

Listening to hidden voices: creating meaningful and sustainable partnerships between marginalised groups and their universities.

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Against a backdrop of long-standing equality legislation, the levelling up agenda as well as our university's (Liverpool John Moores University) own commitment embedded in its values of partnership and student participation, hearing hidden student voices is indeed more crucial than ever. Yet a combination of factors including the Covid-19 pandemic, hybrid teaching and learning, the necessity for many students to work and study in parallel has led to some students feeling disconnected (see, for example, Lederer et al 2021). Further, students from less well-off backgrounds are more likely to be working part time, often several hours a week that leaves them too time poor to engage in university life (see Jack 2019).

So, what ought we to do about it? We address below what LJMU is doing to hear the voice of one marginalised group: Gypsy, Traveller, Roma, Showmen and Boaters (GTRSB). LJMU is shortly to sign the GTRSB Pledge to support more GTRSB students to go to university and once there, to participate fully in university life. In the UK, the 2021 Census gathered more data on ethnic groups, and for the first-time included Roma as an ethnic category. Thus, we now have more data than ever about size and location of different communities that provides a rich research seam to mine. If, in our case, GTRSB students' voices are missing from important conversations, then that void needs to be addressed. At LJMU, the GTRSB Committee, set up to deliver the pledge, not merely involves GTRSB students but has them at its centre, to ensure that we are addressing the precise needs of their community as defined by themselves. As a result, GTRSB lives, history and voices have now permeated to many aspects of university life including at open days, conferences, within the curriculum, knowledge sharing and through implementing the UN Sustainability Development Goals of quality education, reduced inequalities and partnership working. The benefits, to GTRSB students and the ripple effect to others are huge, as expressed by Ruby, a Romany gypsy final year student:

"There shouldn't be any hidden voices in higher education - anywhere, really; but when there is, it is universities like Liverpool John Moores that are showing the way forward. They give you a step up and support you, and they do not want you as just a token. LJMU see you as a person, and you should be no less."

In the quote below, Alexandra, a Roma student of law considers the benefits of partnership working that spill over to local communities:

'In my studies at LJMU, the partnership work was more than a one off. It was a partnership journey of supporting and learning from each other to be able to find ideas and projects which can be visible not only in academic environments but in communities too where they can reap the benefits'.

The need for universities to be much more than seats of academic learning, ivory towers remote from the communities in which they nest, was captured in two projects that LJMU led as forerunners of the GTRSB pledge. Liverpool Roma Employability Network (LREN)

and Roma Education Aspiration Project (REAP), brought together Roma community members, parents, schools, pupils, employers, NGOs and others from wider GTRSB groups through a series of interventions to raise awareness of the Roma community in the heart of the city, learn about their aspirations and organise and deliver the right support. The starting point for both projects was to increase public awareness of the Roma community as pupils, employees, citizens and community champions. The next step, to consolidate the partnership, was to increase public engagement with the community, and evidence of this is witnessed through increased cross community activities like fund raising and street cleans, as well as more Roma pupils engaging with school and aspiring to further and higher education. From LJMU's experience, once GTRSB students access university, they do very well and become role models for others within their community. Yet, as aforementioned, many students work and study, leaving little time for deeper engagement in university life. So, once we have our role models and champions from communities such as GTRSB with the potential to inspire and mentor others, who supports the role models? Without support their voice risks becoming hidden and silenced, leaving too little disruption to the status quo.

References

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