Submission on HEA Consultation Paper: Towards the development of a new national plan for equity of access to higher education.

**Goal 1: to promote access for disadvantaged groups to higher education.**

**High level objective:** Monitor and support work to progress access to higher education by target under-represented groups

**Collaboration between higher education institutions and Traveller organisations**

Pavee Point is pleased that the HEA has identified the importance of higher education institutions working with Traveller representative organisations, teachers, academics and access personnel to consolidate and enhance existing initiatives to support Travellers progressing to higher education. In order to further supplement this, HEIs should be encouraged and supported to use the lifetime of this access plan to pilot Traveller specific access initiatives in collaboration with local and national Traveller organisations. Institutions should be supported in this through the provision of funding and the establishment of fora to share and discuss good practice in the inclusion of minority ethnic groups in third level education.

It is important that HEIs look at early intervention initiatives in parallel with other access initiatives. Programmes like HEAR and DARE are irrelevant to a large percentage of Traveller students as 55% of Travellers have completed formal education by the age of 15 (Census 2011). Given that early school leaving is common in the Traveller community, access initiatives will have to look at targeting primary school and junior cycle Traveller students if we are to successfully increase the number of Travellers participating in third level education.

**Recommendation:** HEIs should be supported and encouraged by the HEA to work with Traveller representative organisations to pilot Traveller specific education access initiatives.

**The role of colleges of further education**

Teacher’s expectations have a significant impact on educational outcomes. Historically expectations for Traveller students in the education system were low and unfortunately this continues to be the case in many schools today. Comprehensive training modules on equality and diversity which effectively challenge bias and prejudice and equip teachers to
address discriminatory attitudes and behaviour must be included in initial teacher training courses.

These modules should explicitly address attitudes towards the Traveller community given that 62% of Travellers report having experienced discrimination in school (All Ireland Traveller Health Study, 2010). Furthermore Traveller children, immigrant children and children with a disability are more likely to report being bullied at school (State of the Nation’s Children Report, 2012)

If teachers are not aware of the unconscious prejudice and stereotypes that they carry and are not empowered with tools to allow them to reflect on these, it can result in negative outcomes for the young people in their classroom.

There is a need for positive action measures to include Travellers in the delivery of education across all levels of education. Travellers should be encouraged and supported to pursue careers in education as teachers and teaching assistants at preschool, primary, post primary level and third level. As mentioned in the Mid Term review of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013, the UK introduced a recruitment campaign for teachers from minority backgrounds in England and Wales through targeted advertising, mentoring programmes and grant support a similar programme could and should be introduced in Ireland.

Having members of the Traveller community involved in the education system would have a multitude of benefits including: providing positive role models for young Travellers, challenging prejudice and stereotypes in the education system, building trust between Traveller parents and the education system and finally providing much needed employment for young Travellers.

**Recommendation:** Comprehensive training modules on equality and diversity which effectively challenge bias and prejudice, and equip teachers to address discriminatory attitudes and behaviour must be included in initial teacher training courses.

**Recommendation:** There is a need for positive action measures to ensure Travellers are encouraged and supported to pursue careers in education as teachers and teaching assistants at preschool, primary, post primary level and third level

**High level objective:** Use available funding in a manner that best supports equity of access to higher education by disadvantaged groups.

Existing financial supports need to be examined and tested to ensure that they support underrepresented groups to participate in third level education. For example, currently, under the SUSI grant system students under the age of 23 cannot be assessed as ‘independent’. Many Travellers under the age of 23 are married and living independently of their families. According to Census 2011, 33.4% of Irish Travellers aged between 15-29 were married\(^1\) in comparison with just 8% of the general population. Classing these students as

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\(^1\) More specifically, Census 2011 found that 252 Travellers aged between 15 – 19 were married.
‘dependant’ is not only inaccurate but also presents a significant barrier for Traveller students in accessing financial supports. Provision needs to be put in place to ensure that students under the age of 23 can be assessed as ‘independent’ as the current policy has a disproportionate impact on Traveller students.

**Recommendation:** Student financial supports should be evaluated, and equality, gender and Traveller proofed.

**Goal 2: To put in place coherent pathways from second level education from further education and other non-traditional entry routes to higher education**

**High level objective:** Develop more coherent pathways from second level, further education and other routes of access to higher education.

**Raising awareness of further and higher education pathways**

There is a significant amount of confusion regarding further and higher education pathways outside of the traditional route. Pavee Point welcomes the HEA’s initiative to raise awareness about these pathways by working with HEIs and education providers. This work could be significantly supported by working with community groups and representative organisations including Traveller representative organisations to ensure greater dissemination of information and wider awareness of further and higher education pathways.

**Recommendation:** Work with community and representative organisations to increase awareness among underrepresented groups of further and higher education pathways.

**RPL**

RPL activity in the FETAC levels 1-5 bracket has been localised and pilot in nature over the past number of years. It has also been driven by workplace needs (up-skilling, professionalization, new regulatory requirements, continuing professional development) and ad hoc funding opportunities (mainly from the EU). As well as this, RPL as a means to foster inclusion of hard to reach groups has not been emphasised.

