

The Implications of COVID-19 for Traveller and Roma transfer to and progression within Higher Education



PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLER AND ROMA CENTRE



NATIONAL FORUM

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Report

CONTENTS

Contents	1
Introduction	2
Proposals for areas of immediate action	3
<i>Dept Education and Skills and Higher Education Authority</i>	3
<i>Higher Education Institutions</i>	4
<i>Over the next six months</i>	4
Opening Plenary	5
<i>Maria Joyce – Coordinator, National Traveller Women’s Forum</i>	5
<i>Enda Hughes - Head of Equity of Access, Higher Education Section - Department of Education and Skills</i>	5
<i>Caitriona Ryan – Head of Access Policy – Higher Education Authority</i>	6
<i>Anastasia Crickley – Chairperson Pavee Point</i>	7
What has worked well	8
Key Issues and Recommendations	9
<i>Traveller and Roma Educational Disadvantage</i>	9
<i>A lost generation?</i>	9
<i>Family support</i>	10
<i>Access to IT facilities, resources and study spaces</i>	11
<i>Poverty, social exclusion and financial barriers</i>	12
<i>Third level mentoring, support and information</i>	12
<i>Building confidence, supporting Traveller and Roma identity</i>	13
<i>Traveller and Roma organisations and community supports</i>	14
<i>Immediate COVID-19 supports</i>	14
<i>Employment options for Traveller and Roma</i>	15
<i>Mental health, stress and isolation</i>	15
<i>Monitoring</i>	15
Closing Remarks	17

INTRODUCTION

The Forum was organised by Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre and the National Traveller Women's Forum, in response to urgent COVID-19 concerns being expressed by Traveller and Roma students and parents and adult learners hoping to continue or commence third level education in Sept 2020. It consisted of opening and closing plenaries and six facilitated breakout sessions which provided opportunities for all to express their views.

More than fifty participants from all over the country participated in the Forum. They welcomed the opportunity it provided for Traveller students, prospective students and graduates as well as Travellers and Roma from local organisations active in education work to speak directly with Dept Education and Skills (DES) and Higher Education Authority (HEA) representatives regarding their concerns at this time. Aside from opening remarks colleagues from DES and HEA adopted a listening mode as did the small number present from other agencies, national organisations and third level access offices.

Participants acknowledged existing and current supports and initiatives and their positive outcomes for Traveller and Roma students and learners at all levels as well as the need for ongoing engagement with them. This report, reflecting its title and objectives is mainly concerned however with issues and possible responses to them.

The objectives of the Forum were to:

- Provide a space for current and prospective Traveller and Roma third level students, including mature students and graduates, parents or supporters, and Traveller organisations to share COVID-19-related impacts on their study, learning and progression.

- Discuss differences in those experiences including for young and older women, people parenting alone and students with learning difficulties.
- Provide a space for assuring Traveller and Roma students and their parents of the ongoing commitment of the DES and the HEA to continued support for access to and progression in third level education.
- Inform relevant, immediate and medium-term responses to Traveller and Roma students' current, upcoming and longer-term COVID-19-related needs and issues by DES, HEA and colleges.

In addition to the issues the Forum set out to discuss, and reflecting somewhat the uniqueness of the opportunity to discuss current education concerns, a number of associated overarching themes emerged which form important pre-conditions or part of, for transfer to and progression in third level, and improved outcomes from education overall.

These included that:

- Traveller experience of education disadvantage and discrimination pre-dates COVID-19.
- Transfer to third level education cannot be disaggregated from transfer to and progression within second level education, and the conditions which facilitate or impede this. What happens at other education levels cannot be ignored.
- The special measures necessary for integrated fully equal education for Traveller and Roma at all levels, including a national strategy which builds on and extends the third level plan, remain outstanding.

The concerns raised at the Forum with regard to these themes are therefore included alongside other concerns in the conclusions and recommendations which follow a brief overview of the plenaries.

PROPOSALS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

These proposals for areas of immediate action are drawn from issues and suggestions by Forum participants.

There is an immediate need to reinforce, extend and target efforts already being made to mitigate the acknowledged increased education disadvantage caused by COVID-19 including for Travellers and Roma in or progressing to third level education. Given the increasingly short window as one education year formally ends and the next is set to begin, the following proposals for immediate action are made, drawing on issues and recommendations by Forum participants and in the light of other initiatives and emerging guidance.

Reflecting the integrated nature of the discussion they cover a spectrum of education levels and associated dimensions. The list is also initial and will be added to in the light of emerging official and other guidance and communications.

