

Cork City Traveller Education Inter Agency Group submission to the National Access Plan

1. What should our overall vision for equity of access to education in Ireland be for 2022-2026

An equitable education system that supports Travellers to engage, participate and succeed in higher education, this is dependent on support for Travellers across all educational levels from early years to higher education. So this means the vision should be about more than equity of access to education, it also means equity of opportunity from the education system.

2. Who are the target groups that should be specified in the next National Access Plan?

Travellers are a particular group that need to be prioritised within the National Access Plan because they are currently highly marginalised and excluded relative to other groups in Irish society (according to the 2016 Census less than 1% have a third level qualification) .There are many challenges to addressing this amongst which is the need for a reliable database of Travellers that takes into account ethnic identifier / self identifier data. It is particularly difficult for HEA Access Services / Offices to proactively work with schools, when data on Travellers is not readily available or reliable.

3. How can pre-entry / post entry activities be developed?

Literacy & numeracy: As a result of gaps / failings in the primary and secondary education system, Traveller children often have low levels of numeracy and literacy. Significant changes in the education system and supports for the students are required from early years to secondary level to improve Traveller numeracy and literacy skills. This is a precursor to supporting Traveller access to further and higher education.

0-6 Year olds: 0-6 year old Traveller children need to be particularly well supported. This is universally recognised as a crucial time in education and a reliable indicator of future academic success. A Traveller specific version of Young Knocknaheeny / Let's Grow Together initiative would be most helpful. The wrap around nature of the supports available at an early age where parents are included and trust is built up is very impactful, leading to far fewer mental health problems and exclusion when the children grow into teenagers. The knock on effect of better educational attainment is that it would hopefully lead to a more

engaged Traveller secondary school cohort and therefore improve retention. Like everything else, early investment can pay huge dividends.

Block at secondary level: There is a progression block at secondary level, Travellers often do not progress to senior cycle, thereby preventing their progression to Further or Higher Education (unless as a mature student). To ensure Traveller progression to Further and Higher Education, the National Access Plan needs to look at secondary level and develop innovative supportive solutions that are culturally appropriate. This has begun with the NTRIS project, however this programme and other programmes focussing on supporting educational access need a longer timeframe to yield positive results, this work is based on the development of trusting relationships, this work takes time. Short term funding to support Traveller access initiatives can often have negative consequences when funding streams run out. The trust between partners can be impacted and the relationships can be damaged.

Adjust Mature Student age for Travellers: In order to encourage participation in Further and Higher Education for Travellers, particularly for Travellers who leave school early, it is recommended that the age for Mature Student entry for Travellers be adjusted to 21.

Programme Design to employ a universal design approach: Programme design within Higher Education (and primary / secondary levels) there is a need to employ a universal design approach that focusses not on separating people and groups but on the inclusion of all. Opportunities whereby Travellers can be involved in the codesign of programmes and curricula, should be explored and encouraged to equality proof curricula. Traveller culture needs to be respected, celebrated, visible and included within education programmes, in accordance with the Traveller Education and History Bill.

Support at post higher education level: This is important to further support Travellers progression in education, business and community. A Graduate Traveller Network has been recently established by the Traveller Education Coordinator at MTU Cork Campus to offer support to graduate Travellers to develop in their careers and to increase the visibility of positive Traveller educational and career outcomes. Initiatives such as this need to be expanded.

Employment supports post graduation: Members of the Traveller Community can experience discrimination in work place environments. Initiatives that positively support Traveller graduates in securing internships and employment are needed. This is needed for Travellers to succeed in their career paths and in employment and more broadly this will further encourage engagement of the Traveller community in education. Successful

employment is an outcome of education, this outcome must be supported for Travellers. This will require commitment and joint working between educational institutions and employers. Policy direction from government would also assist this.

4. How can current funding programmes be better utilised to further the objectives of the National Access Plan?

SUSI Grants need to be revised to become more culturally appropriate for example, many Traveller couples marry when they are young. However for applications for SUSI grants they remain dependent on parents. The SUSI funding models (criteria) should be adapted to reflect this.

