Roma university students in Spain and Central and Eastern Europe: negotiating participation and identity in contrasting international contexts

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Roma university students in Spain and Central and Eastern Europe: Exploring participation and identity in contrasting international contexts

Roma are Europe’s largest, most marginalised minority, with a long history of racism and exclusion informing complex inequalities. Roma higher education (HE) participation remains under addressed, and paucity of research hinders understanding. While there is variation between countries, the proportion of Roma accessing HE compared to the general population is extremely small in all countries. Spain has the largest Roma population outside CEE, and relatively high levels of Roma HE participation. As part of an international project on Internalisation and Mobility, here we discuss insights from 11 qualitative interviews carried out with Roma students and recent graduates in CEE and Spain. We identify emergent themes around identity and inclusion and how experience intersects with distinct national approaches. We focus in particular on competing pulls of ‘ethnic invisibility’ versus ‘coming out’, and related onus on a responsibility to ‘give back.’

Keywords: Roma; higher education; identity; inclusion; ethnic invisibility

Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of Roma students participating in higher education (HE) in European countries. Questions relating to identity as well as discourses of visibility, entitlement and gratitude are explored.

Roma communities throughout the world have experienced long histories of racism and exclusion (Kolev et al., 2013). Treatment of Roma varies considerably across country contexts; this makes European Union policy vital to addressing ongoing inequalities and discrimination. 2005-2015 was designated the Decade of Roma Inclusion; as part of this 12 European countries committed to focus on closing the gap between Roma and non-Roma on key indicators including education (Friedman 2015). A major new policy framework was subsequently introduced - the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma (Council of Europe, 2010); this aimed to further focus attention of European governments on addressing
neglected issues around Roma social inclusion. Since then, key issues remain; the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (Commission to the European Parliament, 2018) identifies key areas of education, employment, healthcare and housing.

However there has been criticism of processes of intervention and assumptions around the potential of these to address Roma marginalisation. It is argued that these have failed to address the multiple and interconnected social exclusion issues facing Roma (e.g. McGarry & Agarin, 2014). In order to challenge ongoing Roma exclusion including in educational opportunities, we must develop understanding of specific features of regional contexts as well as European level policies addressing these. This paper focuses on two areas of Europe with the largest Roma populations. We set out to explore key emergent similarities and differences in HE experiences for the minority of Roma who persist in education to this level.

The Higher Education Internationalisation and Mobility: Inclusions, Equalities and Innovations (HEIM) project contributed new understanding to the existing limited body of research, by incorporating international comparison and a qualitative approach. The research was co-produced with research team colleagues and participants from this marginalised group. Our methodological approach offers insights into some of the why’s behind the what’s indicated by largescale quantitative data (e.g. UNDP/WB/EU, 2011). This includes how Roma experiences in HE may be nuanced according to specific factors within different European contexts. For example, Affirmative Action initiatives in CEE compel Roma students to disclose ethnicity and include an often explicit requirement to ‘give back’ in return for support. In contrast, the Spanish context for Roma is characterised by an absence of targeted support that exists alongside widespread discrimination. This, we argue, gives Spanish Roma little impetus to disclose ethnicity. Our small-scale data suggests that these divergent approaches encourage particular responses by Roma HE students.

This paper draws from a small number of exploratory interviews carried out as part of a much larger project. We identified salient themes around identity and inclusion which we see as important to feed into future research development around Roma identity and ethnicity
in higher education. While Roma as a diverse group share a distinct history, insights discussed here also have wider relevance to issues of marginalisation in HE.

**Locating Roma exclusion from and in Higher Education**

*Historical exclusion of Roma in Europe*

Roma communities globally have a long history of racism and marginalisation, and they continue to experience educational segregation, illiteracy and acute job and housing instability (Open Society Foundations, 2014). These exclusions render Roma a particularly transient population as they are forced to be mobile to seek employment and accommodation (Collett, 2013). However many Roma do not possess passports or resident permits, and stateless people in many European countries have no access to post-18 education (Kolev et al., 2013). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP/WB/EU, 2011) identified that less than 1% of Roma in Europe complete tertiary-level qualifications, with some variation across countries. The accuracy of this data is considered problematic (Messing, 2014), but it is nevertheless acknowledged as important evidence of the extent of educational progression inequalities for Roma.

