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Report on Access Officers' Round Table Discussion on Implications of Covid-19 for Traveller and Roma Transfer to and Progression within Higher Education

29th June 2020

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Introduction. Rose Ryan - Chair

Rose welcomed all participants; she congratulated Senator Eileen Flynn, noting her wonderful achievement in being appointed to the Seanad, and her participation in the Traveller Education Forum which preceded and led to the Access Officers Roundtable discussion

Rose outlined the objective of the Roundtable as being to consider the report of the Forum held on May 27th by Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre and the National Traveller Women's Forum, on the implications of COVID-19 for Traveller and Roma transfer to and progression within Higher Education. The Forum was held in response to the urgent COVID-19 concerns being expressed by Traveller and Roma students, parents and adult learners, seeking to continue in or to commence third level education.

The Forum, she said, provided a unique opportunity for the more than 50 participants from throughout the country including current Traveller students, prospective students, graduates and those from local organisations who are active in education work, to speak for themselves and their own community about the impact that COVID-19 has had. The Forum also proposed a range of solutions to address in a cross-sectoral way the particular issues of current and ongoing concern. Maynooth University and the Institute of Technology Tralee were asked to nominate two representatives to the Forum. Rose and Valerie Moore from IT Tralee attended on behalf of both sectors.

The Roundtable, she said, would consider the report of the Forum and act as a bridge between the recommendations from the Forum to ensure the greatest impact in higher education. The Forum Report she said is in many respects a call to action and provides a powerful roadmap to explore and plan in practical terms how to progress the agenda set out. Rose outlined the objectives of the Roundtable:

- To provide a space for those working in access to higher education to consider the issues highlighted in the *Forum Report on the Implications of Covid-19 on Traveller and Roma transfer to and progression within Higher Education*, and its recommendations;
- To consider how higher education institutions can implement and action the report recommendations;
- To consider how and where the report should be disseminated;
- To reinforce existing commitments to increasing Traveller and Roma access, participation, and outcomes.

She noted that there were almost 50 colleagues present at the Roundtable from a broad range of higher and further education organisations, including the university sector, Institutes of Technology, Further and Community Education, Access Offices, Sanctuary movements, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion representatives, policymakers from the Department of Education and Skills, the Higher Education Authority and the Irish Universities Association.

Presentations

Anastasia Crickley

Anastasia also welcomed participants and congratulated Eileen Flynn on making history as the first Traveller member of a House of the Oireachtas. She wished her well in her work there.

The context and rationale for the Forum and the roundtable discussion she said is clearly set out in the statistics as they pertain to Traveller education:

- Just over 20% of Travellers aged 20 to 24 years had completed second level education in 2020, an increase from 13% in 2011, yet at least four times less than the rest of the population.
- In 2019 there were 61 Travellers recorded in third level - that figure has risen since then.
- COVID-19 is worsening Traveller access and participation outcomes at all levels of education.

Anastasia highlighted the importance of the Roundtable as an occasion to:

- share the Forum report with key stakeholders
- ask associated and immediate questions
- extend an invitation to take associated and immediate action to avoid what could be in effect, a lost generation.

She drew attention to the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, and the Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-2021. She stated that while these strategies refer to Travellers, it is extremely important to include Travellers and Roma in all discussions. She noted other important and relevant initiatives including:

- The Path Programme with its three strands
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives
- Initiatives emerging from university Equality Policies
- The role of the Public Sector Duty

She commended the innovative actions taken by access offices and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) before and since COVID-19 began, including making direct contact with all of the Traveller and Roma students in HEIs; employment of Traveller and Traveller students in access offices; supportive cultural initiatives and Traveller societies; and supporting individuals to make 3rd level and further education applications – all of which clearly present significant challenges this year.

Anastasia also stressed the need for discussion on what needs to change as identified through the Forum:

- Dependence on pilot initiatives to promote inclusion, rather than systematic departmental and institutional commitments with timelines, targets and monitoring.
- The direct and indirect discrimination and racism in education needs to be named whether on purpose or in effect as an issue for all in HEIs and education at any level.
- Initial and ongoing anti-racism education including an explicit focus on anti- Traveller racism for all staff and students and ongoing monitoring towards its elimination.
- Recognition of power, privilege and cultural gaps between students, educators & support services and the groups they serve.