The PATH funding in the last Access Plan facilitated some positive work via the introduction of Traveller support posts such as the Traveller Education Co-ordinator in the south, however these posts are short fixed term contracts of 3 years or less. The success of this work lies in building relationships, expertise and profile raising. This takes time and is often at its most impactful towards the latter part of the contract. We need to move beyond pilot programmes. For improved effectiveness a longer time frame is needed, posts and initiatives need to be linked to the duration of the Access Plan or preferably posts should be mainstreamed within Higher Education institutions.

The HEAR and DARE schemes should ensure a prioritisation of Travellers.

5. How can the goal of mainstreaming be further embedded within HEI's?

Dedicated Traveller education posts should be mainstreamed within Higher Education Institutions to ensure that access for Travellers is prioritised and resourced effectively.

6. How can a whole of education approach to widening participation in higher education be achieved?

A whole of education approach is welcomed and should include the provision of wrap around education services and support from early years to higher education. Support for parents must be seen as key to this process, supporting Traveller parents will positively impact on Traveller children's engagement.

Supporting retention and progression at secondary level is crucial to supporting progression to third level. There is a need for a large scale scoping exercise at primary, secondary and third levels as a way of identifying needs and appropriate responses. The evaluation of the NTIRIS project will assist in this.

Central to a whole of education approach is the need for joined up thinking and collaborative working across government departments and agencies including the Dept of Education and Skills, The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youths, Tusla, Traveller organisations and others.

7. How can pathways between further education and training and higher education be developed?

Many Travellers are interested in pursuing apprenticeships, however it remains extremely difficult for Travellers to access apprenticeships. Travellers face considerable difficulties in accessing placements both in terms of apprenticeships and more broadly in areas such as in transition year in secondary school. This is an area that needs attention by the Further Education Institutions and access partners.

HEI's need to be flexible in the learning opportunities for members of the Traveller Community. HEI's need to listen their learning needs and work with the Traveller community to design bespoke programmes if needed. HEI's need to be respectful of the knowledge and expertise that exists within the Traveller community and be open to Travellers feeding into the design and delivery of programmes.

8. How can other social inclusion initiatives outside of the higher education sector be harness to support equity of access objectives?

The important role played by social inclusion initiatives and community education organisation needs to be acknowledged, resourced and expanded. Community development organisations are crucial support partners in engaging Travellers in education programmes and in supporting them to remain engaged throughout course delivery. There is a very successful example of this in Cork where the Traveller Visibility Group (TVG) and the Adult and Continuing Education Department in UCC worked together to support and deliver a level 7 Leadership Training programme to 19 Traveller women. The supportive role of the TVG was integral to the success of the programme. Options for increased flexibility by HEI's in designing bespoke programmes should be introduced. When programmes are responsively organised and delivered as a partnership between educational institutions and community development organisations the engagement, retention and outcomes are generally very positive.

Cork has a good track record of inter-agency working. This model could be expanded on across educational institutions. The organisations involved in this partnership include the

Traveller Visibility Group, Cork City Partnership, Cork ETB, UCC, MTU, Cork City Council, NTRIS employees, school representatives.

Traveller engagement at 3rd level has an important “mirroring” impact at primary and secondary level, adults engaged in education positively influences young people’s engagement and expectations around education pathways. Positive role models can be very impactful. Students and graduates from a Traveller background can have very positive influences on others within the community.

9. What challenges has Covid-19 presented in relation to an inclusive system and how can they be addressed?

Many Travellers are digitally disadvantaged, this needs to be remedied by the provision of technology such as laptops and the provision of training and support to increase Travellers technological capacity. This is particularly important as we move towards blended learning environments. In Cork, particularly in the context of Covid-19, there has been attempts to alleviate digital disadvantage through the Cork Access Network. The support of laptop loan schemes via the third level institutions was also welcome, this will need to be expanded to ensure equitable educational access across the Traveller community.

Submitted by the Cork City Traveller Education Inter Agency Group:

Membership includes Cork City Council, UCC, MTU, Supporting Traveller And Roma (STAR – Cork NTRIS pilot programme), Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), Traveller Visibility Group, Cork City Partnership, Cork ETB, Home School Liaison, School Completion Programme.

3rd June 2021