



PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLER AND ROMA CENTRE

**Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Further
and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science**

**Session on Traveller Education, with reference to Inequality, Digital Divide and
the Impact of Reduced Timetables**

June 2021

Introduction

I would like to thank you, on behalf of Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, which welcomes the opportunity to present to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Traveller Education, with reference to Inequality, Digital Divide and the Impact of Reduced Timetables. Pavee Point is a national non-governmental organization which promotes the realisation of human rights and equality for Travellers and Roma in Ireland. From our start in 1985, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre has given central importance to pursuing full and equal participation for Travellers throughout the education system. This was and is based on our understanding of education's key importance for human dignity and rights. Our work more recently expanded to include Roma. Now in the field of education, we are firmly committed to the system change which is essential to ensure what the Department of Education and Science (DES) states as its central policy aim:

"...the meaningful participation and highest attainment of the Traveller child so that, in common with the children of the nation, he or she may live a full life as a child and realize his or her full potential as a unique individual, proud of and affirmed in his or her identity as a Traveller and a citizen of Ireland..." (DES, 2002, Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools, p.5)

The system change which Pavee Point believes essential, needs to be reflected as a key component of the National Strategy on Traveller Education promised in the Programme for Government. This Strategy, covering all education levels and identified issues, needs to be developed in association with Traveller organisations, to have clear targets, timelines and resources, and to continue to be monitored and implemented in partnership with Traveller organisations.

Background Information

According to enrolment figures, Travellers transfer from primary school into the secondary school and then begin dropping out in later years. Across the first three years of the secondary cycle about 74% of Travellers aged 12-15 years are enrolled. The dramatic drop is at point of transfer to Senior Cycle, in which about 30% of Travellers aged 16-19 years are enrolled.

Since 2007/08 the Higher Education Authority has conducted an Equal Access Survey of each cohort of new entrants, tracking enrolments from marginal populations including Travellers. In 2015 it published a National Equity of Access Plan 2015-2021, amplified in the Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Education 2019-2021. The targeted numbers for increasing Traveller participation have had some modest success and been a useful tool in the promotion of Traveller education and ambition. Such targets and associated special measures are needed at all educational levels.

Further Education and Training Participation

FET participation in 2019-20 included 1,527 Travellers and 431 Roma.

- Over 40% were in adult literacy groups or in Youthreach.
- Almost 60% were under 25 years of age;
- 43% were men, 57% women.
- Of those enrolled, 88% partially or fully completed a course in 2019, and 60% of those who completed a certified course achieved certification.

Travellers comprise 0.6% to 1% of Irish society but 0.1% of new entrants to third level institutions (HEA, 2017). Disaggregated data is essential to track baseline information and progress in achieving targets and objectives but it's important to understand that there are real people behind these figures.

My Education Experience

I am one of the 110 students enrolled in universities according to the HEA 2019/2020 data. I myself was an early school leaver. I left school after primary school due to isolation, exclusion, and marginalization. After a few days' absence, I was asked what was the point in me coming back as I'd never amount to anything. I felt crushed. I went back to third level education as a mature student and successfully completed my degree in May this year with a first-class honours degree despite the challenges and barriers that COVID-19 created on top of the challenges and barriers that pre-exist before COVID-19.

The Digital Divide and Reduced Timetables

Our previous submission to the Committee discussed a number of concerns for Travellers in education. These have been further exacerbated by the conditions created by COVID-19. These concerns include the inequalities associated with marginalization and discrimination that have always existed (Pre COVID-19) for Traveller students across every level of the education system. The reality of ongoing prejudice, racism, and discrimination against Travellers, including within the education system, should not be ignored or underestimated. Unconscious bias, an important issue which needs to be addressed for a variety of discriminations, needs to be understood as potentially masking real underlying racism and its effects, and the indirect discrimination described in our equality legislation. This is of particular concern now for Traveller students completing examinations including the leaving cert.

Digital Divide and COVID-19

Another concerning issue is the implications associated with remote learning and the differential impacts of the digital divide which COVID-19 has exposed. This is presenting as an issue for Travellers in terms of access and participation in primary, post primary and higher-level education. These concerns were particularly highlighted in the National Education Forums Pavee Point organised in association NTWF to examine education implications of COVID-19 for Travellers and Roma. This year's forum report which indicates that the issues continue and can have long term consequences is imminent soon.

