



SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN 2022-2026

FROM: SOUTH CLUSTER SOAR PROJECT

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster of higher education institutions – Institute of Technology Carlow, Munster Technological University, University College Cork and Waterford Institute of Technology together with community partners to collaborate on devising and delivering strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The Project is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3. The SOAR Project is operationalised through five work streams including *Travellers in Education* and *Enabling Transitions* that focusses on supporting students with disabilities. The work stream groups are comprised of community partners and participating higher education institutions. This submission is made based on project learning, arising issues and discussions. It also includes recommendations from the following SOAR Project evaluation reports:

- Pavee Beoir Leaders: Traveller Women in Higher Education
- The 1916 Bursary Fund: An Evaluation of the Initiative and its Impact from the Awardee's Perspective.

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

- At all levels, the student body reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population and is supported to fully engage, participate and succeed in education.

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

- Due to the ongoing marginalisation and low participation rates; it is critical that Irish Travellers are both a specified and indeed a prioritized target group in the next National Access Plan.
- Students with disabilities must remain a target of the new NAP with particular emphasis on students with categories of disability that are most under-represented. Consideration of the intersectionality of disability and other limiting barriers such as financial, cultural, social, geographical and DEIS school attendance is also required to reflect the needs of students experiencing multiple disadvantage.

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

- Co-ordination at national and local level is required across programmes to maximise resources, impact and outcomes.
- Particular focus on progression of Travellers to and through senior cycle is required. Good practice developed under pilot NTRIS Projects should be extended and expanded.

- Working in partnership with Traveller parents is critical to raise awareness of opportunities and supports available in higher education.
- The Traveller Graduate Network developed through the SOAR Project can increase visibility and provide role models within the community and HEIs.
- Greater transparency of baseline Traveller data vis-à-vis school attendance together with community intelligence can provide more accurate data (similar to All-Ireland Traveller Health Study approach) and identify more concentrated areas of need.
- Adoption and implementation of the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill (2018), with ongoing monitoring and evaluation of same.
- Programmes and activities to be established in the basis of consultation and partnership with Traveller Advocacy Groups.
- Re-instatement of local Traveller-specific supports for parents, students and schools based on best practice models established through NTRIS pilot projects and other initiatives.
- Support for schools to engage in the Yellow Flag Programme, FE and HE sectors to also engage.
- Inclusion and diversity work place initiatives should be provided by public sector bodies and local business networks, to support senior cycle and third level Traveller students to access the workplace.
- Greater support for Travellers wishing to pursue apprenticeships is required, in particular, support in securing sponsors.
- Additional targeted outreach activities for students with disabilities at primary and secondary level, particularly in DEIS schools, is required within existing structures to enhance impact and outcomes.
- Promoting engagement with Assistive Technology Resources such as *Technology to Make Learning Easier* developed through the SOAR Project with schools, FE and other education providers.
- Adoption of UDL in schools to enhance the learning experience and outcomes for students with disabilities.
- Programmes that raise aspirations of students, teachers and parents for students with disabilities to progress to higher education.
- The significant role which mentors play in supporting Access students merits further attention in terms of consideration of ways in which HEIs can facilitate and scaffold community-based and peer-to-peer mentorship initiatives for students from specific Access target groups.

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

- Provision of flexible part-time options that are adequately funded through the fee and maintenance grant system.
- Greater financial support for broader range of programmes in FE.
- Greater financial support for students facing multiple disadvantage.
- Traveller education specific funding for Traveller Advocacy Groups is required. This funding should resource capacity within the community to engage in the necessary development work and enable collaboration with education providers.
- The impact of support programmes is impeded when restricted to short time frames, programme investment spanning a longer time frame is required for sustained impact.
- The Fund for Students with Disabilities is administration-heavy, limiting time of Access staff to support students, more streamlined processes are required.

