

Submission for the New National Access Plan 2021

Introduction

The view expressed in this submission are the views held by the Board of Involve; Involve is a Youth Work based organisation that works on behalf of the Traveller community. The board is comprised of members from the Traveller community and members from the settled community. We believe that at the heart of any Action Plan should be the concept of inclusion and thus providing accessible education to all, no matter where you are from, the colour of your skin etc. We are very much aware that education transforms people's lives and provides the platform for everyone to reach their full potential and a fulfilled life. We believe that access to higher education for all isn't the full answer, we also need to ensure that Travellers attending Higher Education/FET must be supported whilst completing their programmes to ensure positive student outcomes for all. It's also imperative that clear pathways need to be developed in an integrated manner that allows the smooth transfer from FET to HE to ensure that no one loses out and any barriers that inhibit this transfer must be removed. The cost of education for many from disadvantaged backgrounds impacts on their participation, all the necessary financial support needs to be put in place to ensure that this happens. We also need to expand our understanding of disabilities, this was rather limited in our last action plan, there are many other forms of disabilities out there, sensory and other hidden disabilities etc. that impacts on learners moving into HE and FET. When you look at the recent numbers of adult Travellers attending third level and FET programmes, we are disappointed, however, we do believe if we promote those who are presently involved, we will develop role models that will encourage others to follow suit.

Recommendations that we feel that could be identified as possible actions in the Plan:

Traveller Education Officer

Understanding and providing for the particular needs of Travellers students and parents as they seek to access higher education is critical to ensuring that children and young people from the Traveller community can fulfil their potential through education. Having a whole education approach is essential for enabling participation by Travellers in higher education. Therefore, a full-time post *Traveller Education Officer* must be established in each third level institution, or in partnership with other institutions, to work closely with the Travelling community, primary/secondary school and FET communities to deliver a targeted approach while furthering the agreed actions and recommendations outlined in numerous Travellers in Education reports and strategies. The Traveller Education Officer will work closely with school principals to ensure that third level education is seen as a viable option for Travellers and provide the necessary support to guidance teacher in the schools with the relevant supports directed towards Travellers accessing third level.

Pre University Programme

Traveller students have identified a gap in supports during the transition process into higher education. The transition can create additional barriers (Academic, Financial and Wellbeing), which act as a deterrent for the progression and retention of Traveller students in higher education. Therefore, a Pre University programme should be established by the Access offices with a multi-disciplinary team of professionals supporting Traveller students and parents from pre-entry. This will empower Traveller students and their families to overcome the barriers and be in a stronger position once they commence their studies at University. The programme would represent an essential intervention in ensuring Traveller students access to higher education.

Incentivised FET to HE Pathways

The new National Access Plan needs to build on the long established strong engagement of Travellers in further education and build coherent incentivised pathways from further education and training to higher education. In 2019, the total number of Traveller enrolments reported in further education and training was 1,527. Of these learner enrolments, 43% were men, and 57% were women. The majority (59%) of these learners were younger than 25 years of age (FET In Numbers – Traveller Community, SOLAS, 2019). It would be important that clear pathways would be developed for these young Travellers when they complete their FET programmes into HE, this obviously isn't there now, when you look at the differential in numbers when you look at the number of Travellers that attend HE.

The current FET to HE model creates additional barriers for Traveller Youth and hinders any significant progress. A key barrier is financial, an 18-year-old Traveller student in further education at Youthreach receives a weekly payment of €203 weekly, but if the same student progresses into higher education (NUI Galway or GMIT) which is within 45km from home, the student will receive a SUSI grant of €297 per month. This is an obvious barrier that impacts on the transfer, so we do need to circumvent this in order to may third level a serious option for Travellers.

Travellers want to progress into higher education, but the financial burden is too much to handle; more needs to be done by the department to deal with this issue. Pathways from further education to higher education must be incentivised. If this is addressed in the next National Access Plan, the number of Traveller Youth progressing into higher education through a further education route will increase drastically over the next few years.

Specific Traveller student grants/scholarships should be established to assist Traveller Youth to overcome financial barriers. The Tusla model for supporting Travellers to become social workers is an extremely proactive initiative to duplicate to other third level sectors.

Support/Counselling Services

The relevant dedicated college supports must be in place to support Travellers attending HE, this support should be easy accessible when needed and promoted in a way that acknowledges the Traveller community in a positive light.

Research

There needs to be accurate data gathered on the participation of Travellers in HE. Thus policy decisions will be based upon baseline data that will inform the work. There needs to be ongoing collection of information on the participation of Travellers with a view to having evidence based research to make future policy decisions.

Creating Local Partnerships

There needs to be more regional and community based partnerships/collaborations between a range of stakeholders/actors that work directly with Travellers in order to support increased participation of Travellers in HE. These partnerships need to be resourced to sustain the work of encouraging Travellers to move into HE.

Teacher Education

We need more Traveller teachers in schools as role models and the training of teachers need to be reviewed as to the appreciation of Traveller culture on the school curriculum. It is imperative that

schools are provided with the necessary tools to encourage Travellers to think about becoming teachers. We need Travellers working in Third Level also as lecturers in order to create a further role model for Travellers.