Traveller students were particularly left at an extreme disadvantage given the issue of access to IT facilities, high costs of broadband, lack of access to devices, resources, books, libraries, and private quiet spaces to study. Lack of broadband is a serious concern for

those living on halting sites and it may have had an impact on the ability of some to register for the predicted grade process for the Leaving Cert. Online learning presents its own difficulties including for Traveller and Roma parents without relevant language or literacy skills. It also holds the possibility of missing lectures due to bad Wi-Fi, inability to ask questions and difficulties with engagement.

Many Travellers and Roma who do make it to third level find it difficult to navigate the system and to access the information they need, as many third level students felt they were not getting enough information to support them. e.g. navigating the CAO process or Susi application process. This has been exacerbated by distance/virtual education and the changing dynamic of the supports in place because of COVID-19. It can also be difficult for students to access learning materials and to do assessments. Much support is needed. Traveller students generally find it difficult to access quiet, private space at home for study largely due to overcrowding and poor living conditions. There is a lack of access to community facilities with space and internet connectivity as most are closed during the crisis.

In addition to the issues associated with the digital divide, there are potentially thousands of Traveller and Roma children around the country currently receiving little or no education, with no access to proper IT facilities and parents facing challenges in offering support given their own education experiences. Access to SUSI supports was difficult for students living in trailers or caravans as they are required to submit supporting documentation in relation to proof of address and the grant system doesn't accept "no fixed abode" as an answer.

Reduced Timetables

Another serious concern that has been widely raised, is regarding the use of Reduced Timetables (effectively a form of reduced attendance) for a number of Traveller children at primary and secondary levels. Pavee Point carried out a Traveller Baseline Needs Assessment in Clare, which highlights the use of these timetables as a key issue impacting the education of Traveller children. Traveller parents highlight the use of these timetables as disruptive to the delivery of high-quality education to their children. Pavee Point believes this practice serves to reinforce unequal educational outcomes experienced by Traveller children. School is often the first place that Traveller children are made to feel different – and different in a bad way. The guidelines on reduced timetables which need

to include clear conditions for their use, with Travellers and other groups, are urgently required.

Overall conclusion

We have an education crisis as this year's Forum discussions underlined, but Traveller education ambition remains strong. I myself am proud to be part of that and I hope to play my part in supporting it for others. We have capacity and we can succeed but we need resources and measures to create conditions to make that possible.

I call on you to support the following:

- The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill, as a means of acknowledging Traveller culture and identity, and as a first essential step towards appropriate inclusion of all who are part of Ireland now, in the curriculum.
- Immediate development of the National Traveller Education Strategy as a means to acknowledge and address the deep-seated marginalisation, disadvantage, and discrimination experienced by Travellers and Roma in the education system, which pre-existed the COVID-19 pandemic but has been further exacerbated by it,
- Provision of an immediate timeline for the development of the strategy, implement it with resources, targets, timelines and appropriate monitoring processes.
- Development and implementation of a disaggregated data collection system with an ethnic identifier across all elements of the education system. Using this disaggregated data, develop a clear framework to monitor and evaluate access, special measures, retention, progress, outputs and outcomes across all relevant student cohorts, at all levels of the education system.
- The Department of Education to undertake as a matter of urgency an assessment of the extent of non-return to school among Traveller and Roma children since the schools re-opened.
- The Department of Education to monitor through the Inspectorate the implementation of new guidance and measures including COVID-19 related measures and their impact on Traveller and Roma learners.
- The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority to ensure the explicit inclusion of Travellers and Roma in the upcoming Equity of Access Plan, with targeted resources to ensure their inclusion and to continue targeted funding to support Traveller participation.

- The Higher Education Authority to immediately institute a comprehensive monitoring process to assess the implementation of third level changes in resources, entry, participation, and assessment, including their impact on Traveller and Roma students.
- All schools, colleges, and all other educational institutions, in partnership with Traveller and Roma organisations, to develop, implement, and monitor a Traveller and Roma Action Plan for their institutions with specific targets, timeframes and resources.
- That all relevant intersecting and crosscutting policies and state initiatives are effectively inclusive of Travellers and Roma in their development, implementation, monitoring and associated resources (e.g., National Strategy for Women and Girls, The Children's Guarantee and Recovery and Resilience Plans).