This difficult but very clear message from the Forum about the need to recognise and continuously address power, privilege and cultural gaps embedded in their positions needs immediate action from all.

Anastasia drew attention to core elements that need immediate reinforcement, including:

- A move from a needs-based to a rights-based approach
- The need for special measures for marginalised groups Instead of individual responses
- A focus on Travellers as mature students as well as Leaving Cert starters
- The need to understand, reinforce, articulate and make clearly visible the urgency of the situation and the benefits of Traveller and Roma Higher Education for society overall.

Maria Joyce

Maria began by congratulating Eileen Flynn on her appointment to the Seanad and said she could not emphasize enough the importance that seeing Eileen in this role will have for all Travellers today, highlighting the importance and impact of Traveller role models on the community and in raising expectations and aspirations of young Travellers in particular. Eileen's nomination she said is hugely important not just from historical perspective but in terms of going forward into the future. Maria noted that Eileen herself completed 3rd level education.

Maria re-emphasised the detrimental impact of racism and discrimination and the need for this to be recognized in our institutions and at all levels of education. Whilst noting that the focus of her presentation would be on recommendations for third level, it is, she said important to recognise and reinforce that inequality of access, participation and outcomes from primary and second level impact significantly on those at third level. Such inequality results in gaps and significant concerns in relation to transfer from second to third level including the challenges posed by Covid-19. That is not taking away from the responsibility, and the action that's needed at 3rd level to ensure Travellers are achieving real outcomes.

Maria highlighted a number of the recommendations outlined in the Forum report including:

- In partnership with Traveller organisations, develop, implement, and monitor a Traveller/Roma Action Plan for their institutions with specific targets, time frames and adequate resources.

Maria noted that the target in relation to Travellers in 3rd level is something to aim for and something that has had an impact. Setting targets, allocating resources and developing ambitious plans of action in association with Traveller organisations she said is crucial – it cannot be just about goodwill.

- Support and promote partnerships between Higher Education Institutions and local and national Traveller organisations.

Maria highlighted the good links that some institutions have with Traveller organisations in some areas. She noted the need to strengthen them where they do exist and to build them where they do not. This is crucial, she said, to promote and ensure not just access to but quality outcomes for Travellers from the system, not just in the student body but also across staffing levels.

- Provide enhanced direct individual contact and support for all Traveller and Roma students
 - prospective and current
 - full-time and part-time
 - mature and younger

A lot of feedback, Maria said, has been received on this issue. Many who were able to access support did so from previously built relationships – for instance with a tutor they had a good relationship with or an access officer that they'd worked with. We cannot continue to rely solely on good relationships. Support must be embedded in the structures, processes and allocation of resources.

- Ensure that all information is easily accessible and understood
- Engage with Travellers and their supporters to allay COVID-19 related fears regarding going or returning to college.

Maria drew attention to the digital divide which further exacerbates Traveller educational disadvantage and she noted that formalized and explicit support systems are required if they are to work for everyone. The need for clear and accessible information cannot be over-emphasised, bearing in mind the experiences of Travellers when language has been used as a tool for exclusion.

- Establish an immediate baseline and collect ongoing disaggregated data using an ethnic identifier in order to:
 - promote third level inclusion, and
 - monitor the full implications of COVID-19 for Traveller third level students.

Disaggregated data is essential to track baseline information and progress in achieving targets and objectives. Covid 19, Maria said, has demonstrated how important data is and how not having data, based on the lived experiences of Travellers, leads to further disadvantage.

Tracey Reilly

Tracey presented further recommendations from the forum, noting that they rang very true to her own personal experiences.

She said that in order to mitigate the effects of COVID-19:

- Traveller and Roma students (full-time and part-time, mature and younger) need to be provided with immediate additional supports, including:
 - additional financial supports through all current means for instance SUSI, 1916 Bursaries, and Student Aid Funds, and also through new means
 - direct and ongoing support for confidence and wellbeing enhancement
 - immediate supports regarding repeats, deferrals, progression and transfer.

Tracey noted that there are many funds Travellers might not be aware of, have access to, or know how to access. Information is clearly needed in this area and Access Offices have a significant responsibility in this regard. Communication and information dissemination through Traveller organisations who are directly in touch with Travellers and have direct and trusted relationships with them can also be a very effective strategy.