Department Education and Skills and Higher Education Authority

- Assess the immediate implications of the Leaving Cert predicted grades process for prospective Traveller and Roma students and support and promote special measures to alleviate any associated negative consequences for third level progression.
- Acknowledge the direct and indirect negative implications of COVID-19 for Traveller students transfer to and progression in third level education including their financial capacity and move immediately to make additional targeted financial supports available to them in Sept 2020. Given the numbers involved already and possibly transferring the costs involved are not high and are offset by longer term economic contributions in a community with a current unemployment rate of 85%.
- Provide immediate resources to access offices in particular also other student services to cover the essential extra supports required overall (some listed below) to immediately and over the coming period mitigate the effects of COVID-19 for Traveller and Roma students.
- Move to ensure that all funding available through SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland), the 1916 Bursaries and other mechanisms is extended to cover part-time and mature students as well as all registration and associated costs - many prospective Traveller students are mature and are applicants for part-time routes.
- Provide a higher education specific IT Fund for the groups targeted by the National Access Plan (NAP), prioritise Traveller access to additional IT equipment made available as a result of the COVID crisis and provide disaggregated data on the allocation of the equipment.
- Establish an immediate baseline incorporating the Action Plan for increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education, and regularly update this with disaggregated data on Traveller and Roma third-level participation in order to create conditions necessary for successful monitoring of the implications of COVID-19. This needs to be repeated for all other levels of education.
- Ensure that Travellers and Roma are named in all relevant DES and HEA communications and that disaggregated data using an ethnic identifier supports their participation and progress in third level education.
- Ensure Traveller and Roma students priority access to safe study spaces e.g. in public libraries, local authority facilities and those of Local Development Companies.
- Support and promote partnerships between HEIs and local and national Traveller organisations as well as with schools, and all other relevant education and training bodies.
- Make immediate funding available to resource local Traveller organisations responses and national initiatives to mitigate increased Traveller and Roma education disadvantage and discrimination due to COVID-19 and proactively engage and seek input at all levels with regard to upcoming and current communications e.g. regarding college and school openings and special summer programmes.

Higher Education Institutions

- Provide direct contact and ongoing support through both existing student services and access offices and other college personnel for prospective mature or Leaving Cert students, ensure that all information provided to them is easily available and understood, and engage with them and their supporters to contextualise and allay fears regarding going to college in particular with regard to COVID-19.
- Enhance supports and direct individual contact including from lecturing staff for all Traveller and Roma part or full time, mature and younger students including with regard to assessment outcomes, repeats, deferrals, mental well-being, study space and remote learning in order to promote their progression and retention given COVID-19 challenges.
- Include Traveller students in all college induction and promotion initiatives, employ Traveller and Roma graduates in access support services.

Second and other levels

- Immediately ensure that all Traveller and Roma sixth class pupils and their families are contacted by their school, and supported where necessary to make satisfactory transfers to secondary school as well as being contacted in advance by the new school and supported to engage with it. Identify and eliminate any gaps or difficulties with finding places.
- Ensure a process of school engagement at all levels including early years and pre-school with Traveller and Roma families and guardians.
- Monitor Traveller and Roma children's school attendance to ensure that full participation is assured to them. Reasons for practices such as restricted timetables must be investigated and addressed.
- Ensure proactive involvement of local Traveller organisations in all area based COVID-19 education initiatives.
- Take immediate action with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to replace school meals and other food poverty supports during the school holidays.

PROPOSALS FOR ACTION TO END OF 2020

Department of Education and Skills

- Develop and implement a National Traveller Education Strategy building on the Third Level Action Plan, incorporating the NTRIS (National Traveller and Roma Integration Strategy) education actions with targets, timelines and appropriate monitoring processes.
- Engage with relevant policy makers including DCYA (Department of Children and Youth Affairs), Tusla (Child and Family Agency) and partners including the National Youth Council of Ireland, to develop and implement strategies to ensure that issues for mitigating COVID-19-related disadvantage are identified and addressed through early years provision and through the informal education provided through youth projects and engagement in youth work.
- Collaborate with the DJE (Department of Justice and Equality), given their role in addressing racism and discrimination and with regard to Traveller and Roma equality in Ireland in support of mitigating COVID-19-related educational disadvantage for Travellers and Roma.
- Acknowledging the announcement of a national strategy on racism, proactively collaborate with DJE to ensure direct engagement and involvement of Traveller and Roma in its provisions particularly with regard to education.
- Recognising the parallels, support implementation of the recommendations above, using also the framework for learner support being developed by the COVID-19 Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Advisory Group.