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**Pavee Point Submission to the Joint Committee on
Education, Further and Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science
on the issue of Traveller Education with reference to
Inequality; the Digital Divide and the Impact of
Reduced Timetables**

June 2021

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Introduction

Pavee Point welcome the opportunity to present to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the issue of Traveller Education with reference to Inequality; the Digital Divide and the Impact of Reduced Timetables. This submission follows on from the 2019 submission to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills, which focused on broader education issues for Travellers.

- 1.1 From our start (as DTEDG) in 1985, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre has given central importance to pursuing full and equal participation for Travellers throughout the education system. This was and is based on our understanding of education's key importance for human dignity and rights. Our work more recently expanded to include Roma, and was significantly enhanced through the services of an education worker, made possible until 2017 by a philanthropic organisation grant.
- 1.2 In its *Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools* (2002, p.5), the Department of Education and Science (DES) states its central policy aim:
... the meaningful participation and highest attainment of the Traveller child so that, in common with the children of the nation, he or she may live a full life as a child and realise his or her full potential as a unique individual, proud of and affirmed in his or her identity as a Traveller and a citizen of Ireland....
- 1.3 We understand that this committee session is concerned with Traveller Education with reference to Inequality; the Digital Divide and the Impact of Reduced Timetables. However, our submission reflects again our concern that any process in education requires backup from first, second and third level high quality foundations.
- 1.4 Progress in any education arena requires solid foundations in high-quality early years and primary programmes, solidly embedded in a partnership between Travellers and Traveller organisations, and the education providers.
- 1.5 Pavee Point welcomes your current concern about Traveller Education with reference to Inequality, a concern also reflected in the Programme for Government (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020). We note the need to take into consideration the reinforcement of Travellers' education inequalities by Covid, already recognized by your focus on the digital divide.
- 1.6 We recognise the progress that was made when earlier education supports for Travellers (visiting teachers and in-school learning supports) were in place in schools. Now a new form of supports is required, that is firmly rooted in the Traveller community.
- 1.7 Framing our points outlined below, we have three overarching recommendations, which we believe to be essential for creating conditions to address Traveller education issues overall, including those to which you seek responses:
 - a) In line with the commitment in the Programme for Government (Department of the Taoiseach, 2020), develop and implement a National Traveller Education Strategy building on the Higher Education Action Plan, incorporating the National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy (NTRIS) (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017), to set education actions with targets, timelines and appropriate monitoring processes.
 - b) Ongoing mandatory education of all education personnel, including policy makers, on anti-bias, interculturalism, structural discrimination and racism (sometimes unconscious, indirect, and a reflection of wider structural issues)
 - c) Direct engagement with Traveller organisations as equal and key partners in Traveller rights to ownership of and engagement with the education system at all levels, to be effective education partners and to maximise the benefits, societal and personal, they can achieve from that engagement. In order to achieve this ownership and engagement,
 - i. bridges must be built between Traveller community organisations and the formal

and informal, institutional and community-based education systems (i.e., schools, colleges, youth work projects, adult education, further and higher education structures);

- ii. strategies such as Reduced Timetables and home education, increasingly used in relation to Traveller pupils, need to offer high-quality education programmes with pathways back to full provision, and be stringently monitored and evaluated. The promised guidelines in this regard are still awaited
- 1.8 Below, we briefly outline our key points. These and other related issues are discussed extensively in the NTRIS (2017) and in Pavee Point's Civil Monitor Reports on that Strategy, prepared for the European Commission, DG Justice and Consumers. Most recently they were discussed both in the 2020 Forum (Report, Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women's Forum 2020) and in the 2021 Forum (Report forthcoming), on the implications of Covid for Traveller Education.
- 1.9 The bulk of points in this submission relate to data on Travellers in education. Reports on Roma in Early Learning and Care (ELC) provision (Pobal, 2021) and in Further Education and Training (SOLAS, 2020a), are as yet the only official data on Roma in education in Ireland, but information from Roma in Pavee Point and from the National Roma Needs Survey as well as from other involved agencies indicate that their situation urgently requires attention and response.

2: Key Issues: Early Years to Second-level education

- 2.1 The issues identified below and recommendations made to address them need to be read and understood in the light of the fact that Travellers' experience of school is often one of discrimination and marginalisation, as documented in numerous research investigations, including reports by Pavee Point on many occasions.
- 2.2 All Travellers in the early years and primary school age bands are enrolled in ELC centres, primary schools, and the first years of postprimary schools, as outlined in the data below. However, it needs to be noted that at any education level, enrolment is not an indicator of attendance or outcomes.