Other issues which need consideration include the provision of IT equipment when some Travellers especially those on halting sites do not have access to WiFi. Many Travellers also have underlying health conditions and therefore have to be extremely careful of close contact with others. A combination of all of these factors creates extreme stress for Traveller students, making individual induction and support even more crucial at this time.

Tracey went on to call for:

- Priority access to safe study spaces for Traveller and Roma students, including public libraries, local authority and community facilities;
- Inclusion of Traveller and Roma students in all college induction and promotion initiatives, and employment of Travellers in Access Services;
- The naming, promotion and embedding of Traveller culture, identity and history throughout the HEIs recognising also the institutional racism Travellers experience.

Tracey noted that for those such as herself living in small mobile homes with little space and big families, finding room to study is especially challenging. Due to closures of community centres and libraries it is difficult to access study space outside home, making completion of assignments extremely challenging. These issues have led to huge anxiety for Traveller students

She highlighted the importance of employing Travellers and Roma in access services to play a key role in supporting Traveller students and breaking down barriers as people with full knowledge of the issues and challenges for Travellers in Irish society. *'Nothing for Travellers without Travellers'*.

With regard to institutional racism, Tracey underlined the importance of recognising and naming racism and ensuring that training is in place to combat and address it across the education spectrum.

The Chair thanked the speakers, remarking that the power of the process and of the Forum Report was in the centrality of the voices of Travellers themselves as they speak about their lived experience and reality, the common challenges that they face, and the actions needed to address them.

Break Out Group Discussion

Three questions provided the focus for the break-out discussions:

1. What is your reaction to the Forum report?
2. Having considered the report, which recommendations could you implement or action in your own institution?
3. Having considered the report, which recommendations would you like to see implemented or actioned at a national level?

What was your reaction to the Report?

Participants welcomed the report, praised its model, its timeliness and its focus on needs, accessibility and strong recommendations with long and short-term actions and the potential to spark policy change.

The importance of amplifying the voice of Travellers in the process of seeking policy change was stressed, *'It was Travellers speaking about their experiences, their barriers and challenges and also what worked well, which is equally important'*. Related to this is the importance of continuing to build leadership and role models in the community and of giving parity and priority to Traveller organisations roles and advice in all access initiatives.

Many of the issues raised are not new and although some positive changes are happening in terms of numbers, the numbers themselves are disappointing and much progress is clearly needed in all of the areas discussed in the report. *"There are 61 Irish Travellers in 20 HEIs – that is an average of 3 students per HEI. This is not enough"*.

They noted the relevance and importance of references to unconscious bias in the report given the reality that staff populations in the HEIs are not diverse and for the most part, represent privilege. Anti-Traveller racism was described as acceptable and not acknowledged as racism by the majority of the wider population – a key issue that needs to be addressed.

References in the report to the digital divide were noted and work being done by Galway Traveller Movement to address this issue was highlighted, again stressing the importance of linking and engaging with Traveller groups locally.

Questions were asked as to the nature of the courses that Traveller students are undertaking (e.g., the extent to which Travellers are gaining professional qualifications in medicine, teaching, law etc. and the need for disaggregated data in this area).

The huge pressure on Traveller organisations during COVID-19 was recognised.

Group members spoke of their shock at the prospect of a lost education generation, something which requires immediate essential action including from themselves.

Participants noted good ongoing work including this Roundtable and the Forum, and the importance of sharing and building on these initiatives such as the Star Pupil initiative and the Kerry Integrated Travellers Education Group (KITE).

Technological University Dublin (TUD), for instance, provides a course called 'Access to Apprenticeships' which is a 6-week introductory course. Five Traveller men have participated on the course to date.

Most HEIs have an equality and diversity training module for staff – for instance, every new lecturer in TUD must take part in two hours of intercultural and diversity training. More information on Travellers needs to be included, however: given the short nature of the programme it is difficult to cover all aspects. All HEIs need to do Anti- Racism Training inclusive of Anti-Traveller racism for all staff

In terms of the data collection, College Connect are working with AIRO to design an intuitive mapping and community engagement tool that can tell the story of Traveller and Roma student progressions, such as where is there a need for services and also what types of services are working. However, overall disaggregated data using an ethnic identifier is also an essential requirement

Attention was drawn to the importance of Traveller role models, e.g. as teachers, and the establishment of a new post with the NCCA to develop specific Traveller inclusion in the curriculum was noted.

