Background

Founded in 1990, the Irish Traveller Movement is the national advocacy and membership platform which brings together Travellers and representative organisations to develop collective solutions on issues faced by the community to achieve greater equality for Travellers. We represent Traveller interests in national governmental, international and human rights settings. We challenge racism- individual, cultural and structural which Travellers face and promote integration and equality. We are led by our grass roots community membership, deliver expertise in shaping organisations locally and promote community leadership ensuring Traveller's voices are to the forefront of all discussions.

The Irish Traveller Movement is mandated by our membership of over 40 local Traveller groups to bring forward policy and related matters to national structures and represented on the national NTRIS Education Working Group Sub-committee coordinated under the Department of Education (DE). We are also the innovator of the Yellow Flag Programme -the school based intercultural programme.

Ongoing consultation between the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the DE, the Irish Traveller Movement and other Traveller representative groups is essential to Traveller education progression and we welcome The Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-2021 and the opportunity to submit to this consultation on the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education ('National Access Plan' 2022-2026).

In a related context we endorse the recommendation contained within the May 2020 Report "The Implications of COVID-19 for Traveller and Roma transfer to and progression within Higher Education" and seek your attention to those also.

Context

Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority confirmed by historical sources to be part of Irish society for centuries. Travellers' long shared history, cultural values, language, customs and traditions make them a self-defined group and one which is recognisable and distinct. Traveller culture and way of life, of which nomadism is an essential factor, is distinct from the settled population.

Census 2016 showed 30,987 Travellers self-identified, but a closer estimation of population is found in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, (DHLGH) last available data 2019, where 10,809 families were enumerated (between 45,397 and 57,287 people) throughout the 31 local authority areas.

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Travellers are among the most marginalised communities in Ireland. Long term exclusion, and experience of discrimination has had a detrimental effect on Traveller's life chances and outcomes across the various social indicators such as health, education, employment, and socio-economic status. Gaps in participation, progression and achievement between Travellers and their settled counterparts in education are significantly lower and show;

❑ In 2016 only 13% of Travellers versus 92% non-Travellers completed senior cycle at second level1

❑ 2019 enrolment shows a total nationally in primary and post primary education of 11,397 pupils, 4,136 girls and 4,169 boys in primary and 1,610 girls and 1,482 boys in post-primary2

❑ In 2017 only 8% of working-age Travellers compared to 73% of non-Travellers had reached leaving certificate at second level.3

❑ 57% of Traveller boys had only primary-education compared to 13% nationally4

❑ 13% of femaleTraveller females were educated to upper secondary or above compared with 69.1% of the general population5

❑ Half of Traveller children do not live in DEIS school catchment areas.

❑ Of those who left second level education early, 55% left by the age of 15.6

❑ 4 out of 10 Travellers said they or their children had been bullied in school because of their identity as Travellers7

Challenges to progression in Post Primary Education - the gateway to third level

▪ Commitments to resources in Further and Higher education for Travellers' transfer to, and progression within higher education, and recent increased funding given the lower than expected uptake under schemes in the previous 3 years, are welcome. However, retention in post primary must also be given a priority focus, and additional resources allocated to defeat early school leaving. The long called for Traveller Education Strategy across primary, post primary and higher/further education, is still anticipated, and critical to advancing those aims.

▪ To target retention and progression of Traveller and Roma students, a two-year education programme was piloted in four areas as an action in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (2017-21). It was estimated to have reached less than 8% of Traveller school going

1 CSO, Available: https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/presspages/2017/census2016profile8-irishtravellersethnicityandreligion/

2 Department of Education POD and PPOD on request.

3 A Social Portrait of Travellers in Ireland (2017), Available: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS56.pdf

4 CSO, Available: https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/presspages/2017/census2016profile8-irishtravellersethnicityandreligion/

5 Ibid

6 Behaviours & Attitudes (2017), Traveller Community National Survey. Available at: https://exchangehouse.ie/publications_nationaltravellersurvey2017.php

7 Ibid

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children. There is no indication of the continuation or further roll of these programmes beyond 2021.