Information on RPL is not widely available to learners (particularly the case with FETAC course material). A number of universities and colleges (namely UL, UCG, GMIT, DIT, and UCD) have guidelines on RPL but very few FETAC centres openly promote RPL as an option for learners. Reviews of RPL in Ireland attribute this mainly to the centres lacking the resources to support RPL processes. It can sometimes also be due to the fact that providers are aware that learners might not be familiar with the term 'RPL' and so are more likely to introduce and explain it as an option verbally.

The fact that RPL in Ireland is linked to the NFQ is significant because it means that, in Ireland, the understanding and application of RPL is limited to people using prior learning to gain formal accreditation in specific fields. On the one hand this is highly advantageous to any candidate who succeeds in having their prior learning accredited because there will never be any question that they do not meet the required standards of a particular level. On the other hand, because RPL is linked to the NFQ (and because standards must be
maintained), the candidate is required to work very hard (produce a lot of evidence) to get their prior learning recognised. The onus is on the candidate to transform their informal or non formal learning into declarative/de contextualised/procedural knowledge that is applicable to course specific outcomes - a process that would be especially challenging for candidates with little prior experience of the further education system and/or who have had little formal schooling. There is always a chance of someone failing in this, even in situations where their personal experience far outstrips the knowledge, skills and competence encoded in the qualifications.

With the exception of ad hoc funding for piloting, no funding has been made available for the operationalisation of RPL in Ireland since it was laid down in policy in 2005. This lack of funding (and an adjoining strategy for the operationalisation of RPL) means that providers and learners have very little experience of how RPL works in practice. While providers are prepared and committed to RPL on paper, many are not sufficiently resourced or experienced to support RPL among learners in practice.

**Recommendation:** There is a need for an explicit National policy on RPL
**Recommendation:** Methods of using RPL to include under represented target groups in formal education should be explored and shared.
**Recommendation:** Information on RPL, how it works and where it can be accessed, needs to be disseminated and shared among education providers, access officers and representative organisations.

**Goal 4: To support evidence-based policy formation**

**High level objective:** Strengthen systems to gather data and other evidence needed to measure progress and advise development of policy for access.

Efforts should be made to monitor and evaluate HEIs efforts to increase Traveller participation in third level through the use of outcome, process and structural indicators. The use of structural indicators will be useful in assessing whether third level institutions have successfully put in place the key structures and mechanisms to facilitate and encourage Traveller participation in third level education.

**Recommendation:** The HEA should develop a framework of outcome, process and structural indicators to monitor and evaluate initiatives undertaken by HEIs to increase Traveller participation.

**Data collection**
There is an ongoing issue with the collection of data aggregated by ethnicity at third level. In 2013, the Pavee Point Education Advisory Committee undertook a survey of third level institutions to establish how many institutions had Traveller specific access programmes/activities and how many Traveller students were attending individual institutions. The vast majority of institutions who responded noted that whilst they were aware of Traveller students who were attending their respective institutions many of these students chose not to self-identify.
In order to truly assess the real extent of the challenges that exist for Traveller students and to measure the effectiveness of legislation and policies to tackle discrimination greater availability of qualitative and quantitative data is necessary.

How and when students are asked to identify should be examined along with wider institutional recognition and support for minorities in HEIs in order to encourage and support Traveller students to self-identify.

**Participation in higher education by Traveller students**

Pavee Point welcomes the inclusion of a specific target for Traveller students in higher education. The number of Traveller students participating in third level remains particularly low, with less than 1% of Travellers continuing on to third level education in comparison with 30.7% of the general population.

It is clear that the previous premise that Traveller students would be reached through their inclusion in the ‘underrepresented group’ has not proven particularly successful. Figures gathered by the HEA have shown that from 2007 to 2013 there was an average of 28 Traveller students in third level education. Given the specific nature of the historical and ongoing educational disadvantage faced by Traveller students, targeted work needs to be undertaken to increase access and progression among Travellers.

We hope that the introduction of a specific target for Traveller pupils will incentivise third level institutions to undertake this work.

The proposed target of 70 Travellers in higher education by 2016 is double the number of Traveller student’s currently in third level and may initially seem ambitious. However even if this target is achieved, it will still be less than 1% of the Traveller population. In comparison to the percentage of the settled population in third level education this is very small. Pavee Point is cognisant of the short time frame for this strategy and the need to set achievable goals. Baring this in mind we accept the target of 70 for 2016 however we would urge that this strategy indicate that subsequent strategies will significantly increase the targets for Traveller students and that therefore third level institutions should use the lifetime of this strategy to undertake outreach activities and early intervention programmes with a view to ensuring they meet future increased targets.

Clearly if the HEA is to achieve equity of access in third level education, long term, the percentage of Travellers participating in third level education should be the same as the percentage of the majority population.

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2 Participation in the Higher Education Authority survey is voluntary and based on the principle of self-identification therefore we accept that these statistics may not be 100% accurate.