Higher Education Institutions

- Enhance holistic engagement of all HEI (Higher Education Institution) staff including lecturers in support of marginalised and minority students.
- All HEIs, schools and other education institutions, in partnership with Traveller and Roma organisations, should develop, implement and monitor a Traveller/Roma Action Plan for their institutions with specific targets, timeframes and resources.
- Positively support visibility of Traveller and Roma culture and history and identity in college events and communications and promote Traveller and Roma student initiatives and societies.
- Recognising the need to mitigate unconscious bias as well as direct discrimination and the implications of these for worsening COVID-19 related consequences move to reinforce existing Equality

Policies and initiatives through interactive training on racism - both conscious and unconscious - as well as the promotion of diversity and interculturalism.

- Provide ongoing induction and training for all teaching and support staff in managing and teaching in the new and evolving situation including as it affects Travellers and Roma students.

As indicated by the issues and recommendations outlined in the body of the report, the Forum led to rich and diverse discussion and recommendations regarding COVID-19 Traveller and Roma third level education as well as other deep-seated education disadvantage and discrimination issues. They represent matters of concern which require responses which address them and provide a basis for follow up by the Forum organisers, Traveller organisations and other partners as well as DES, HEIs and other education institutions and agencies.

OPENING PLENARY

Maria Joyce – Coordinator, National Traveller Women’s Forum

The Forum was opened by Maria Joyce who welcomed participants and partners and the support of the Department of Education and Skills and the Higher Education Authority.

The Forum, Maria said, is a response to and seeks to address the enormous educational challenges now facing the Traveller and Roma community as a result of COVID-19. The current crisis, she said, is further exacerbating existing educational disadvantages for the Traveller community and presenting new challenges which must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The Forum, she said, aimed to provide an important space for the experiences and views of Travellers and Roma to be expressed and discussed with policy makers and other stakeholders to identify the strategies and approaches needed in the short and medium term to protect the right of Travellers and Roma to education at this time.

Enda Hughes - Head of Equity of Access, Higher Education Section - Department of Education and Skills

Enda thanked the organisers of the Forum in his introductory remarks and referred to the many challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has created for learners throughout the education sector. He informed the group that early on in the crisis, the Department established a number of working groups to identify issues impacting on learners and to look at ways of mitigating these impacts; so that everybody can continue to engage and progress on their education journey.

Travellers are one of the key target groups that were identified as likely to be more adversely affected by the switch to distance learning. The Department have worked with Traveller advocacy groups and access officers to try and address some of the issues. Today’s event is part of their response to the concerns that have been raised.

Enda referred to the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*¹ which contains a target for increasing participation in higher education by members from the Irish Traveller community. Despite the development of a number of previous plans however, Enda pointed out that this is the first time that such a target has been set in the National Access Plan, and as such, it marks a key milestone in terms of the Department and the HEA's commitment to the Traveller and Roma communities.

He noted that in 2018 the Department undertook a mid-term review of the National Access Plan, *Progress Review of the National Access Plan and Priorities to 2021*², which highlighted progress made in terms of improving participation for some target groups such as students with disabilities. However, the review also highlighted areas where more work is needed. In particular, it highlighted the need for more work to improve access to higher education by members of the Traveller community.

Arising from the progress review, the Department made a commitment to develop an action plan for increasing Traveller participation in higher education. *The Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-2021*³ was launched last November by Minister Mary Mitchell O'Connor. The overall objective of the Action Plan is to advance Traveller participation in higher education within the context of approaches on retention and transition of Travellers across the education spectrum.

The forum itself, Enda highlighted, provided an opportunity for the Traveller community to draw attention to issues of concern regarding transitions to and progression within tertiary education. He expressed his own and other Department colleagues' interest in hearing first-hand what those issues are and working with those present to resolve them.

Caitriona Ryan – Head of Access Policy – Higher Education Authority

Caitriona reiterated the importance of a target for Traveller participation in higher education; she noted from the data and progress reviews however that some progress has been made but not nearly enough. She noted that the challenges presented by COVID-19 should not be allowed to damage the progress that has been made and more importantly that it does not inhibit any future progress.

The HEA since the COVID-19 crisis has been liaising with all of the access offices in all of the higher education institutions to gain an understanding of the particular issues for students who come from groups who may not traditionally participate in Higher Education or experience various types of disadvantage. The issues particularly revolve around access to IT, Financial issues, feelings of isolation, being away from the campus amongst others.

The HEA, Caitriona noted, are aware of the different and varying issues and challenges facing specific groups and communities which lends greater import to the Forum and to hearing the voice and experiences of Traveller and Roma, their views and recommendations, and to ensure that policy makers can ensure that COVID-19 does not stop the National Access Plan from moving forward in terms of the HEA's objectives and targets in relation to Traveller participation. It is important, she said, that the progress made is sustained and further progress made.

