



**Submission to the Higher Education Authority and
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science for the
National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education
2022 -2026**

16/06/2021

About National Traveller MABS

National Traveller MABS, established in 2005, is a leading advocate for the financial inclusion of Travellers in Ireland.

National Traveller MABS works to end the financial exclusion of Travellers in Ireland by

- Promoting and developing culturally appropriate financial education programmes.
- Supporting the development of a collaborative working relationship between local MABS, local Travellers and other relevant organisations.
- Working with partner organisations to address exclusion by developing alternatives to mainstream saving and borrowing
- Highlighting issues of over-indebtedness and exclusion from financial institutions, making appropriate responses through our research and policy work

National Traveller MABS strategic aims are

- To resource and support MABS/ CIS and Travellers so that Travellers receive an effective and culturally appropriate service
- To contribute to addressing the wider social, cultural and economic issues that cause Traveller Financial exclusion
- To build, maintain and develop effective partnership and relationships with relevant strategic stakeholders
- To maintain and develop an organisation which is influential, sustainable, dynamic and open to learning

National Traveller MABS is funded by the Citizens Information Board. We are managed by a voluntary board of directors and are a registered charity.

Recommendations

- The updated plan for equity of access to higher education could be developed using a new model based on the EquiFrame. A new vision for the NAP that reflects the issues highlighted by the pandemic would put a fresh lens on diversity, equality and inclusion.
- The initial groups targeted in the National Access Plan 2015 -2019 should remain included in the next National Access Plan 2022-2026.They need to be redefined to reflect the needs of society today including those in direct provision and recognise outstanding gender issues.
- The target for full and part time undergraduate new entrants from the Traveller community has not been reached and it falls approximately 50% short of the initial target. This cannot be deemed a successful outcome and it is imperative that Irish Travellers remain as a target group for the next NAP.
- The commitments to support students in other categories of disability and to reevaluate those who should be included in the target group defined by socio-economic barriers need to be upheld and implemented in the NAP 2022-2026.
- PATH 1 funding should be increased so that we achieve a higher rate of diversity amongst teachers. This aligns with Action 15 of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017 -2021 to support the development by the higher education sector of positive action measures to encourage and support Travellers and Roma to

become teachers and should be more target towards Travellers to increase student retention at second level and progression to third level.

- The 1916 Bursary scheme needs to be extended indefinitely beyond the current 3 year extension that began in 2020/2021.
- More 1916 Bursary's should be made available to the targeted groups to further increase participation and the financial support available to students most in need of it.
- The 1916 Bursary should be available from all recognised higher education institutions rather than being limited to the 22 named institutions.
- PATH 3 funding needs to be more targeted at developing relationships between HEI's and local schools and colleges of Further Education. Career guidance needs to be more targeted and supportive and understanding of the social and cultural issues faced by those in the specified groups. A one size fits all approach does not work.
- The SUSI grant amounts and the adjacent and non-adjacent rates need to be re-examined to take into account the actual cost of living for students and their particular circumstances.

- There needs to be increased flexibility in the SUSI application, decision and appeals process to take into account individual circumstances, particularly in the Covid-19 era.
- SUSI applicants should be able to retain their current social protection entitlements.
- Those in receipt of the Back to Education Allowance payments or VTOS payments should be entitled to receive the maintenance part of the SUSI grant to ensure wider participation of those from low income backgrounds in further and higher education.
- The eligibility assessment on gross income needs to be readjusted to take into account the financial realities of student households.
- All funding available through SUSI, the 1916 Bursaries and other mechanisms should be extended to cover part-time and mature students as well as all registration and associated costs as many prospective Traveller students are mature and are applicants for part-time routes
- The SUSI grant system be expanded to include part time and online accredited programmes.
- HEI campuses should be funded to provide a safe and welcoming environment for Traveller students on campus through the creation of Traveller societies. It would be a

point of contact and culturally appropriate support for Traveller students including a mentoring or buddy system. These would help to build positive relationships as well as alliances between Traveller students and the rest of the student and staff body. These groups could work towards increasing Traveller participation in third level education, while providing a safe and welcoming space on campus.