▪ There has been no restoration of cuts to the Traveller-specific education supports (86-100%) in 2011, despite recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to address Ireland's obligations under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)8. Impacts from these cuts have taken more than a decade to erase, and little evidence of improvements in completion rates since then, or equivalent supports in the system towards retention.

▪ State assistance to schools for Travellers in the form of enhanced capitation grants, in 2020 was €75 per Primary pupil and €103 per pupil in Post-Primary9, in addition to the mainstream rate. However, additional support for other "in need" learners ranges from approximately €250-750 per pupil. There is no monitoring by the Department of Education of how this grant is spent by schools nor the extent to which it meets the needs of the Traveller pupil.

Other challenges include:

⬛ Department of Education policy, the Traveller Education Strategy 2006, had no associated action plan or budget and remained dormant until the actions of the NTRIS 2017 reasserted some of the aims of that plan, but progress has been slower than anticipated.

⬛ During 2020 and due to Covid-19, the NTRIS Education subcommittee convened by the DE met only twice due to the Department's demands across mainstream education. This along with digital inequities for Traveller pupils caused concern.

⬛ In 2018/2019 there were 2,916 Traveller pupils in receipt of educational support. €16.2 million was allocated to DEIS grant for schools 2020/21, only half of all Traveller pupils are in DEIS schools.

⬛ No emphasis on targeted supports or a national oversight plan in second level with the capacity to ensure the Traveller student is supported across the lifetime of their education to enhance the possibility of improving retention and attainment.

⬛ Parental experience of the education system, low literacy, education levels and lack of confidence in the system.

⬛ Lack of visibility of Traveller culture in the curriculum and in teaching practice.

⬛ Identity based bullying, and low-level expectation of schools of Traveller pupils.

⬛ Application of a Reduced Timetable for Travellers, DE guidelines have been delayed due to Covid 2020/21 priorities.

⬛ Given the change in how allocations were made in Traveller education supports in 2008, there is

a) No defined budget allocated to the area on an annual basis across the early years, pre and post primary and third level settings

b) No disaggregation of the funding to assess the total level of supports to Traveller education based on ethnic equality collection.

8 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016), Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Ireland. Available: http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRiCAqhKb7yhsv OufvUWRUJlLHiLHKqpXZxUGOtzQF0l%2B37QzAKosbh7yc40d4J3IynFaWf0Egu6J99RK6Y%2FT Hjpged5r1H3f3KQIiFieFkoeAPALAwKpbZz

9 Department of Education (2020), Capitation Grant. Available:
https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Grants-and-Additional-
Support/Capitation-Grant/

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## Third level

Significant challenges remain without adequate measures or a targeted strategy to enhance the potential for Traveller progression to third level, and address obstacles in education. In its progress review in 2018, the HEA highlighted the ability of the NAP to achieve its targets "these factors often lie beyond the control of the higher education sector, and so interventions to react to these factors may be required at an earlier phase of the education cycle."[10]

According to Census 2016, 1% of Travellers progressed to third level education with 167 qualified. However as previously mentioned, census data is an underestimate of the population and currently over 3,000 Travellers are enrolled in post primary, where an emphasis should now be placed on direct engagement in every school setting.

Traveller enrolment in third level show [11][12]

➢ 2019/20: 40 new entrants and 110 total enrolments

➢ 2017/18: 118 total enrolments, accounting for highest ever with 75 in Universities and colleges and 43 in Institutes of Technology

➢ There was an increase of 27 individuals entering higher education from 2011 to 2017

➢ 41 Travellers were participating across all programmes in all years of study in higher education over seven years.

However, while overall enrolments in higher education continue to increase to their highest levels in 2019/20, Traveller participation continues to be relatively stagnant and recognised by NAP[13].

In 2019, the total number of Traveller enrolments reported in further education and training was 1,527[14]. However, there is no data on the progression of those in FET to higher education.

## Challenges in higher education uptake

Traveller progression to third level should encompass an inspection of the wider impacting ramifications and demographics which impose additional challenges for students, including mature ones and the requirement for pre-entry work underway to support Traveller participation.