There are reported to be slow improvements in Roma educational progression. This includes increasing numbers of Roma who access HE through scholarship programmes and increasing support for Roma HE students through inclusion strategies by European member states (Roma Education Fund, 2014). However many Roma fear revealing their ethnicity, afraid that this information will be used to discriminate against them. This makes it challenging to effectively target and measure the success of educational and other initiatives aimed at tackling Roma inequalities (Greenberg, 2010). Roma exclusion is recognised to be a transnational issue, and the EU’s role is seen as crucial to inclusion (Vermeesch, 2017). However, national level approaches mediate the impact of European policy; the Roma Decade annual monitoring reports reveal considerable differences in implementation and success of initiatives across the 12 participating countries (Decade Secretariat, 2015).

*Central and Eastern European (CEE) context*
Opportunities and inequalities experienced by Roma vary across CEE (Ram, 2014). There are however aspects of Roma strategies across the CEE region that differ from other areas of Europe. Roma in CEE experience high levels of discrimination, but there are also extensive targeted intervention strategies aimed at addressing these (ibid). Roma HE students in CEE are supported by intervention programmes including Central European University’s Access Programmes; Roma Education Fund’s scholarships including the Roma International Scholarship Scheme (RISP); and Romaversitas.

Affirmative action has designated reserved special places for Roma in HE since 1992 (Roma Education Fund & Gallup, 2009). Special places require academic qualification and certification attesting ethnic affiliation; in return these special places provide tuition and maintenance. The number of special places is increasing, and yet many places remain empty (Cismaru and Gologan, 2015). This is often associated with the stigma that such places are seen as offering concessions for low academic ability.

**Spanish context**

Spain’s Roma population is between 1.6% and 1.9% of the population (Laparra, 2011), has the largest Roma population in Europe outside CEE. Spain’s Roma population exist alongside pervasive prejudice against them. Spain’s approach to Roma differs greatly from CEE; this includes different approaches to Roma HE participation. Since 1989 Spain’s approach to promoting Roma social and educational inclusion has been part of its universal welfare system, but HE is not addressed at all in Spain’s National Roma Integration Strategy for 2012-2020 (Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, 2011). Unlike CEE, Spanish HE has no affirmative action targeting Roma or any ethnic group. Overall HE participation is rising in Spain; however participation remains low for disadvantaged groups. This includes low Spanish HE participation for people from migrant, working-class, and low parental education backgrounds. The economic crisis and ensuing austerity policies have reduced government investment in Spanish education since 2010 (Laparra et al., 2013), and the cost of university in the context of economic recession is a major participation barrier (Río-Ruiz et al. 2015; Garaz and Notar 2016). Roma are the most underrepresented group in Spanish HE
(2.2% of Roma compared to 35% of the total population). This low HE participation for Roma is contributed to by poverty, unemployment, low pay, low secondary education, and lack of information (Grañeras and Parras 2010).

Although there are important differences for Roma in Spain and CEE, in both regions Roma as a socially vulnerable group have been particularly negatively impacted by decreasing social protection. This has been caused by the end of state socialism in 1989 in CEE, and more recently in Spain through economic recession in 2010.

_Theorising identity and belonging in Roma higher education participation: Ethnic invisibility, coming out and giving back_