¹ <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf>

² <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2019/01/HEA-Progress-Review-2021-NAP.pdf>

³ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/action-plan-increasing-traveller-participation-in-higher-ed-2019-2021.pdf>

Anastasia Crickley – Chairperson Pavee Point

Anastasia stated that differentials in Traveller and Roma access, participation and outcomes from education at all levels are a key indicator of their marginalisation and discrimination in Ireland and elsewhere. Given those pre-existing issues the direct implications of the COVID-19 crisis for Traveller education are very negative and require direct and ongoing action in partnership with the communities involved.

She noted the latest figures (DCYA, 2020. *Young Travellers in Ireland*⁴) showing Travellers comprise 0.8% of the secondary school population with the number dropping steeply from entry to Leaving Cert which reportedly would have been sat by approximately 300 Travellers this year, half for the traditional exam and half for the Vocational or Applied Cert. The times most vulnerable to dropout are recognised as those of transition to second level, to senior cycle and onwards to further or higher education. Some progress was made up to 2009 but the steady decline from then up to 2014 has not been restored in spite of some improvements.

The original target set for Traveller participation in the current *National Action Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education*⁵ – 80 students over four years – is critiqued for being so low. However, the very setting of that target and the associated Action Plan to promote Traveller participation in higher education⁶ has succeeded in bringing additional numbers of Travellers, now estimated to have doubled, into the system.

Anastasia highlighted that the Roma needs assessment study (2018)⁷ found that only 11% of adult Roma respondents had more than 12 years' schooling; 6% of households had a member attending third level. As for Travellers, poverty and poor living conditions were repeatedly identified by education stakeholders, service providers and Roma respondents as formidable barriers to accessing and completing education.

Anastasia thanked the DES for their partnership in organising the event which recognizes not only the COVID-19-related negative implications for Traveller and Roma education, but also the need for targeted action to mitigate these. Such action, she said, will also need to recognise Traveller and Roma rights to lifelong education particularly when denied in the past, different education issues and experiences for girls and boys, women and men and for parents, as well as being awake to cultural connotations and sensitivities.

The Forum, she said, seeks to inform and shape that urgently required targeted action. The experiences and issues of those present as Traveller and Roma students, prospective students, graduates and organisations from all over the country are crucial. She thanked participants for taking the time to engage and assured them that the organisers would do all they could to ensure that the points raised are made known and acted on.

⁴ file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/72732_824dc1d2acaf4e5a93d88e640ae1ef0f.pdf

⁵ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/action-plan-increasing-traveller-participation-in-higher-ed-2019-2021.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.paveepoint.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/RNA-PDF.pdf>

WHAT HAS WORKED WELL

Given the urgency of the situation and the rapidly diminishing window within which to take action on the issues discussed, the focus here is mostly on those issues and recommendations for action. However, it is important to note at the outset that participants also spoke of a number of actions and initiatives at local, institutional and national levels which worked well and felt should be reinforced.

The solidarity and support of other Traveller/Roma students graduates and student societies and the importance of this form of peer support was repeatedly highlighted throughout the Forum.

One to one engagement by support services with all Traveller and Roma students since COVID-19 was also noted as being extremely important coupled with individual support in using both CAO (Central Applications Office) forms and ongoing HEI application procedures.

In terms of teaching and academic progress the ongoing support and tutorials from some lecturing and teaching staff was commended as were some flexible approaches to enable students to complete their assessments and encourage them to progress with their studies.

Understanding of the different issues faced by younger and older Traveller/Roma students, those who are parents, and women students was considered to be extremely important in relation to the ways in which outreach and actions to maintain

contact with Traveller and Roma students were undertaken. Attention was drawn to the support offered by the College Connect Programme in this regard as were the efforts made by some schools at primary and secondary levels to engage and consult in order to understand the particular needs of Travellers and Roma at this time. Specific individual efforts to support parents experiencing difficulties with emergency home education were also noted.

In some instances, it was highlighted that Traveller and Roma students were prioritised in the allocation of available equipment. The recognition of economic disadvantage experienced by Traveller and Roma students in this regard was considered to be crucial in supporting them through this period. As well as enabling students to complete their academic requirements, technology, when available also enabled them to stay connected with peers and college life.

The value of mechanisms suggested such as the COVID-19 diary as a means for alleviating the isolation was noted by participants.

Engagement and consultation through events like this forum and those organised by the National Access Plan Steering Group were named as important initiatives to build understanding, share learning and develop and advance plans for Traveller and Roma education into the future.