These should take account of

• gender

• intersectional consequences in terms of socio and cultural expectations

• the expectations of women and men

• the position of women traditionally as home makers, and care givers

• identity consciousnesses and potential for discriminatory experience

• lack of equivalent early education with college peers

• costs associated with attending third level to the whole family and the obstacles for mature students

10 Higher Education Authority (2018), Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021

11 Higher Education Authority (2020), Irish Travellers in Higher Education: Review of Data

12 Higher Education Authority (2019). Available at: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/Higher-Education-Authority-Key-Facts-Figures-2017-18.pdf

13 Higher Education Authority (2018), Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021

14 SOLAS (2020), FET in Numbers 2019: Traveller Community. Available at: https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/7889a5e9cc/15429_traveller_fet_report_2019_web.pdf

• the intergenerational experience of unemployment and socio-economic disadvantage, which might further deter children and parents to pursue the costs of third level, which are more than what a direct bursary scheme can offer.

Data collection: a tool in retention and remedy

The priority for data collection in education and across all state agencies and departments has been long called for by Traveller organisations and international human rights monitoring bodies.

It is noted, that the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019, and the HEA Data Plan have committed to improving data collection, and that the HEA Executive work with Traveller organisations and HEIs to consider interventions that would support all Travellers entering higher education to answer the ethnicity question in the Equal Access Survey

■ However, Traveller data collection should be broadened to incorporate models to follow the progress of Traveller learners, across all related education points, primary, post primary and third level. This should be published, and solutions activated to address were gaps are identified.

■ The ethnicity question introduced under the Department of Education POD and PPOD should be enhanced for purposes of identifying and segmenting data specific to attendance and attainment. Currently retention and enrolment data are essential but are too limited to alert and remedy essential obstacles, and there continues to be reluctance in making the information available to Traveller organisations by the DE.

It is essential that such infrastructure is urgently put in place to ensure that polices such as NAP can be properly monitored and evaluated and resources/supports allocated.

Infrastructure and resources at local level

Local community-based organisations play a significant and key role in support, outreach, development, and representation of local Traveller communities. Except for four pilot projects

funded under NTRIS from 2019-2022, local Traveller organisations have not been considered for any additional resources to address progression and retention.

▪ The NTRIS education actions have not been protected and underlined with an associated budget and National and local Traveller organisations have not been funded to advance the community development and community engagement related work, a central function to success.

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Case Study: Illustrates how PATH Stand 3 funding fails to provide resources at local level to support Traveller participation in higher education:

In 2019, a Cork based Traveller Group supported 19 local Traveller women to undertake a two-year part-time level 6/7 course in Leadership, at University College Cork. The partnership between the local organisation, the university's faculty and access office was crucial throughout the programme. However, it required significant time and resource commitments by the Group in the development and support attached, and essential to the participants engagement and success in this programme, which was without dedicated resources.

▪ Community-based Traveller groups with long standing trust, cultural competency and expertise, are without dedicated resources in the area and forced to address the unmet need arising from closure of the former Traveller Visiting Teacher Service 2011 and additional demands within after schools supports, following the cuts leveraged in schools supports in 2008. A specific and dedicated plan and resources toward retention in post primary in conjunction with Groups is needed.

Mature, part-time and post-graduate access

There are many Travellers who wish to return to higher education as mature students and are more likely to attend on a part-time basis due to life circumstances. A study of those in higher education 2021 showed almost two thirds cited financial cost as a major barrier, with job commitments and family responsibilities seen as a major barrier by half of respondents15.

▪ Measures are needed to address financial barriers for mature and part-time students by reviewing the adequacy and eligibility of the SUSI grants scheme, PATH funding initiatives and other mechanisms to omit those obstacles for prospective students and consider indirect costs such as childcare.

▪ While efforts to improve access to third level undergraduate study has improved, there are far less grant options to encourage graduates to complete post-graduate or masters level courses. These avenues should also be explored in terms of removing cost barriers.

An accessible system

The administrative process required to access higher and further education can present a substantial barrier for some Travellers. Completing multiple forms, and provision of documentation can be a daunting and it is important that these processes are made as user-friendly, uncomplicated, and flexible as possible.