There remains a lack of academic work that addresses the experiences of Roma, and particularly higher education (Allen et al. 2019). It is therefore necessary to draw insights from wider relevant literature. Theoretically, our work is broadly located in the context of discourses of inequalities in international, neoliberal HE (e.g. Burke, 2011; James, 2014), seeing this as a ‘socially exclusive’ landscape (Waters and Brooks (2010: 217) serving to reproduce existing privileges (Ackers 2008). Within this context there is seen to be an imperative to secure positional advantage by some groups over others (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). This lays challenge to the potential of dominant integration and diversity discourses, which Anthias critiques as reinforcing notions of ‘us and them’ in contrast with their ostensible inclusion agendas. Anthias identifies the complexity of the way in which members of marginalised groups may feel themselves to be accepted and ‘belong’ within mainstream inclusion agendas, but may not fully identify with these, or may experience ‘split’ allegiances between mainstream and community (2013). We see this question of identification as relating to understandings around competing pulls of ‘ethnic invisibility’ (Abajo and Carrasco, 2004; Padilla-Carmona, González-Monteagudo and Soria-Vilchez, 2017) versus ‘coming out’ (Pantea, 2015). This is often accompanied by an expectation to ‘give back’ (Hinton-Smith, Danvers, & Jovanovic, 2017) that we identify in discourses around Roma HE participation. In one of the important contributions to the emergent literature around Roma HE participation, Garaz and Torotcoi discuss this expectation that Roma graduates will become
agents for positive change in the Roma community (2017). Assuming a compulsion to ‘give back’ in return for one’s higher education implies racist understandings around who is and is not entitled to pursue HE for their own benefit. This requirement for Roma students to give back in return for their HE resonates with Ahmed’s critique of the racist underpinnings of organisational diversity agendas that position inclusion as a ‘gift’ to be bestowed. Ahmed argues that such positioning of inclusion as a gift rather than a right for marginalised groups effectively relegates them to the position of ‘those who are not at home’ (Ahmed, 2012: 43). Positioning Roma as in need of the (repayable) ‘gift’ of higher education resonates with Tremlett’s identification of Roma as being seen as ‘needy subjects’ (2017). Tremlett sees this as a heavily racialised concept characterised by assumptions of passive, infantalised vulnerability. She argues that such assumptions are prevalent in public discourses, despite being at odds with the lived realities and identities of Roma people (ibid).

McCaffrey argues the need for a paradigm shift by dominant cultures to develop more agentic attitudes to the education of marginalised groups including Roma (2017). Developing such nuanced understandings will require acknowledging the complex interplay of marginality, solidarity, resilience and resistance in ‘being a Roma’ (Allen et al. 2019: 2). This will require moving beyond notions of preferential treatment and positive discrimination to focus on the political identity of Roma as defining their status (McGarry 2014).

**Researching Roma students in European higher education**

Here we focus on key themes emerging from a set of 11 exploratory interviews with Roma students currently in higher education or recently completed. Five interviewees were from CEE and 6 were from Spain. These interviews formed only a small part of a much larger project, but they show important insights. Interviews provided rich, narrative accounts, with some interviews taking place over several sessions. There are only small numbers of Roma students in European HE, resulting in a relatively recognisable network of Roma graduates working in key areas. For this reason we have not provided biographical information here, in order to protect the anonymity of participants. However, to summarise, CEE participants came from Albania, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia. Participants were identified via
snowballing sampling through REF colleagues in CEE and through the University of Seville in Spain. Some participants were recipients of enabling HE access programmes such as those provided by CEU and Romaversitas; however this was not always disclosed in interviews and even where identified we have avoided identifying this, in order to protect anonymity.

We do not set out to representatively account for experiences of all Roma students by replicating or reviewing existing large-scale quantitative data (e.g. European Commission, 2014, Eurostudent, 2015; UNDP/WB/EU, 2011). Such large-scale data is important, but commentators have also identified problems present in such research (Messing, 2014). Disaggregated data on Roma educational participation is unevenly collected across Europe, and at best can tell us what is the case, but not why.

In addition to large-scale data sets it is vital that we also develop data approaches that validate meanings attributed by individual actors to their experiences. Such small-scale qualitative data offers an important contribution ‘not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something’ (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 224). Semi-structured interviews, each 1-2 hours duration in total, were conducted by the research team; audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The international research team for the wider project included members from Spain and Central European countries, as well as the UK and Sweden. Interviews discussed here were carried out by non-Roma and Roma interviewers including researchers from Britain and Spain. The interviews with Spanish participants were conducted in Spanish while the CEE interviews took place in English.

Roma people are diverse in terms of language, culture and tradition (Kolev et al., 2013) and aspects of identity including gender, nationality, religion, age, disability, sexuality, marriage, parenthood, language and socio-economic background, and their cumulative effect. Together these combine to create the ‘complexity of factors defining becoming and being a Roma student’ (Danvers, 2015, p. 18). Participants spanned multiple demographic and perspective differences, which we cannot make general claims from in such a small sample. However, insights from the interviews do point to the need for an intersectional approach
(Crenshaw, 1991, 2003) to future, larger-scale research into Roma HE experiences, and how these are contextualised by embodied locations. Issues discussed here often share relevance to other marginalised groups in HE. This represents the potential for such empirical approaches to illuminate ‘issues of the common and the specific, without diluting either’ (Fine et al., 2000, p. 111).