KEY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Traveller and Roma Educational Disadvantage

Forum participants stressed the severe historical and intergenerational educational disadvantage experienced by Traveller and Roma communities being exacerbated by COVID-19. Barriers placed in the way of Traveller progress – including reduced timetables – must be removed, as has been recommended by a number of reports and recent Dáil Committees. A paradigm shift in approach to supporting Traveller and Roma education is now required as a matter of urgency.

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 as Traveller students await their leaving cert grades, “how can Travellers have confidence in the assessments for Leaving Cert?”

Unconscious bias and racism also need to be unmasked for Traveller and Roma progress in education to be possible, and this is particularly urgent now given the pressures which schools and educational personnel are under. Racism and discrimination need to be named and addressed, not renamed or sidestepped.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The DES action plan to increase Traveller participation in higher education needs to include long-term and ringfenced funding for targeted supports, beyond those already available.

2. A comprehensive National Traveller Education Strategy, which builds on existing NTRIS education actions and the Higher Education Traveller Action Plan, with targets, time lines, resources and monitoring mechanisms for Travellers and Roma is urgently required.

3. Gathering disaggregated data on Traveller participation and progress in education should be included as part of the Traveller Education Strategy.

4. Additional resources must be spread across schools where Traveller children are attending, and not just focused on DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools which cater for less than 50% of Traveller children.

A lost generation?

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, it was noted, was difficult before, but COVID-19 has added another barrier and it is likely that this gap will get bigger.

The danger now, it was stated, is that ambition to progress to third level will be reduced through lack of direct contact and encouragement from teachers. Concerns were expressed that many students will not return to school in September. Many families are living in overcrowded conditions with immune-compromised family members, and there are huge concerns of a risk of infection also from the school environment. In addition, for children at risk of early school leaving, the gap in the school year may compound that.

A huge concern was expressed for Traveller children in primary and second level. There is on-going and now exacerbated anxiety around transitions, from primary to post-primary and from junior to senior cycle. A radical response is now needed to ensure that a whole generation will not be lost from an educational perspective overall including with regard to higher education.

There are potentially thousands of Traveller and Roma children around the country not currently receiving any education, with no access to proper IT facilities, and parents facing challenges in offering support given their own education experiences. Those are the children falling through the gaps. Without increased education support, including after-school supports, they will not complete Junior and Leaving Certificate in the coming years.

Concern was also expressed that the predicted grades process will be embedded with implicit bias, low expectations and direct discrimination, creating further barriers to progression for Traveller and Roma children. The need for coordinated local and regional responses along with a national strategy and national education initiatives it was stated, has never been greater. The NTRIS pilot initiatives have potential but are operational in only four areas.

For those who have progressed or intend to progress to third level, the issue of retention is a key concern as *“people are making other choices – they don’t want to stay”*. The fear was expressed that a lot of groundwork is going to be lost if tutors are not available to students who are in need of supports during Covid19.

To mitigate the existing and COVID-19-related inequalities in education for Traveller and Roma communities, there needs to be accountability back to these communities, and the Public Sector Duty needs to be used as a means of promoting an equality proofed learning environment

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote access to education and positive outcomes for Traveller and Roma learners.
2. Ensure that the system at all levels is ambitious for Traveller and Roma students, and encourages their access, participation and outcomes to the highest level.

3. Ensure that pending return to school processes and education using blended learning do not further marginalise and stigmatise Roma and Traveller learners.
4. Engage immediately with Traveller and Roma pupils, families, students and Traveller organisations on urgent issues of transfer, progression and retention and enhance support at all levels.
5. Ensure that Traveller and Roma learners and families are prioritised for COVID-19-related initiatives, including equipment grants.
6. Assess the immediate implications of Leaving Cert outcomes for Traveller and Roma learners and take action to ensure that any negative effects on progression are mitigated.
7. Proactively use the public sector duty to protect Traveller and Roma education rights and interests.

Family support

The lack of experience in Traveller and Roma families in relation to third level education was stressed, as was the lack of Traveller and Roma family/ community role models who have progressed to higher education. This places strain on Traveller parents seeking to support their children through education, and places pressure on Traveller learners to try to navigate the system.

In addition, it was noted that young people may at times be ashamed and embarrassed to say that they’re struggling, *“it’s hard to have those conversations in the family – it’s like a parallel universe – you’re the only one going”*.

Traveller student participants said they are trying to educate their families on how important it is to get space to do their assignments, and to apply for funding. Support for this would usually come from the Access Office. *“They are struggling at the moment to get everything done and they’re afraid of failing. I think they have it in their head they’ve already failed before they started.”*

Families need encouragement, and to be given grounds for confidence that there will be employment opportunities for their children if they continue in education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop in association with Traveller organisations a system of parent supports (including mentoring programmes) to enable Traveller parents to assist their children through all levels of education and ensuring that they can be partners in oversight of their children's education processes and the institutions where it takes place.
2. Enhance family confidence in education through parallel employment initiatives and positive action.
3. Resource Traveller organisations to enable them to employ dedicated staff to use community development approaches to focus on community engagement and education promotion and progression into and through third level education for both school leavers and mature students.