- Traveller students should be included in college promotion and induction sessions.
- Higher Education Institutes should employ Traveller graduates in access and support services.
- A State sponsored low interest education loan for living expenses, repayable after graduation when borrowers start earning above a minimum income level should be investigated.

Introduction

Historically, few Travellers have participated in further and higher education. Within the EU, Ireland has one of the highest number of students that attend third level education. However, according to the 2016 census, less than 1% of Irish Travellers continue onto higher education and graduate with a qualification.

From 2010/11 until 2016/17, students that chose to identify as Irish Travellers consistently made up just 0.1% of new entrants to the first year of a university-level programme¹. This figure has increased to 0.2% for the 2017/18 academic year². Similarly, since 2014/15 Irish Travellers have made up 0.2% of new entrants to Institutes of Technology³. In respect of new entrants to all institutions, Irish Travellers made up just 0.2% of all new entrants⁴. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021, supplemented by the Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019 -2021, prescribes a target of 80 Irish Travellers as new entrants in higher education per year. Numbers have increased in recent years, but a huge amount of progress still needs to be made to achieve this target.

There are many barriers to Travellers attending further and higher education with financial considerations chief among them. Travellers experience high levels of financial exclusion and educational attainment is an important factor in combating financial exclusion and changing people's circumstances by taking people out of the poverty trap. It is well documented that at the level of the individual, there is a very significant positive correlation between educational

¹ Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Young Travellers in Ireland, (Dublin, April, 2020 available from <https://assets.gov.ie/72732/824dc1d2acaf4e5a93d88e640ae1ef0f.pdf>, accessed 14/04/2021

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

attainment and earnings⁵ and degree-level graduates earn substantially more than upper secondary graduates in all OECD countries⁶.

The Department of Education itself has acknowledged that despite education reforms, “the expansion of educational opportunities has resulted in much greater gender equality in educational attainment but large disparities remain in terms of the socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and racial background of learners ... [and that] where those from lower socio-economic groups do attend third level, they are more likely to attend the Institutes of Technology where the incidence of non-completion is highest (more than twice that found at the Universities) [and concludes] that young people from lower socio-economic families face cultural, educational and financial barriers to participation in higher education and that, as part of the drive to increase participation and enhance derived outcomes from the education system there is a need for targeted financial support accompanied by clear and accessible information on entitlements⁷

National Traveller MABS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the new National Access Plan, the review of the student grant system and acknowledges the increased funding for student grants and the expansion of the 1916 Bursary Fund in Budget 2021. We also welcome the allocation of €300,000 by government to colleges to help to offset the effects of the pandemic on Travellers in higher education or hoping to progress to third level and the

⁵ Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, (Dublin, 2001) pg 14, available from <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/Report-of-the-Action-Group-on-Access-to-Third-Level-Education.pdf>, accessed 14/04/2021

⁶ OECD Report, “Education at a Glance

⁷ Supporting Equity in Higher Education (Department of Education and Science, 2003) available from <https://assets.gov.ie/24689/424630ebf076442c8b6df9c980b073ce.pdf>, accessed 14/04/2021 & WRC Social and Economic Consultants, Third Level Access Measure 9 of the EHRDOP Implemented by Department of Education and Science available from https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/download/pdf/measure_09_third_level_access_wider_equality_study.pdf, accessed 14/04/2021

Covid-19 Once off Emergency Grant. We recognise and appreciate that the National Action Plan and the SUSI grant supports many students from low income backgrounds through college, however, we believe there are areas for improvement within the SUSI grant system and the NAP PATHWAYS funding streams which could benefit all those wishing to continue on to further and higher level education and help to increase the numbers of Travellers attending further and higher level education.

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

The key vision of the National Action Plan involved ‘building positive social change and tackling inequality in our society.’⁸ Education is the key to positive social change and tackling inequality however inequality is inbuilt into our education system and the National Action Plan for Equity of Education needs to be more ambitious if we are to achieve meaningful positive social change and tackle inequality.