**Narrative accounts and democratising the research process**

The diversity of the research team and our focus on working together for capacity-building engaged us directly in confronting issues of intersectionality, power and reflexivity. This related to our theorising and our communication with participants, but also to the process of working together as a team. We worked together as a team of international, Roma/non-Roma, academic/non-academic and graduate/non-graduate colleagues in a collective endeavour. Our approach to research process and relationships was underpinned by a commitment to creating space for previously silenced voices to tell their stories, as a challenge to hegemonic power constructs. Being reflexive around the dynamics of co-production of knowledge was central to our methodological approach; we were acutely aware of the danger of occupying a position of ‘speaking for’ others. Consequently, the research was guided by the principle of speaking next to rather than for marginalised others, as described by Trin Minh-Ha (as quoted in Chen, 1992).

Individual interviews were used to facilitate construction of personal identity through narrative account (Mathieson & Stam, 1995), locating individuals as ‘not only the actor, but also the author’ (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 198). This approach was vital to maximising the democracy of the research transaction and negotiating the multiply-layered power relations of intersectional identity between researchers and participants. Mindful of the inherent tensions, we were drawn to the metaphor of the researcher as a ‘traveller’ (Kvale, 1996, p. 4) ‘wandering together with’ participants in the process of arriving at insight.

**Findings - Emergent themes: Coming out and giving back**

**Coming out**
Those we interviewed from CEE described growing up in Roma ‘communities’: living amongst, going to school alongside, and sharing their childhood friendships with other Roma. HE entry for our participants often marked physical and symbolic leaving of their community for the first time. This was trifold: there often were not universities located geographically close to Roma communities; attending university was seen as representing a symbolic break with being Roma, by becoming ‘gadjo’ (non-Roma); and it was described as feeling necessary to move some geographical distance from home to achieve a new identity as a university student. This break with community engendered feelings of fragmenting and un-belonging:

You don’t have the feeling that you belong there…. you know, you feel like... strange; you feel like a... you know, a foreigner in the class, even when you are living with them… To be honest, I don’t feel that I belong to the higher education community, no. (Georgeta, CEE)

An exception amongst CEE participants was Liliana, who was half-Roma. She had grown up amongst non-Roma and described her educational experience much more positively than others.

Contrastingly, Spanish participants did not describe experiencing becoming a university student as a departure from existing identity, as Flora, who came from a very poor background, expressed:

Studying means leaving your Roma culture? No, I’ve seen that in marginalised contexts but not where I live, in my town... It doesn’t depend of the culture but on the context in which you are.

A key feature of Spanish participants’ stories was ‘normalised’ rather than ‘marginalised’ upbringings. They mainly had families of origin who were not socially, economically or occupationally different from the wider population. Antro was typical; he explained that he did not feel different to others, and that he belonged to the Roma community as he also belonged to many other groups. Spanish Roma participants all lived and had been educated in areas much more integrated with the mainstream community compared to CEE participants. Ets’ experience was typical of Spanish participants: ‘My high school was an
integrated school. I was the only *gitano* studying there.’ All of the interviewees from Spain conveyed such experiences of ostensibly integrated educational participation, such as Atro: ‘I was a normal student, as everyone else in the classroom.’ However this idea of being as normal as everyone else, appeared to be a fragile, illusive basis of inclusion and belonging, as it was invariably reliant on Roma origin remaining hidden from peers and teachers:

Someone started to say that me and my brother were Gitanos… Before that I knew that I was different but didn’t know what difference was that and then, one day, he started to release that I was Gitano… and I suppose that I started to see it as something negative, because of the things they said about me… (Antro, Spain)

Spanish students emphasised that this did not mean that they were denying their true identity; instead it was about ‘keeping it to themselves’ until the right moment emerged to disclose their identity to others. As such, disclosing Roma identity emerged as an ethnic ‘coming out.’ This engendered associated fears of possible negative consequences, so participants felt the need therefore to protect their social acceptability by not disclosing their identity to anyone who may carry prejudice against them. Brüggeman (2014) has similarly noted such a sense of ‘coming out’ in the narratives of Spanish Roma HE students.