It was suggested that more work needs to be done to support the development of educational services at all QQI levels as key in assisting students with the transition from post-primary to 3rd level.

Participants emphasized the need to make educational settings far more culturally and socially supportive for Traveller and Roma students and their parents.

Participants acknowledged the difficulties for Travellers in accessing apprenticeship sponsors. It was suggested that programmes with a defined and practical progression can work very well: the Travellers Primary Health Care Programmes and the current Pavee Point/HSE/ Maynooth University initiative were cited as examples. Continuity, consistency and mainstream support for such initiatives is key.

Funding remains a significant issue. Withdrawal of funding for specific Traveller educational supports, such as the Visiting Teacher Service and afterschool supports, were retrograde steps having a significant impact on Traveller education. The need for long-term funding, resources and supports targeting the Traveller and Roma communities' inclusion in Higher Education was stressed.

It is vital that students are supported to access laptops and mobile hotspot devices so that the WiFi and broadband connection can be tackled.

Participants stressed the imperative for HEIs to collaborate and work in partnership to tackle the issues.

Data Collection was considered to be extremely important and a more uniform, focused approach and strategy to coordinate data collection and establish baseline data was called for.

Participants stressed the importance of training and engagement (anti-racism, bystander intervention) and culture and identity campaigns identifying key allies and supporters within each HEI.

Losing the face-to-face connection between students and staff was considered a major concern with the potential to further exclude students and lose the impact of that 'one positive person' that students rely on

for support. *'Many students wouldn't trust a university/ establishment but would trust one person'*. Face to face contact is also crucial to supporting students at the initial stages of entry to third level.

Other areas for consideration included:

- The need to extend outreach and engagement beyond DEIS schools which many Travellers do not attend
- Bringing information about access routes to communities in a more accessible way
- Shifting to more targeted supports rather than a general approach
- Being more considerate of the difficulties of blended online learning and the ways in which it is exclusionary
- Maintaining one to one connection through phone calls or on-line where appropriate
- On return to campus – acknowledging the need for 'safe spaces' and making spaces open and available when people don't have anywhere else to study
- Developing Partnership with Travellers and Traveller organisation in relation to all aspects.

'If you haven't been inclusive in your approach before you can try something new now and this can be a fresh beginning'.

'This is everyone's responsibility'.

Having considered the report, which recommendations could you implement or action in collaboration with other HEIs/community partners/other organisations?

Interest was expressed in exploring how resources like libraries and study spaces can best prioritise access for Travellers – particularly as many of these are not operating as usual. The potential for collaborative provision of technology and IT supports was also discussed.

Suggestions were put forward in relation to developing a programme for undergraduate students to support homework clubs in Traveller organisations. Partnership with Traveller organisations was identified as important and strengthening the relationship was proposed.

Collaboration it was suggested could also happen in the provision of parental supports and mentoring supports.

The need for part-time fees to be covered by grants and scholarships was recognised as a major step which needs to be taken. The removal of barriers to access for part-time students was called for.

The need for consistent and comprehensive disaggregated data on Traveller participation was again raised.

It was suggested that a list be made of all local Traveller organisations to ensure that use is made of all community resources and connections.

'Underpinning much of all action is the importance of institutional anti-racism strategies and anti-racism training which includes racism against Travellers'.

Having considered the report, which recommendations would you like to see implemented or actioned at a national level?

The main recommendations made in relation to this question were:

- Employment of Traveller Access officers/ Traveller Support workers in all HEIs and Access Offices and throughout the country.
- Anti-racism and cultural competency training for teaching staff at all levels.
- A specific ring fenced and targeted national funding line for Travellers in higher education
- Strategic uniform and national IT provision for Travelers, including training for Travellers in use of IT.
- Full implementation of the Action Plan to Promote Traveller Participation in Higher Education
- Establishment of a forum to harness and amplify the voices of Traveller students and alumni.
- Continue on from this roundtable with more conversation and strategic partnership nationally that will provoke rapid change and improve sustainability
- