Pavee Point Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills, March 2019

The progression of members of the Travelling Community to second-level and third-level education

Introduction

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 or 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 and Post-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 welcome the amendment to the 1998 Education Act, proposed in the Education Bill currently before the Oireachtas. This amendment represents a first step towards making the legal framework for the Irish Education system reflective of the diversity in Irish society, and towards directly reflecting the Human Rights principles to which this country has signed up.

1.4 This submission is concerned with second- and third-level education, but it must be understood that any progress at these levels 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 welcome your current concern about Traveller Education, which is particularly timely, given recent recognition of Traveller ethnicity, and the post-recession prospect of restoring and re-envisioning targeted education services. Such services, designed, implemented, and evaluated with full participation by the Traveller community, need to directly target and address the continued persistent disadvantages experienced by Travellers throughout the education system.

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; a new form of supports is required, that is firmly rooted in the Traveller community.

1.7 In addition to our priority concerned outlined below, we have two 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. 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)

b. 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 restricted attendance timetables and home education, increasingly used in relation to Traveller school students in difficulty with their schools, need to offer high-quality education programmes with pathways back to full provision, and be stringently monitored and evaluated.

1.8 Below, we briefly outline key issues that prompt these main recommendations in relation to second and third level provision, and offer more detailed recommendations. These and other related issues are discussed extensively in the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS, 2017) and in Pavee Point's Civil Monitor Report on that Strategy, prepared for carried out for the European Commission, DG Justice and Consumers. (2018). Our points will be based on data relating to Travellers, there are as yet no official data on Roma in education in Ireland, but information from Roma in Pavee Point and from other involved agencies indicates that their situation urgently requires attention and response.

1.9 Key issues for second level schools and for third level provision will be outlined first, and recommendations will follow in a final single section, to highlight the fact that many of them apply to both sectors.

2: 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 Immediate issues impacting Travellers' *transition* to second-level schools, and from there to third level, are enrolment, retention, attendance, and attainment levels; these are briefly documented below. Pavee Point believe that some key *causes* of poor transition, retention and progression rates lie in the (lack of) connection between the Traveller community and the school system. Framing these are fundamental issues of curricula, ethos, and professional development.

Enrolment and retention rates

2.3 According to the 2016 Census (Central Statistics Office, 2018) there are about five thousand Travellers aged 15-19 years old in Ireland. DES Statistics (2017, Table 12) on Travellers in post-primary schools show that over half are in non-DEIS schools, but they comprise almost 2% of all students in the DEIS sector, as against 0.5% of all students in the non-DEIS sector. Traveller enrolments in second-level schools peaked at 2,699 students in 2010 (over twice the 2000/01 enrolment).

2.4 The Visiting Teachers for Travellers service is credited, including by the Task Force on Travellers (1995), 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.

2.5   In the ensuing three years, the absence of a targeted support service is evident in Traveller enrolments which dropped by 10% in DEIS schools, and by 9% in non-DEIS schools. The drop occurred in the first two years of the Junior Cycle; growth in the Senior cycle stalled.

2.6   By 2015, a 4% recovery had occurred and 51% of the population aged 12-18+ were enrolled in second-level schools (DES, 2017). However, the by-age range was wide, from 48% of children aged 12/13 years, up to 91% of those aged 15 years, and down to 25% of 17/18-year-olds.

Attendance and attainment

2.7   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 education category headings, and it became impossible to track their attendance or attainment levels. TUSLA (2012) remarked that absorbing this data resulted in slightly higher overall absenteeism rates for schools. An ethnicity question has been introduced, for purposes of identifying support needs, at point of enrolment, but the DES does not disaggregate published attendance and attainment data.

2.8   There is concern at the use by a growing number of schools of restricted hours arrangements (effectively a form of reduced attendance) for Traveller students. This, and home-schooling, require educationally sound frameworks and accountability governing their use. The spread of these practices can arguably be linked to cutbacks in educational supports that were implemented in 2011, and they point to the need for relevant and targetted supports.

2.9   NTRIS proposes actions to improve Traveller and Roma education attendance, participation and engagement. Disaggregated data (designed in the light of GDPR regulations) are needed to identify how to shape and target such initiatives.

2.10 In the Education Research Centre's first evaluation of the DEIS scheme 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. for the ERC, 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).