Contrasting experiences of being highly identifiable as CEE Roma or assumed to be ‘normal’ as Spanish Roma may map onto the notion of ‘ethnic invisibility.’ Roma in CEE described experiencing prejudice because of being noticeably different in physical appearance to non-Roma. Contrastingly, Spanish Roma described being often physically undifferentiable from non-Roma peers; they were hence assumed not to be different, as Antro explained: ‘my mates thought I was joking when I told them I was *gitano*’. Abajo and Carrasco (2004) and Brüggemann (2014) have identified ethnic invisibility as a coping strategy used by some Roma students to offer protection from racism and exclusion.

Such ‘inclusion’ based on invisibility is illusory and precarious because being welcome is contingent upon looking and behaving as non-Roma. This is illustrated in Refre’s response when he was asked if he knew other Roma students at university:
Declared as Gitano? No, I don’t know anyone. There might be others because sometimes I see people with some features… but I don’t ask them “hey, are you Gitano?” I simply don’t speak about it…. I have told my close friends I’m Roma because I don’t have any problem with saying “I’m Gitano”… because they are my friends and I never heard any derogatory comment from them regarding Roma… But, when it comes to anyone in the classroom, somebody that I just see once or twice a week, one hour, or from who I have heard negative things about Roma… I pass. (Refre, Spain)

Ethnic invisibility may serve a positive function in offering some protection from prejudice. However a negative consequence of such Roma invisibility in higher education is that the invisibility prevents Roma educational success from being visible and becoming normalised. While Roma educational success remains hidden and hence an anomaly, it means that when students’ Roma identity is disclosed, their educational success is often interpreted as indicative that they are not like Roma.

**Giving back**

A prevalent theme across narratives from Spain and CEE was participants’ desire to use the opportunity of a higher education to ‘give back’ to their Roma community of origin (Hinton-Smith et al., 2017). This included becoming either an ambassador for Roma interests in the public sphere, or a positive role model encouraging others to advance in education and philanthropic professional vocations (Kolev et al., 2013). In Spain, Gaviota and Flora worked for Roma Associations, while Violeta explained how:

through my own experience, I want to testify, to contribute to opening the eyes of girls and boys... I believe that things are going to change because we [educated Roma] are more and more everyday.

Similarly, Liliana from Macedonia argued that:

What do we have to do? …We need more Roma people…to be educated. When you have more Roma educated people, first, they’re going to change their personal life and second, they’re going to change other Roma’s life, because when you have
more educated people I think, in general, we’re going to change the general picture for Roma everywhere in Europe.

Roma students in Spain had not been beneficiaries of affirmation action; so any compulsion they felt to ‘give back’ to the community was a personal motivation rather than a formal obligation in return for the higher education they had received. Spanish Roma students explained wanting to use their education to give something back to other Roma as being a positive means to constructing a new self-identity, that integrated success in mainstream, graduate life while remaining true to Roma origin.

While all of the Spanish participants expressed a desire to become Roma role models; CEE students conveyed this differently:

It is our duty, as Roma educated persons, as...Roma educated woman, to help, first of all my community, to be in school and to be educated. (Mirela, CEE)

This was conveyed by some as an unwelcome encumbrance:

It can be a burden on my shoulders to always be seen as a Roma - the expectation to give back. Giving back to the community is a personal choice, but I do not see it as my personal responsibility. (Adja, CEE)

Others asserted a desire to move beyond Roma issues:

Should we all work on Roma questions? We can’t all work with that - we must work in public organisations etc. and show that Roma can do that as well. (Gizi, CEE)

The motto of The Decade [of Roma Inclusion] was ‘Roma with Roma’, like, working with the Roma community but also by Roma, and I don’t see it as a negative thing, it was a positive, but in the long run, I don’t want to see our graduates nor me working, like, in Roma-related projects, you know? I want to see scientists, I want to see theatre, presenters, you know. (Mila, CEE)

We recognise the inherent racism entailed in a compulsion for Roma students to ‘give back’ to their community or society in gratitude for receiving their higher education. The idea of any such ‘debt’ to the community in return for access to education reflecting should
reflect an intrinsic motivation rather than an outwardly imposed obligation. The expectation for Roma to ‘give back’ in return for their education implicitly positions them as being less entitled than others to education as a right for themselves.

