

Submission 3.4 National Traveller MABS

- 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.

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 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 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.

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.