Access to IT facilities, resources and study spaces

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 all present huge challenges to Traveller students. Lack of broadband is a serious concern in particular 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 the possibility of missing lectures due to bad Wi-Fi inability to ask questions and difficulties with engagement. 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.

Concern was expressed that the additional €10 million for IT supports allocated to schools by the DES will not be used to proactively support Travellers, due to low system expectations of Travellers' educational attainment. In the week that the Forum took place Dell had donated 150 laptops and desktops for delivery to HEIs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A cross-Departmental approach (Education, Local government and Communications) is required to ensure that national rollout of broadband specifically targets and includes all Traveller accommodation locations, including unofficial halting sites.
2. The DES needs to prioritise access for Traveller and Roma learners to the use of resources from the additional €10m ICT fund, and to monitor its implementation with regard to such access.
3. The next tranche of ICT grants in 2020/21 should have a ring-fenced portion to ensure the needs of Traveller and Roma students are met. The DES along with primary, post primary and third level/ further education and training institutions must put in place easy-to-use distance learning tools and ensure that any technologies used aren't excluding Traveller and Roma learners.
4. Public Libraries, Local Development Companies and 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.
5. Initial guidance and ongoing support should be made available for Traveller and Roma students on using social platforms essential for their education progress.
6. Prioritise support for Travellers and Roma through the Student Assistance Fund.
7. A book and device sharing scheme for Traveller and Roma students should be established within third level institutions.

Poverty, social exclusion and financial barriers

Overcrowded living conditions or situations where parents and family members have underlying health conditions create very challenging study environments. Understandably, in these situations, education is not always the priority given other more immediate demands like accommodation and health: this is a challenge when helping students to engage or re-engage.

Financial difficulties place significant barriers in the way of Traveller and Roma access to and progression within education. High levels of poverty and unemployment have been further compounded by the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, those seeking to go to third level will rarely be able to do so without receiving a grant or bursary.

The fact that most of these grants and bursaries are not available for part-time programmes, and that some, such as the 1916 bursary, are not available for postgraduates were also noted as significant concerns for Travellers, many of whom from necessity choose to study part time. A huge cohort of Traveller and Roma are unable to attend third level education full-time due to financial barriers and work commitments.

The likelihood of more Traveller students wishing to study part time during and post crisis was also noted as was the probability that students and families will have less capacity to meet the costs of third level in the coming year with less part-time work available.

Having a family and childcare responsibilities can make balancing things very difficult for Traveller and Roma students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All third level funding for students including SUSI grants need to be for both part time and full-time students and in addition all associated costs including registrations etc. need to be covered if core barriers to Traveller and Roma access to education are to be removed.

2. Specific targeted grants and bursaries for Travellers e.g. the 1916 Bursary (a very welcome initiative) within each higher-level institution need to be brought to an adequate level for full and part-time courses and associated costs and be available for all who need this support.
3. Information about funding and registering for programmes needs to be accessible and widely disseminated amongst the Traveller community and have additional supports available to ensure that Travellers and Roma engage with the process.

Third level mentoring, support and information

Mentoring and supports are crucial at this time, but participants noted that these processes are very difficult to maintain in the absence of face-to-face contacts. The importance of being and feeling included within education institutions was noted: *“an inclusive campus environment is a must for Traveller and Roma students”*.

The difficulties are compounded, it was felt, for undergraduate students who have less history of engagement and who may lack the single-mindedness that comes with longer term engagement with education: for such undergraduates, this can lead to a situation where *“people can give up”*. It was noted that due to the small number of Travellers, there can be little or no peer support for them in third level, but that this can be better in some regions/institutions than others.

The importance of Access Offices in HEIs, the value of the services they offer (including additional services since the COVID-19 crisis began), and the importance of engaging with them to get support were noted. It was noted too that Access Offices need to engage more with Roma to build contact and communication with them and to proactively reach out to current and potential Roma students.