Covid19 has caused changes to be rapidly adopted in educational policies and practice and has accelerated the importance of widening the definition of the existing target groups and to include additional target groups. The updated plan for equity of access to higher education could be developed using a new model based on the EquiFrame⁹. This model presents an analytical framework for evaluating the extent to which social inclusion and human rights form part of policy and policy related documents. This systematic approach allows for the analysis and facilitation of the inclusion of human rights and vulnerable groups in health policies¹⁰. This framework could provide a means of widening participation in an equitable manner. A conclusion of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report on Education Inequality and Disadvantage and Barriers to Education was that ‘the education system as it currently stands is unfair and unequal and that the consequences of this are

⁸ Higher Education Authority (2015). National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019. Dublin: HEA.

⁹ Cardiff, Linda, Kehoe, Michele, COVID-19 ‘Targets’ the National Access Plan, All Ireland Journal of Education, HOME / ARCHIVES / VOL. 12 NO. 3 (2020): SPECIAL ISSUE: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION (PART 1) available from <https://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/491/831>, accessed 10/06/2021

¹⁰ Mannan, H., Amin M. & MacLachlan M. with El Tayeb, S., El Khatim, A., Bedri, N., McVeigh, J., Swartz, L., Munthali, A., Van Rooy, G., Eide, A., Schneider M. (2011). The EquiFrameManual: A tool for Evaluating and Promoting the Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups and Core Concepts of Human Rights in Health Policy Documents. Dublin: The Global Health Press

stark'¹¹. The experience of COVID19 has created a valuable insight into the role and responsibilities of the NAP in the provision of equity of access to higher education. Instead of being viewed as a pragmatic, utilitarian, instrumental, and human capitalist approach, a revised NAP can be a catalyst to provide change. A new vision for the NAP that reflects the issues highlighted by the pandemic would put a fresh lens on diversity, equality and inclusion. The opportunity now exists to provide a framework for an educational system that meets the needs of all in society.

¹¹ Houses of the Oireachtas (May 2019).Joint Committee on Education and Skills Report Education Inequality & Disadvantage and Barriers to Education. Available from https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/reports/2019/2019-06-05_report-on-education-inequality-disadvantage-and-barriers-to-education_en.pdf accessed 12/06/2021

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

The initial groups targeted in the National Access Plan 2015 -2019 should remain included in the next National Access Plan 2022-2026.

As Ireland battled Covid-19, it became apparent that equity of access to education was not ‘everyone’s business’¹² and many were left behind. The challenges faced by those targeted by the NAP were considerable, however Covid-19 revealed access issues for vulnerable groups beyond the target groups and the identification of new target groups is required. The existing target groups need to be redefined to reflect the needs of society today including those in direct provision and recognise outstanding gender issues. The disability community which was a focus of the 2008-2013 NAP was limited to those with physical, sensory and multiple disabilities. The 2015-2019 plan continued to focus on this target group. A commitment was made at that time to provide support for students in other categories of disability including students with learning disabilities, mental health or neurological conditions. The commitments to support students in other categories of disability and to reevaluate those who should be included in the target group defined by socio-economic barriers need to be upheld and implemented in the NAP 2022-2026.

While there has been an increase in overall student numbers, and in participation rates by students from a number of the target groups, the progression of Irish Travellers to higher education has not been a success. The NAP 2015-2019 had as its baseline data a figure of 32 Irish Travellers in higher education (full and part-time undergraduate new entrants). The NAP target for Travellers was 80 for 2019. However as the 2021 review of the NAP shows

¹² HEA (2018). *Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2012*. Dublin: HEA., page 2

only 41 Traveller students were recorded, almost 50% less than the target. This cannot be deemed a successful outcome and it is imperative that Irish Travellers remain as a target group for the next NAP.

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

National Traveller MABS acknowledges and welcomes the fact that there has been significant additional investment in new access initiatives since the commencement of the NAP. The Government has committed over €30 million over the years via the Programme for Access to Higher Education Fund (PATH) to increase access to higher education by the target groups identified in the NAP.