Early Years

- 2.3 The most recent Census (2016) recorded 5,199 Irish Traveller Children aged 0–6 years. Pobal (2021) reports that in 2019, 2,831 Traveller children were enrolled in ELC services (=1.5% of total enrolments, and approx. the total number of Travellers aged 3-6 years).
- 2.4 In 2019, 681 Roma children (=0.4% of total early years enrolments) were enrolled in ELC services (Pobal 2021).

Primary School

- 2.5 In the 2018/2019 school year, 8,305 Travellers aged 4-12 years were enrolled in primary schools (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA], 2020). They constituted 1.5% of the total primary-level enrolments. The number enrolled exceeded the numbers in that age range recorded in Census 2016, suggesting that Traveller parents self-declared their children's Traveller identity at point of first enrolment.

Postprimary School

- 2.6 DCYA (2020) data indicate that currently, all Travellers transfer from primary school into Junior Cycle. However, they progressively drop out in later years, so across the three years of this Cycle about 74% of Travellers aged 12-15 years are enrolled. The dramatic drop is at point of transfer to Senior Cycle, in which about 30% of Travellers aged 16-19 years are enrolled. On the other hand, transition numbers post-Junior Cycle are rising:
- Transition Year has often been cited as a block for Travellers, on the ground that they didn't see the point of it. However, enrolment in that year rose from 51 in 2009, to 128 in 2018.

- Total Senior Cycle enrolment rose from 405 in 2009, to 704 in 2018.
 - Of the three Leaving Certificate programmes (“established”/traditional, Vocational, and Applied), the greatest enrolment growth is for the established Leaving Certificate, followed by the Vocational programme. Numbers opting for the Applied programme are declining (DCYA, 2020).
- 2.7 The Visiting Teachers for Travellers service is credited with driving this enrolment growth. However, it and a Traveller-targeted scheme of additional teaching hours for second-level schools were terminated in 2011; Travellers’ support needs were to be absorbed by the general educational support services. In the years immediately following termination of those services that growth regressed or stalled. DES data (2017a) show that by 2015, a 4% recovery had occurred and 51% of Travellers aged 12-18+ were enrolled in second-level schools. However, the age range was wide, from up to 91% of those aged 15 years, and down to 25% of 17/18-year-olds. The gap remains wide (DCYA, 2020).

Traveller enrolments in DEIS/Non-DEIS Schools

- 2.8 In 2011, 55.2% of enrolled Travellers were in DEIS Schools and 50.6% in non-DEIS Schools. By 2018, 49.4% of enrolled Travellers were in DEIS Schools and 44.8% in non-DEIS schools (DCYA, 2020).

Attendance and attainment across the school sectors

- 2.9 In 2005, attendance rates among Traveller students averaged under 50% (DES, 2005). However, with the adoption of inclusion policy as then understood, data on Travellers were absorbed under mainstream headings, and it became impossible to track their attendance levels. TUSLA Education Support Service (Millar, 2012) remarked that absorbing this data resulted in slightly higher overall absenteeism rates for schools.
- 2.10 An ethnicity question has been introduced in the initial enrolment application form, for purposes of identifying support needs, but data is not disaggregated in published attendance and attainment reports.
- 2.11 In the Education Research Centre’s first evaluation of the DEIS scheme (2011) the authors note that Traveller pupils’ test scores “were significantly below those of non-Travellers at every grade level in both reading and mathematics, and the magnitude of the difference between the scores of the two groups is large in every case” (Weir et al. 2011, p.45). In their 2017 review, this disaggregation was not done (Kavanagh et al., 2017). Poor attendance, absence of specific learning supports, and weak engagement between schools and Traveller communities are deemed to be causal factors (NTRIS 2017).
- 2.12 NTRIS actions are intended to improve Traveller and Roma school attendance, participation and engagement. Disaggregated data (designed in the light of GDPR regulations) are needed to identify how such initiatives have worked to date.

