMU staff ran two CV-building sessions and provided one-to-one support. Fifty participants attended the CV workshop, 16 participants produced a CV, and 10 participants created a CV through the NGO after the event.

The employability fair challenged stereotypes about individuals that *'don't want work or training'*. The enthusiasm for finding work was also a surprise and very different from the polite exchange with the employer having to 'sell' a job to the prospective recruit. Instead,

the participants, sometimes quite loudly, expressed their desire for a job and/or training. One of the significant issues was the participants' lack of opportunity because to access some of the training schemes, they had to be in receipt of benefits, which many were not. Virtually all the Roma are working, frequently self-employed, for example selling the *Big Issue*, which excludes access to training opportunities.

The evaluation was overwhelmingly positive, with 100% of the attendees agreeing that they found the event useful and developed their knowledge about employment and employability. Furthermore, the qualitative feedback supported this with comments, such as the *'opportunity to network'; 'meeting new people'; 'to put me in the right direction'; 'know how to get a job'; 'I like because I can apply to work';* to the practical benefit of *'I have a CV!'* and personal recognition in the quote *'I have skills!'* On the negative side, there were not enough actual jobs. Also, as the Roma are employed and are working (even if for only £15 per day), they could not access many government training opportunities. Despite this, we were thrilled that one Roma woman secured a job and training directly following the event (Lisseman 2019). Levitica, a former *Big Issue* seller who secured employment from the project, commented how she wanted to provide for and inspire her children and that her *'dreams had come true'*.

Implications for practice

Our key learning is to make the human centre-stage for disadvantaged workers:

At the managerial level

- While some obstacles need to be taken into consideration when training people from the Roma or similar communities in the future, overall we learned that the approach was positive and that MI could be used in an adapted form to help change the culture toward education and ultimately achieve a better quality of life in the future. Therefore, it is speculated that managers might benefit from developing MI skills in their interactions in the workplace.
- Observe and take action if exploitative practices are witnessed, for example to agency staff.

At the HR level

- Broker collaborations across and outside organisations to contribute and build a local skills ecosystem, for example via local government schemes.
- Support local fair work/good employment charters such as those launched in Liverpool and Manchester.
- Model compassion, humanity, and fairness for all workers, including those on the periphery.
- Encourage the organisation to employ workers directly, rather than outsource or via an agency.
- HR professionals who develop skills in the conversational style of MI are more likely to achieve greater work satisfaction for themselves and employees as they guide workers to change – as opposed to feeling the need to use disciplinary, threatening approaches, which can often be the case inadvertently.

At an organisational level

- Restrict the use of temporary contracts.
- Hire workers directly rather than through labour market intermediaries (agencies).
- Introduce the Low Pay Commission (2018) recommendations.
- Offer training opportunities to all workers.

At a societal level

- Reflect on rights and protection of UK workers, for example introducing policies like Japan to 'directly hire workers' and bypass agencies (Nye 2019).
- Implement the recommendations from the Low Pay Commission (2019) that include right to reasonable notice, shift cancellation compensation and right to switch to permanent contract.
- Create learning and education opportunities for all workers (for example not restricted to those on benefit).
- Introduce universal basic income (UBI).

Working with a 'hard to reach' group with pressing economic stressors has been challenging, with success being hard-won. Nevertheless, with long-term commitment and by working with and through the community, organisations can contribute to making a much needed important societal change (Savage 2021).

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