PATH 1 funding is for supporting access to initial teacher education by the target groups. The focus on the profession of teaching is crucial, and is informed by the understanding of the power of teachers as role models and influencers in raising the aspirations of young people. PATH1 aims to increase the number of students from under-represented groups entering initial teacher education and to provide more role models for students from these groups, demonstrating that there are pathways open to them to realise their potential through education. This aligns with Action 15 of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017 -2021 to support the development by the higher education sector of positive action measures to encourage and support Travellers and Roma to become teachers. In order to increase the numbers of Irish Travellers entering higher education there needs to be an increase in the numbers of teachers from the Traveller community to provide more role models for students and to show them there are pathways open to them.

PATH 2 funding comprises of the 1916 Bursaries. The 1916 Bursaries are targeted at non-traditional entry and can support undergraduate study on either a full- or part-time basis. Each bursary is worth €5,000 per year. 200 Bursaries are available per year. A number of

Travellers have benefited from the Bursary. The 1916 Bursary scheme needs to be extended indefinitely beyond the current 3 year extension that began in 2020/2021. More Bursary's should be made available to the targeted groups to further increase participation and the financial support available to students most in need of it. The Bursary should also be available from all recognised higher education institutions rather than being limited to the 22 named institutions.

PATH 3 funding is dedicated to building and enriching relationships between higher education institutions and regional and community partners to enable better targeting of students. To this end there needs to be a concentrated effort to strengthen existing links between the Career Guidance Service and Home School Liaison Scheme in schools and access officers in higher education institutes with a view to working the Traveller community. Targeted events and initiatives such as College Connect and the SOAR program's Whidden Workshops: It's Kushti to Rokker [Chat Workshop: It's Good to Talk] for Traveller and Roma students who are considering further or higher education should be supported by PATH 3 funding as they provide a real connection and chance to speak to HEI's staff and admin as while being led by Traveller and Roma students sharing their experiences and talking about the specific issues they faced and answering questions put to them by potential students. Similarly NUIG regularly promotes Traveller cultural events on campus, and organizing panels of Traveller students to talk to potential Traveller students about college life. As part of the efforts by the University's Access Office to support Travellers as role models and their participation in education a short documentary *'Travellers in Higher Education – Building a Sense of Belonging'* was produced. NUIG is also home to The Mincéirs Whiden Society, the first Irish Traveller Student Society in Ireland. It aims to provide a safe and welcoming environment for Traveller students on campus. In addition, the society intends to build positive relationships as well as alliances between Traveller students, the student and

staff body at NUI Galway. The society aims to work towards increasing Traveller participation in third level education, while providing a safe and welcoming space on campus. These types of initiatives are invaluable as they provide safe spaces as well as visibility and support for Traveller students and such initiatives should be further resourced.

HEI's could also support awareness of Traveller culture and diversity by introducing modules on Traveller culture and including Traveller culture and history in pre-existing modules. Traveller students should also be included in college promotion and induction sessions and employ Traveller graduates in access support services.

Covid-19 has had a severe impact on students and their family's ability to afford 3rd level education. A recent survey of third level students found that household Income has been reduced for 56% of students and over 77% of students and their families are experiencing financial stress and anxiety. While over 80% of students are concerned or extremely concerned that they won't have enough money to go to or remain at college. Those eligible for the full SUSI grant continue to struggle financially with almost 65% say it is not adequate to meet third-level education costs¹³. While there has been an increase in the grant this increase does not fully reflect the cost of attending college today. The accommodation allowance payment needs to be realistic given the accommodation crisis and the ever rising rental costs to students. The non-adjacent rate of SUSI needs to be recalibrated to recognise the reality that in most rural communities there is no public transport service and while the student may live within 45km of their college the costs to get there can be significant as there is no bus service or easy access to college for these students. The cost of food and utilities

¹³ Telling the Real Story, SUSI grants for 3rd level education Survey findings,(2020) available from https://www.sinnfein.ie/files/2020/Telling_the_Real_Story_-_Rose_Conway-Walsh.pdf, accessed 14/04/2021

continues to rise year on year and the SUSI grant amounts need to be seriously overhauled to reflect the realities of the cost of living for students today.