Reduced Timetables

- 2.13 Another serious concern that has been widely raised, regards the use of Reduced Timetables (effectively a form of reduced attendance) with a number of Traveller children at primary and secondary levels, as highlighted by Pavee Point’s Traveller Baseline Needs Assessment in Clare (2019). Traveller parents highlight the use of Reduced Timetables as disruptive to the delivery of high-quality education to their children. Pavee Point believes this practice serves to reinforce unequal educational outcomes experienced by Traveller children. School is often the first place Traveller children are made to feel different – and different in a bad way.
- 2.14 Pavee Point are concerned that there is still a significant use of Reduced Timetables, particularly at post-primary level, where there is a lack of available learning supports for students, or as a disciplinary method.
- 2.15 On foot of NTRIS, the DES conducted a consultation on the development of guidelines for the

use of Reduced Timetables, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures the Department of Education has decided to wait until September 2021 to issue the guidelines.

Ethnicity, Curricula, and bullying

- 2.16 NTRIS notes that Travellers report widespread racist bullying in schools and its occurrence is very commonly absorbed into general anti-bullying policies – possibly reducing its gravity to that of interpersonal hostility.
- 2.17 The forthcoming NTRIS report on research into anti-Traveller bullying needs to tackle this issue head on, with clear recommendations and guidelines, discussed in advance with Traveller organisations. Racist bullying cannot be tolerated, but it must be recognised that racism in schools goes beyond bullying and requires system-wide action.
- 2.18 Traveller history and culture get little attention. These areas are included in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Intercultural Guidelines for primary (2005) and second level (2006) schools, but this does not translate into classroom practice.
- 2.19 The *Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill* was introduced to the Seanad in 2018; we understand it will be before the Houses of the Oireachtas on this Thursday: it is an important first step which requires your support. At the moment it is arguable that the value of respect for cultural identity takes second place to the value of social and economic inclusion. Both are essential. Inclusion of Travellers in this way in the curriculum should lead the way for inclusion of the further diversity that is part of Ireland now.

Professional development

- 2.20 In current pre-service and ongoing professional development programmes for teachers, treatments of interculturalism and anti-racism levels are inadequate. These areas are not mentioned in teacher education policies; and initiatives such as modules produced by Pavee Point's education service are far from adequate to meet the needs in contemporary Irish education. Add-on modules, however excellent, cannot be as effective as a coherent programme, informed throughout by human rights principles in promoting all forms of diversity and bias.
- 2.21 If teacher education is to be effective in these areas, teacher education institutions need to be visibly informed by interculturalism and anti-racism, including explicit focus on Travellers.
- 2.22 Initial and ongoing professional education levels for all engaged in education delivery should be deeply informed by interculturalism and anti-racism principles, and include mandatory modules that explicitly include Travellers and Roma.
- 2.23 School inspections and other monitoring and accountability systems need to include assessment of the school's interculturalism and anti-racism policies, curricula, and practice.

3: Key issues: Further and Higher Education

- 3.1 Travellers comprise 0.6% to 1% of Irish society, but 0.05% of enrolments in higher education institutions in 2018 were Travellers (HEA 2018, 2018 online). In 2019, approximately 1.5% of further education participants were Travellers (SOLAS 2020a, 2020b).
- 3.2 According to the 2016 Census, 4.6% of Travellers aged 15 years and over who had finished their education (13,331 persons) had completed some form of post-second level education: 2.1% (157 women, 118 men) had completed undefined technical/vocational programmes; 1.3% (101 women, 67 men) held advanced/higher certificates/completed apprenticeships; and another 1.3% (105 women and 62 men) held a degree or professional qualification. 10.2% of women and 9.9% of men registered as still in education. Most were in the younger age groups, and women strongly outnumbered men at all levels.
- 3.3 Traveller women and girls are more likely to engage with education provision, and this gender imbalance grows with each successive stage in education uptake, though it is somewhat less in vocational and trade areas.

- 3.4 The gap separating Traveller society and all post-school formal education sectors is narrowing but is still dramatically wide. Eliminating this gap will take strong commitment by institutions and Traveller community organisations.
- 3.5 The educational transition pathway for many Travellers who are early school leavers is via programmes such as YouthReach and other youth and community initiatives. Experience on these, and outcomes such as certification seem to be of varied quality, and routes onwards to advanced further education or higher education are unclear.
- 3.6 For many Travellers, their life commitments strongly influence the age at which they can engage in further and higher education. Marriage and child-rearing are engaged in at a younger age than in the majority population, and many Travellers are free to look again at their life options in their thirties: access routes for mature students are extremely important for them.
- 3.7 Community education, further and higher education systems need to coordinate their programmes, so that progression pathways are coherent and clear, and there is evident flexibility within and across pathways and programmes.
- 3.8 The distance between the Traveller community and post-school provision is wide, and coherent linkages between Traveller organisations and third level policy, planning and provision would open this sector to potential Traveller students.