Many Traveller and Roma students find it difficult to navigate third level systems and to access the information they need. Students it was felt are 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 was pointed out that greater efforts need to be made to raise student awareness of support programmes and how to access them. The difficulties of getting information to students without one-to-one support were also highlighted. Support programmes need to be more aware of distance created by their language and framing as well as by their very location in what may be seen as an authority structure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhance engagement of all HEI staff including lecturers in support of marginalised and minority students specifically including Travellers and Roma.
2. Provide resources for reinforced engagement of Access Offices and other student services with all Traveller and Roma students at the current time and on an ongoing basis.
3. Prioritise one to one advisory support for all students, focused on academic, personal and financial needs.
4. Provide training for all HEI personnel, including lecturers and management on unconscious bias and racism as well as direct discrimination and the promotion of diversity and Interculturalism building on the Equality Policies and associated procedures all HEIs already have in place.
5. Ensure that all third level staff are aware of the cultural, authority and power differences between themselves and Traveller and Roma students, and that they take these on board in their interactions and support, particularly enhanced engagements and supports being recommended due to COVID-19.
6. Support Traveller and Roma engagement with student life across universities including through encouragement of Traveller and Roma Societies.

7. Engage and employ Traveller and Roma graduates to support Traveller and Roma students.
8. Ensure that all support and mentoring services are available for part-time students.
9. Recognise the differential experiences for younger and older Traveller and Roma women students, and also the intersectionality of issues faced due to parenthood, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation etc.
10. Recognise the information gap particularly but not exclusively for prospective students and the complexity of available information, including with regard to COVID-19 arrangements and take immediate steps to address this. This is an issue also for parents and Traveller organisations seeking to support Traveller learning at all education levels.

Building confidence, supporting Traveller and Roma identity

A number of Traveller and Roma students do not self-identify in the education sphere due to fear of isolation, prejudice and discrimination. Travellers and Roma can have low expectations of themselves: *“many in their leaving cert are doubting their plans - there’s a complete lack of confidence”*

Participants stressed that the HEI environment needs to be a welcoming one where students have the confidence to self-identify and be proud of who they are. The failure to provide a space which is reflective of Traveller ethnicity and culture and celebrates diversity leads to low self-esteem amongst students and a lack of confidence. Identity, it was suggested, is very difficult to assert when there is no peer support at third level. Building the confidence of young people is very important in this regard to enable them to express their identity in these environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Third level institutions need to actively and visibly support Traveller identity through library holdings, exhibitions, and appropriate inclusion of Travellers and Roma in curricula.

2. All third level institutions need to engage with Traveller organisations as partners in the education process.
3. Foster and support peer support groups for Traveller and Roma in second and third level.
3. Enhance engagement of all HEI staff including lecturers in support of marginalised and minority students.

Traveller and Roma organisations and community supports

The role of Traveller and Roma organisations is fundamental to progress for Travellers in education. Many projects are working on issues of health and accommodation and it was argued, need additional resources and support to undertake in-depth work on education.

Lack of dedicated education workers in Traveller organisations was emphasised as an issue that needs to be addressed.

The Roma community development infrastructure is only beginning. There is, it was said, frustration in the community, lack of knowledge about how to access information, and not enough dedicated people working with the Roma Community. The case for Education Workers assigned to local Traveller and Roma projects was strongly made which would allow for a structured direct relationship between the Traveller and Roma communities, schools and third level.

A coordinated response and meaningful collaboration with the Traveller and Roma organisations at local level it was suggested, is an essential element. The essential role of Traveller organisations as partners with parity of esteem and perspectives needs to be recognised and resourced. The Traveller and Roma peer led Primary Health Care Programme provides a precedent and national working model in this regard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Resource Traveller and Roma education support workers within Traveller organisations.
2. Develop a collaborative approach to supporting Traveller and Roma education between Traveller organisations, community and youth organisations and relevant professionals and agencies (including the NTRIS pilot scheme where relevant).

Immediate COVID-19 supports

Currently there can be dependence and over-reliance on individual relationships with tutors and teachers for immediate support, often necessary due to the low level of targeted formal support structures and not enough pathways or information regarding them.

Where Traveller and Roma students are doing well, it was said, it is because of a support system around them in the school or college environment which cannot be replicated remotely. A very crucial support is missing for those whose home environment is not focused on education. Schools will be reopening in a very different way. Traveller and Roma organisations need to prepare for that so that Traveller and Roma children are not left further behind.

The encouragement and support being given by Traveller and Roma peers and families offering encouragement and support was acknowledged.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Development of targeted outreach services from college to Traveller and Roma students during this period to keep them connected and provide necessary supports as is already in place in some HEIs.
2. Provision of support and assistance to Travellers who will be trying to navigate the system for the first time in September.
3. 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.
4. Develop and implement student focused transition arrangements from all schools and further education to HEIs with direct engagement at an early stage between the HEI supporting institution and the prospective Roma and Traveller students.