- Part-time flexible options can provide viable pathways for students with disabilities and other access student cohorts, however part-time students do not have the same access to student support services as full-time students, appropriate resourcing is required to ensure parity of support provision to part-time students to facilitate participation and progression.
- Acknowledgement that a considerable amount of Access work with the most marginalised student cohorts has evolved in response to identified, ongoing and complex needs and requires long term funding security as part of core Access work.
- The extent and complexity of the challenges experienced by some students, as revealed by the SOAR Project's *1916 Bursary Fund: An Evaluation of the Initiative and Its Impact from the Awardees' Perspective* report, highlights an urgent need for consideration of the type and level of support being provided to Access target groups who experience multiple disadvantages.
- Consideration should be given to significantly increasing the number of PATH 2 1916 Bursary awards as the number of eligible applicants far outstrips the number of awards available.
- Initiatives to address economic disadvantage must include critical consideration of the role which Access Practitioners and Services will play in their roll out and must include adequate resourcing in this regard.

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

- Mainstreaming of dedicated Traveller education posts within Higher Education Institutions to ensure that access for Travellers is prioritised and resourced effectively.
- Enhanced data gathering at all levels is required to ensure the setting of clear and measurable targets.
- Adoption of UDL can support all students but particularly students with disabilities.
- UDL adoption must be a core goal and responsibility across all departments and levels in HEIs, integrated to multiple policies and not perceived as the responsibility only of Access Services.
- Ongoing training and support for teaching staff to adapt to/create accessible learning materials and resources in keeping with UDL best practices.
- Digital advances gained during covid-19 that enhanced the learning experience of students with disabilities, e.g. lecture capture must be mainstreamed.

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

- Investment in and advances achieved at third level require matched investment at pre-school, primary, secondary and further education levels
- Co-ordination at national and local level is required across programmes and departments to maximise resources, impact and outcomes.
- Clear targets and reporting at all levels is also required.
- Support and resourcing of schools to embrace a whole school approach to UDL and assistive technology is required.
- Initiatives such as the SOAR Project Assistive Technology (AT) Outreach programmes are building teachers and students' capacity to adopt in teaching and learning and therefore enhancing students 'transition readiness' for higher education.
- CPD opportunities should be developed on UDL, teaching research and writing skills, information literacy and assistive technology for FE staff.

- Initiatives such as Autism Friendly institutions.
- Equality, diversity and inclusion training, including Traveller-led Traveller Cultural Awareness Training; to be incorporated to all ITE training and as part of ongoing CPD for school, FE and HE staff.

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

- Streamlining of FE to HE entry routes and requirements nationally.
- Academic reading, writing and study skills programme at FE level for students to incrementally develop HE prerequisite skills.
- A review of QQI guidelines on written assignments with a view to greater alignment with third level to ease transition.
- FE and HE teaching and learning collaboration beyond level 5/6 assessment requirements to support more seamless progression and transition.

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

- Greater alignment in policy and practice between social protection and education is required to ensure return to education is a more attractive, viable and affordable option to remaining welfare-dependent.
- Community development initiatives that support personal development and capacity building can serve as a launch pad for access to further and high education. For example in Cork, the Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN) funded by the Traveller Health Unit, had engaged Traveller women in personal development and leadership development over a number of years; then linked with Adult and Continuing Education, UCC to co-create and deliver a culturally inclusive level 6 and 7 Leadership in the Community part-time programme; student fees were funded through the PATH 3 SOAR Project.
- In Cork and Kerry the Traveller Inter Agency Group education sub-committees continue to meet in an effort to co-ordinate initiatives and maximise available resources.
- Greater engagement with local community networks to leverage existing structures to support access.

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

- Low digital literacy, connectivity issues and lack of access to digital devices.
- Health and welfare concerns of the community, were of paramount importance, for many Travellers accommodation conditions exasperated this. Accommodation conditions for many were not conducive to home-schooling and remote learning.
- Concentrated efforts are required to support the full re-engagement of Travellers in the education system.
- Schools with greater use of technology were able to adapt to remote learning more seamlessly than those with limited digital infrastructure, competency and adoption. Support to upskill and equip schools to embrace technology as an everyday teaching and learning tool is required.