▪ A commitment to using plain English, a consideration of cultural sensitivities, and avoidance of unnecessary bureaucracy should be factored into entry processes.

▪ In recognition of the higher numbers of Travellers accessing third level as mature students, adapting processes to cater for varying literacy levels should also be considered, and the availability of access officers, digital supports and study environments.

Key recommendations

Integrating Policy and Ensuring Priority

➢ Develop and implement a National Traveller Education Strategy incorporating the third level Action Plan and the NTRIS (National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy) education actions with targets, timelines and appropriate monitoring processes. This must be supported with a ring fenced and dedicated budget.

15 Higher Education Authority (2021), Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education. Available at: https://hea.ie/resources/publications/

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➢ Name Travellers as a priority target in the next National Access Plan, continue emphasis on the implementation of the National Action Plan for Travellers with a safeguarded budget.

➢ Ensure the Third Level Action Plan is widely consulted on in the Traveller sector and informed by an Advisory Group comprising all relevant national Traveller organisations, and former and current Traveller students in its design and application.

Access to Supports

➢ Review the income threshold associated with both the SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) grant and the 1916 Bursaries for Travellers, in view of the intergenerational and historic context of unemployment, and socio economy disadvantage, extend for part-time and mature students and for all registration and associated costs

➢ Increase financial supports specifically for mature and part-time students

➢ Ensure digital disadvantage is not barrier and allow for IT supports across HEIs and access for students to study areas/ and or additional needs-based supports.

Mature and Part-time Students

➢ Incorporate the recommendations of the Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education in relation to Travellers in the new National Access Plan.

Resourcing local community engagement and pre-development post primary

➢ Allocate funding for local Traveller organisations to support the development of Traveller educational progression and pre-development work to support Traveller students to be college-ready.

➢ A priority in the DE action plan should now be a targeted, time lined and actioned focus on over 3,000 Travellers enrolled in post primary and on direct engagement in every school setting.

➢ Expand resources beyond the 50% of Travellers in DEIS schools in a targeted approach across other schools.

➢ Establish an advisory group of Post Primary Guidance Counsellors established with the DE and HEA as a partner, and HEIs to inform an action plan to create pathways to college form second level.

➢ For the HEA to create Traveller third level advisory committees in each county comprising Travellers and Traveller representative groups, third level representatives including access officers, and post primary teachers and ensure engagement of colleges located in those territories.

➢ Engagement with the Employers Sector, HEI's and led by the DE and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to implement a communications programme for Traveller parents on the benefits of third level, and for employers on equal access for Travellers, including the State Employment Services and the Public Service Employer.

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Data collection

➢ Introduce a universal ethnic identifier across all education bodies and institutions to collate data on Travellers in further and higher education, to track their progression and ensure allocation of resources follows the Traveller student.

➢ Expand the POP and PPOD to collect data on attainment and retention.

➢ Ensure data connection across associated education points and cooperation between the DE and the HEA towards a targeted action plan, targeting Traveller pupils post primary and from TY to Leaving Cert.

➢ Fully Implement the HEA's Data Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education published in 2017

Higher Education Institutions (HEI'S)

➢ All HEI institutions in partnership with Traveller and Roma organisations, should develop, implement and monitor a Traveller Action Plan for their institutions with specific targets, timeframes and resources.

➢ A communications plan could be initiated to improve Traveller awareness and accessing college grants/ schemes and courses.

➢ Include Travellers as role models in higher education via mentoring programmes for students in second-level and further education.

➢ Ensure staff of HEIs SUSI receive anti-racism and Traveller cultural competency training.

➢ The student assistance fund, Access Office / Officer should be visible and available for Traveller learners, and any learning support needs where required.

➢ Ensure Traveller identify is positively visible and part of school infrastructure and within narrative learning modules.

➢ Support a Traveller Graduate Network that can increase visibility and provide role models within the Traveller community and Higher Education Institutions.

➢ HEI's should commit to ensuring their application and administrative processes are fully accessible, culturally appropriate, and do not act as a barrier to students who may have literacy issues.