Employment options for Traveller and Roma

The need to consider employment outcomes for Traveller and Roma graduates was highlighted, “Education and employment needs joined up thinking as we need to ensure Traveller and Roma go the full circle this will create a ripple effect”

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Plans for progression from education to employment need to be put in place with positive action measures building on existing projects in the social work and community work fields.
2. Enhance support in addition to existing programmes for Traveller and Roma wishing to become teachers, including supports and specific measures to bring students’ standards in Irish up to the level required, by the time they qualify.
3. Develop and implement additional targeted measures for Traveller and Roma students to support the cost of work experience/placement options and encourage their engagement with Erasmus programmes.

Mental health, stress and isolation

The current lack of structure poses real challenges which will make it hard for students to get back to normal. It can be difficult to focus and being away from contacts and the college campus also leads to feelings of isolation, “Being on campus with all your peers – missing out on all that, there’s only so much emails and texts and WhatsApp messages you can send. But it’s missing the whole environment”.

Mental health concerns are significant. There is anxiety about the unknown and about COVID-19 more generally. Students are feeling isolated with lack of support, lack of confidence and a fear of travelling to attend HEIs. There are high levels of anxiety generally as people are unsure what’s happening in their own lives.

There is a lack of certainty for those who hope to start college in September “Will I be able to go, will it be safe, how do I find out the information I need?”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop a specific programme of mental health support for Traveller and Roma students in second and third level education specifically targeting new entrants to third level.
2. Encourage Traveller and Roma student engagement with well-being initiatives.
3. Ensure that mental health concerns are addressed through all the student support services for Traveller and Roma.

Monitoring

The DES has recognized the challenges ahead for learners who are vulnerable to educational disadvantage. In its recent guidance for primary and post-primary schools on *Continuity of Schooling: Supporting students at risk of educational disadvantage*⁸, the DES sets out a strong rationale for the importance of supporting the continuity in the learning of students at risk of educational disadvantage during the school closures associated with COVID-19. “While all students need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, learners at risk of educational disadvantage need even more support at this time.” The guidance encourages school leadership teams to “ensure that the school’s resources are targeted at those most in need”. In addition, the DES has issued guidance for parents⁹, guidance on the School Meals Programme¹⁰ and an announcement of re-prioritisation of ICT grants and an additional fund to support the purchase of ICT for disadvantaged students¹¹.

⁸ <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/guidance-on-continuity-of-schooling.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/continuity-of-schooling.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Management-Organisation/school-meals-programme-guidance-to-schools.pdf>

¹¹ https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0032_2020.pdf

Participants highlighted the fear and worry amongst Travellers in relation to the predicted grades process for the Leaving Certificate given their often negative school experiences and raised concerns that the process would be subject to low expectations, bias, and direct discrimination. On May 29th DES issued a *Supplement Guide for Schools on Providing Estimated Percentage Marks and Class Rank Orderings*¹², which provides explicit advice on avoiding unconscious or selective bias. The issue of how this guidance will be applied remains outstanding.

At the time of the Forum the DES were looking at ways to address issues for those who are not in school but attached to a school for the purpose of the Leaving Certificate for whom as of then there was no system or capacity to predict grades. There are parallel issues with regard to grading in third level, including the implications of new ways of working, recruiting, supporting and assessing students whether part-time or full-time.

New education measures must not further disadvantage Traveller learners, however currently there is no official data available on the impact of DES COVID-19 guidance and schemes on Traveller and Roma learners. Monitoring of implementation of these new measures is a challenge that must be addressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. DES through the Inspectorate should monitor the implementation of new guidance and measures and their impact on Traveller and Roma learners.
2. The HEA and DES need to monitor implementation of third level changes in entry, participation and assessment, including their impact on Traveller and Roma students.
3. DES should undertake an assessment of the predicted grades process in the light of their guidance and the Equality Legislation also referred to therein.
4. Institutions need to widen the band for access to include applicants (including Traveller and Roma) whose education and grades have been severely disrupted due to COVID-19 with direct consequences for their Leaving Certificate grades.

¹² file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/75018_c3c8f852-e834-4c00-847c-7943fbde194c%20(1).pdf

CLOSING REMARKS

The forum organisers thanked all Travellers and Roma and Traveller and Roma organisations for their time and contributions as well as the additional national partners who were in attendance. Representatives thanked the Forum organisations for an extremely worthwhile, informative and positive engagement and committed their respective organisations to reviewing the outcomes of the Forum and the key recommendations contained in the report. They highlighted the importance of engagement and collaboration with Traveller organisations nationally and locally and the need for ring fenced and targeted resourcing of Traveller education and Traveller organisations to ensure that any gains made are not lost, and that further gains can be assured.

It was noted that the recommendations will be brought to student services in all colleges, and that partner organisations will seek to progress them with DES and the HEA directly.