The financial costs incurred while accessing further education and training courses are a barrier for low income households. PLC students are only eligible for maintenance grants and students in receipt of a BTEA (Back to Education Allowance) or VTOS (Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme) payment are not eligible to receive the maintenance grant leaving them in a precarious position. A St Vincent De Paul report has found that course fees can cost up to €1,000 depending on the course materials needed for Post Leaving Certificate students¹⁴. This is unfair, particularly as students deemed to be from low income household tend to enrol in PLC courses.

Many of the most vulnerable in higher education are mature students, those who have a disability or an illness and come from low income households. Upon entry to higher education, those on payments such as carer's allowances, jobseekers allowance, and / or disability may be forced to change to the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) payment to keep entitlements such as the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) or rent supplement and other social welfare scheme and supports. Those in receipt of the BTEA payments are not then entitled to receive the maintenance part of the SUSI grant. This should be recognised as a significant barrier to widening participation of those from low income backgrounds in higher education and should be examined as a matter of urgency.

There are currently nine institutions listed on the SUSI website not eligible for funding even though they provide courses that are offered through the CAO¹⁵. This is a barrier to those

¹⁴ Society of St Vincent De Paul, Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 , available from <https://www.svp.ie/getattachment/7ef1df0a-2d3f-4edf-97f3-81d252c8fe86/SVP-Submission-to-the-Department-of-Further-and-Hi.aspx>, accessed 14/04/2021

¹⁵ SUSI, Undergraduate Students – Approved Institutions/Courses, available from <https://susi.ie/undergraduate-student/approved-institutionscourses-for-undergraduate-students/>, accessed 14/04/2021

trying to attend courses at these third-level institutions and grants should be made available to students based on their individual circumstances meeting the criteria required by SUSI rather than on what education institution they would like to attend. Courses available through the CAO should be automatically eligible for SUSI.

National Traveller MABS is of the opinion that part time students should be afforded the same supports that are available to full time students. According to the HEA Eurostat Survey (2016), of the expenses being paid by students, the average expenses for part-time students (at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level) was higher than full-time students¹⁶ All funding available through SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland), the 1916 Bursaries and other mechanisms should be extended to cover part-time and mature students as well as all registration and associated costs as many prospective Traveller students are mature and are applicants for part-time routes.¹⁷ Furthermore part time study or online accredited programmes may be the only appropriate further education option for those with disabilities and learning difficulties such as autism. Such courses are excluded from SUSI funding leaving people unable to access suitable third level education.

¹⁶ Eurostudent VI study conducted by Insight Statistical Consulting on behalf of the Higher Education Authority. Available at: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/01/HEA-Eurostudent-Survey.pdf>, accessed 14/04/2021

¹⁷ Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre & National Traveller Womens Forum, The Implications of COVID-19 for Traveller and Roma transfer to and progression within Higher Education, National Forum Report, May 27th 2020

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

Covid-19 has had a severe impact on students and their family's ability to afford 3rd level education. A recent survey of third level students found that household Income has been reduced for 56% of students and over 77% of students and their families are experiencing financial stress and anxiety. While over 80% of students are concerned or extremely concerned that they won't have enough money to go to or remain at college. Equity of access to higher education has to begin by addressing the financial burden associated with attending college. It is time that a State sponsored low interest education loan for living expenses, repayable after graduation when borrowers start earning above a minimum income level be investigated. Similar schemes are in operation in Australia, Netherlands and England.

The move to online learning also highlighted the digital divide that exists between Travellers and the wider community. Travellers are in the midst of a serious accommodation crisis and as a result many live in overcrowded accommodation and so finding quiet spaces to attend online lectures and study was difficult. There was also the issue of not having access to laptops and computers at home as well as the lack of broadband or internet connections to many sites and housing schemes. These issues further widened the divide between Traveller students and the majority population students. Challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis are already yielding evidence that progress to date in Traveller access to and progression in education will be regressed. Participation in Higher Education was difficult before, but COVID-19 has added another barrier and it is likely that this gap will get bigger. The danger now is that ambition to progress to third level will be reduced through lack of direct contact and encouragement from teachers for second level students.