Further Education and Training, and Higher Education participation rates

- 3.9 SOLAS (2021) reports that 1,527 Travellers and 431 Roma were enrolled in FET courses in 2019.
 - Over 40% were in adult literacy groups or in youth reach.
 - Almost 60% were under 25 years of age;
 - 43% were men, 57% women.
 - Of those enrolled, 88% partially or fully completed a course in 2019, and 60 % of those who completed a certified course achieved certification.
- 3.10 The HEA (2020) reports that though Traveller enrolment numbers in higher education are still minimal, there has been a significant increase from 2011 to 2019:
 - 1st year new entrants up from 23 in 2011/12 to 43 in 2019/20. HEA first-time enrolment goal for the current Action plan is 80 Travellers.
 - Enrolments in later course years, up from 54 in 2011/12 54, to 62 in 2019/20/
 - Total enrolments up from 77 in 2011/12 77, to 110 in 2019/20. (HEA, 2020).
- 3.11 The driver of this growth lies in system policy. Since 2007/08 the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has conducted Equal Access Surveys of each cohort of new entrants, tracking enrolments from marginal population including Travellers. In 2015 it published a National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019 (extended to 2021 following the HEA Progress Review, 2018). This Plan includes direct targets for Traveller participation, and these are amplified in the DES Access Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation 2019–2021. A further Equity of Access Plan is now being developed.
- 3.12 The targets set for Traveller participation in the Equity of Access 2015-2021 were very low but the setting of targets and the associated special measures, including the additional funding made available through Dormant Accounts to support Travellers in higher education, have had useful effects on the promotion of access. Traveller education ambitions remain high (Forum Reports, 2020 and 2021) and these measures in particular given the difficulties caused by Covid need to be intensified and further developed.
- 3.13 Travellers are a named target group in the HEA National Action Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015): it set a target to increase the number of Traveller new entrants from 35 in 2012/13 to 80 by 2021; however, the increase achieved by 2016/17 has been from 35 to

41. The HEA aims to intensify its efforts in order to double this number by 2021.
- 3.14 Like SOLAS, the HEA also highlights the need for better data to track progress by Travellers in higher education. It mentions the challenge posted to collecting adequate data, by the fact that self-identification is the only means for gathering such data.
- 3.15 Travellers have centuries-long good cause to consider hiding their identity from public institutions. A strongly positive, an ethos and programmes visibly informed by strong human rights, antiracist and intercultural principles should encourage self-identification. And, whether or not Traveller self-identify, this ethos is necessary to educate everyone about everyone, including Travellers.
- 3.16 The funded Path Programmes to support implementation of the HEA Plan need to be extended and explored in collaboration with Traveller organisations, to ensure that relevant support strategies are developed and are clearly communicated, so that they effectively increase Traveller participation in higher education.
- 3.17 The Strategy mentions an issue already noted in this submission: the need for a data infrastructure to accurately track learner pathways. It also notes the need to consult employers regarding the effectiveness and relevance of its programmes.
- 3.18 As noted above, almost all Travellers who have completed higher education courses had pursued courses in community or further education and training sectors. The attraction of this sector is a significant positive. Traditionally, Travellers earned a livelihood through trades, and the possibility of following applied courses to the highest levels seems a productive pathway to develop in collaboration with Traveller organisations.

It will benefit both Further and Higher Education sectors, and Travellers as education partners, to ensure that further and higher education are perceived in principle and in practice as a coherent, complementary and well-functioning part of the Irish education framework.