Ethnicity, Curricula, and inclusion

2.11 NTRIS notes that Travellers report widespread racist bullying in schools; anti-racism is very commonly absorbed into general anti-bullying policies – possibly reducing its gravity to that of interpersonal hostility. They also report that Traveller history and culture get little attention. These areas are included in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment Intercultural Guidelines for primary and second level schools, but this does not translate into classroom practice.

2.12 The proposed amendment to the Education Act will require concrete programmes and materials for schools, on Travellers' history and culture. The DES Integration Strategy (2017) provides basic principles for inclusion, but it is arguable that in it the value of respect for cultural identity takes second place to the value of social and economic inclusion. Both are essential.

Professional development

2.13 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 Points 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.

2.14 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.

2.15 School inspections and other monitoring and accountability systems need to include assessment of the school's interculturalism and anti-racism policies, curricula, and practice.

2.16 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.

3: Third level provision

3.1 Travellers comprise 0.6% to 1% of Irish society, but 0.1% of new entrants to third level institutions (HEA, 2017).

3.2 According to the 2016 Census, of the Travellers aged 15 years and over who have finished their education (13,331 persons), 4.6% 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) hold advanced/higher certificates/completed apprenticeships; and another 1.3% (105 women and 62 men) hold 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 pattern grows with each successive stage in education uptake, though the imbalance 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. It will take strong commitment by institutions and Traveller community organisations to eliminate this gap.

3.5 The educational transition pathway for many Travellers who are early school leavers is via programmes such as Youth-Reach, VTOS, 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

3.9 The Further Education and Training Strategy aims to build "seamless progression pathways" to HE, with coherence, transparency and openness within and between the various FET programmes, and between this domain and Higher Education provision. Engagement with the community education sector, with SOLAS, ETBI, and the technological institutes and universities is also included in this Strategy.

3.10 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.

3.11 As noted above, almost all Travellers who have completed third level 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 FET and HET 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.*

Higher Education

3.12 Travellers are a named target group in the HEA National Action Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education: 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.

3.13 Like the FET, 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.

3.14 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.

3.15 The funded Path Programmes to support implementation of the HEA Plan need to be 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.

4: Summary and recommendations

4.1 Transition from primary school into the first two years of the Junior Cycle remains a major area of weakness, and Senior Cycle enrolment and completion rates remain very poor. Similar challenges attend progressing Traveller enrolments and completion rates in third-level provision.

4.2 These difficulties point to weak engagement between education providers and Traveller society.

4.3 Education programmes and educators at all levels are not well informed about Traveller history, culture and situation in Irish society.

4.4 This knowledge is also patchy or absent in taught programmes. Add-on modules can do little to transform institutions into inclusive learning contexts, where all curriculum areas/disciplines are informed by principles of human rights, interculturalism and anti-racism, where everyone learns about everyone, including Travellers.

4.5 Successful participation and outcomes for Travellers from higher education is possible as has been well profiled regarding a number who have struggled against the odds to get and stay there. These need to become the norm rather than the exception and HEIs need to create the conditions which make this possible. The recommendations of the Maynooth University Traveller Graduates and Supporters Seminar in 2016 contain a number of these:

> *A whole of education approach is required involving:*
>
> a) *Intensive teacher training at all levels (addressing for example, conscious and unconscious bias and expectations of teachers with regard to Traveller education and progression)*
>
> b) *The promotion of aspirations for third level (beginning at pre-school)*
>
> c) *Strategies to prevent early school leaving*
>
> d) *Family supports*

  e)   *Funding being made available to Traveller groups to support Traveller participation in education at all levels*

  f)   *Funding for and availability of part-time programmes and enhanced mature access opportunities*

  g)   *Development of a structured approach to linking further and higher education including recognition of prior learning.*

Pavee Point also recommend:

4.6   The potential for progression through FET, shown by the level of Traveller participation there already, should be built on by opening up pathways through high-quality certified programmes in this domain

4.7   Disaggregated attendance and attainment data must be made accessible (in ways that meet GDPR requirements), to permit tracking, analysis and development of appropriate teaching and learning programmes, skills and resources.

4.8   In lieu of the supports withdrawn in 2011, new initiatives are needed. Traveller organisations need to be engaged from policy to local delivery levels in developing and operating these, to maximise effectiveness.

4.9   The Traveller Education Advisory Committee which followed the Traveller Education Strategy (2006) needs to be restarted, or its remit fully included in the NTRIS Education sub-Committee.

4.10   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.

4.11   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.

4.12   Accountability systems such as schools inspections must incorporate evaluation of 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.

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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