Discussion

Marginalised students must negotiate discrimination from inside and outside HE (Morrice, 2013). For such marginalised students including Roma, access to HE must not only be negotiated at the moment of entry. Negotiating access to the full opportunities and benefits of higher education persists throughout HE journeys and beyond. This includes the challenges of negotiating progression to postgraduate study, academic careers, and wider graduate employment opportunities.

HE participation does not only entail the physical aspects of going to university (Pantea, 2012); it can also mark a status passage to a new identity, with all of the associated opportunities and risks of this (Brine & Waller, 2004). This transition is mediated by students’ embodied characteristics, and this can be particularly acute for individuals whose identity deviates furthest from normative assumptions of the ideal HE student, including in terms of ethnicity. As Roma students negotiate HE, they can become caught between places, both geographically and symbolically. This can entail feeling pushed and pulled between community, and HE with its precarious promises of opportunity. Tension experienced between the desire to give back to community of origin and desire to have freedom to construct one’s own autonomous identity, can be contingent on surrounding context and demands, and this can include the framing of entitlement to higher education.

Affirmative action, ‘coming out’ and the ‘gift’ economy

Prominent Roma initiatives active in CEE, such as Roma Access Programme (RAP) and Romaversitas provide economic funding and also seek to create a professional/intellectual ‘elite’ who self-identify as Roma, embrace their heritage and feel responsible for their Roma communities (McGarry, 2010). The intention is that these individuals should ‘serve as role models and leaders’ and ‘advocate on behalf of the Roma community’ (Central European
University, 2014). Affirmative action interventions targeted specifically to increasing Roma HE participation, redress historic injustices and advance Roma rights. Yet participation can engender pressure to declare Roma status (Pantea, 2015), with this ‘coming out’ engendering the risk of being othered in response. Bequeathing of this ‘gift’ of higher education participation informs internal and external pressure to ‘give back,’ a recurrent principle in Roma research (Pantea, 2015; Kolev et al., 2013; Kwiek, 2010).

Theoretically, we locate this within the power dynamics conceptualised by Ahmed (2012) in terms of minorities being:

Continually reminded that we were the recipients of generous funding. We were indebted. The gift economy is powerful: a means of some asserting the power they have to give to others, which is at once a power to expect or demand a return (p.153).

Discourses of responsibility to ‘give back’ risk situating Roma graduates only in careers that address Roma issues and communities (Hinton-Smith et al., 2017). This is compounded by frequent focus of Roma HE initiatives on disciplines such as social work, which feeds into agendas of ‘giving back’ through community-oriented work (Danvers, 2015). Roma students must be supported into areas including STEM, to support participation in the wider social, political and economic landscape.

Neoliberal HE promotes participation by diverse constituents, but too often in non-altruistic ways that position marginalised students as deficit, in receipt of an education ‘gift,’ and owing gratitude. Ahmed warns:

To be welcomed is to be positioned as the one who is not at home. Conditional hospitality is when you are welcomed on the condition that you give something back in return... People of colour in white organizations are treated as guests, temporary residents in someone else’s home. (Ahmed, 2012, p. 43)

Conceptualising Roma higher education participation

There is tension in Spanish Roma narratives which express that becoming a university student does not mean leaving Roma-ness behind, but that it is preferable not to speak this
identity. Brüggemann (2012, p. 24) identifies Roma graduates as likely to ‘live more or less invisible among the non-Roma’ rather than return to communities. This suggests that the process of becoming an HE student, immersed in a culture of implicit and explicit messages around different ways of being compared to marginalised minorities, can promote quiet integration in the mainstream. Spanish Roma experiences indicate how integration approaches risk positioning success as being in spite of rather than part of their identity, undermining potential to raise the status of Roma. Marginalised students including Roma are not only numerically underrepresented in higher education; they are also symbolically excluded through misrecognition by university cultures that are oriented to validating dominant groups.