The Digital Divide

- 4.1 Covid 19 has exposed and reinforced Traveller education inequality at all levels. In this respect, the ongoing implications of Reduced Timetables and the reinforced implications of the digital divide are particularly relevant.
- 4.2 The digital divide has been a major issue throughout the pandemic along with the school closures: these have deepened educational disadvantage for Travellers. The move to online learning is very challenging Traveller families and for parents trying to get their children to stay in school. Traveller families were impacted with many issues e.g. communication with schools, a lack of access to supports and resources, and lack of study spaces. These concerns were raised by Travellers and Local Traveller organisations at the education Forums organised by Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women's Forum in 2020 and 2021. The Forums also highlighted a number of associated challenges and barriers that pre-dated Covid but became worse during that crisis.
- 4..3 When learning went online many Traveller children lost out due to not having access to WIFI or the equipment for online learning. Many Traveller parents were early school leavers with low literacy levels. Lacking IT equipment to keep in touch with schools and colleges, students were unable to submit their work.
- 4.4 A number of Travellers are living in areas without proper electricity or with poor or no broadband.
- 4.5 In 2021 the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) announced the roll out of £300,000 in funding to support Traveller students' progress to and remaining in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

1. In line with the commitment in the Programme for Government, develop and implement a National Traveller Education Strategy building on the Third Level Action Plan, incorporating the NTRIS education actions with targets, timelines and appropriate monitoring processes.
2. Undertake targeted action to address low transition rates from Junior to Senior Cycle, and Senior Cycle enrolment and completion rates. Similar challenges attend progressing Traveller enrolments and completion rates in third-level provision.
3. Disaggregated attendance and attainment data must be collected and made available (in ways that meet GDPR requirements), to permit tracking, analysis and development of appropriate teaching and learning programmes, skills and resources.
4. Bridges must be built between Traveller community organisations and the formal and informal, institutional and community-based education systems (i.e., schools, colleges, youth work projects, adult education, further and higher education structures).
5. All education providers, from central policy to local practice levels, must undertake training in interculturalism and anti-racism, which includes explicit focus on Travellers and Roma in Irish society.
6. All education institutions must be visibly welcoming of diversity, and resourced confront bias, and to engage positively with the potential of this diversity for learners and for Irish society.
7. Accountability systems such as schools inspections must incorporate evaluation of schools' effectiveness in connecting with Traveller and Roma students' communities and community organisations, ensuring equity of access and participation in an inclusive ethos, and delivering an intercultural curriculum.
8. Engagement with Traveller organisations and communities is essential to promoting continuation in education through Senior Cycle and on to further and higher education.
9. Successes in further and higher education equal access strategies must be resourced to enable successful participation and outcomes for Travellers to become the norm rather than the exception. Resources need to include access to education grants for all Traveller students.
10. The potential for progression through FET, shown by the existing level of Traveller participation, should be built on by opening up pathways through high-quality certified programmes in this domain.
11. Particular resources need to be made available for mature students in both further and higher education, given the intergenerational marginalisation and disadvantage experienced by the Traveller community.
12. The HEA must ensure that the next Equity of Access Plan includes Roma as well as Travellers.

Addressing the issue of Reduced Timetables

13. The use of Reduced Timetables must be strictly monitored and the underlying issues explored with all education partners, with particular attention given to engaging with Traveller organisations.
14. The promised guidelines on Reduced Timetables need to address the possibility of bias and discrimination towards Travellers. The guidelines must be made promptly available and their implementation closely monitored.
15. Again, this practice and the underlying issues must be explored with all the education partners, with particular attention being given to engaging with Traveller organisations.

Addressing the Digital divide

16. A cross-Departmental approach is required to ensure that national rollout of broadband specifically targets and includes all Traveller accommodation locations, including unofficial.

17. Develop responses in collaboration with Traveller organisations, national and local, and dialogue with them on an ongoing basis.
18. Public Libraries, Local Development Companies, community halls/resource centres and other public spaces should provide safe spaces for Traveller and Roma students to study and have access to Wi-Fi and devices.
19. DFHERIS, along with institutions at primary, post primary, and Higher and Further Education levels, must put in place easy-to-use distance learning tools and ensure that any technologies used aren't excluding Traveller and Roma learners.
20. Develop targeted outreach services from early years centres, schools, colleges and other education institutions to Traveller and Roma organisations, and to Traveller and Roma learners and their families, to keep them connected and provide necessary supports.
21. Continue and enhance the dedicated supports for primary and second level shared between schools/ regionally, to address additional needs arising from the COVID-19 crisis.
22. The next tranche of ICT grants should have a ring-fenced portion to ensure the needs of Traveller and Roma students are met.

Closing comment

Fundamental to creating the conditions for full participation in all formal education provision is the health and welfare of the community. Traveller and Roma accommodation, health and employment needs are well documented, and urgently need to be addressed.

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