For the Spanish and CEE students that we interviewed, the tensions of achieving belonging in HE were complexified by respective demands to declare or silence Roma status. Both of these demands impacted on the journey of developing an autonomous HE identity. Spain and CEE, the European areas of highest Roma populations, have different approaches to Roma HE participation. However both can locate Roma as being outside HE culture, as those who are not at home. Both approaches carry the risk of aiming to:

‘fix’ or ‘correct’ the [marginalised] subject, so that s/he will fit in to the hegemonic expectations of what it means to be a university student. (Burke, 2011, p. 171)

Such an approach is implicit in an emphasis on a one-way process of Roma graduates taking experience from HE back to influence their minority culture, without imagining that Roma culture may have anything of value to bring to higher education. While integration and role model approaches are ostensibly divergent, each can imply ‘fixing’ an excluded minority rather than welcoming the positive contribution of that culture to enriching HE. As James argues:

Conventional notions of ‘democratisation’ are not only uni-dimensional (in that they are about making more widely available that which belongs to the elite), but also contradictory (because they simultaneously undermine any notion that all segments of society have cultural features that could be made more widely available, and devalues them. (James, 2014, p. 322)
To strengthen, rather than undermine Roma HE participation we must interrogate the power of unspoken assumptions that symbolically produce insiders/outsiders. There is a responsibility to develop opportunities for Roma in HE, but this must be underpinned by understanding that participation not a debt for repayment; instead it must be recognised as a right, and a contribution in itself. Affirmative action policies must be recognised as acknowledgement of historic and ongoing injustices rather than as conditional upon community contribution. The complexity of multiplier effects of educational opportunity must be understood in terms of benefits of Roma HE participation to individual Roma, their children, and communities (Bergan & Damian, 2010); but also the contribution of Roma to HE classrooms and cultures, and to wider society.

Universities must take responsibility for work to reconcile disjunctures between belonging in minority communities of origin and assumptions around legitimate university subjects. This entails active work by institutions to develop cultures of belonging in which the contribution of diverse students is validated; resonating with work around ‘belonging’ in HE (Thomas, 2012).

**Conclusions**

Through drawing on this small sample of 11 qualitative interviews, we identify strands in experience, implications of country specific approaches, and relationships between these. We do not claim for insights from this small-scale exploratory work to be able to provide the answers to persistent inequalities for Roma in higher education. However we do perceive the perspectives shared by our participants to be important in contributing Roma higher education student voices to identifying the problems; and through this they pose the challenges to be addressed. These problems do not belong to any deficit in Roma students themselves. These are problems to be addressed by the international HE sector, which must continue to strive towards developing more equitable models of inclusion that do not through the parameters of participation opportunities implicitly position marginalised students as not belonging. This
field of research remains young (Allen et al. 2019), an outcome of the longstanding exclusion of Roma from educational participation and progression. Continuing to grow the numbers of Roma graduates with the tools and power to speak for Roma interests in education and beyond is vital to developing a larger base of understanding, spoken by and not for Roma. However meeting this social justice imperative cannot be posed as the condition of repayment for the ‘gift’ of HE participation. Education is a right (Burke 2012) and not a gift; and while Roma may remain excluded from full social participation within many country contexts, they are as entitled to this fundamental right as others. This requires rethinking of the messages underpinning much existing justification around increasing Roma HE participation. There is a responsibility to insist on narratives that acknowledge Roma entitlement to higher education without conditions or expectations, as for other students. Listening to, rather than telling Roma students, graduates and communities is central to this. This research has merely identified challenges in different national contexts, that HEIs and participation programmes should understand to develop more genuinely inclusive cultures. Such development work must be centrally informed by voices of Roma.

Alongside access criteria, this is likely to require attention to areas including curricula, pedagogies, and underpinning values. Universities must work actively to develop cultures in which Roma students are not only numerically present, but genuinely entitled. Growing participation should not provide a new site for marginalisation.

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[1] https://www.ceu.edu/unit/romani-studies-program
[5] According to the OECD report (2016), 35% of Spanish adults aged 25 to 64 have completed a university diploma.
[6] Interviews discussed here took place as part of a larger international project. (HEIM was a Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research and Innovation Staff Exchange (RISE) initiative, including an international research team from the University of Sussex, UK; the University of Seville, Spain; Umea University, Sweden; and Roma Education Fund (REF), a non-governmental organisation operating across CEE.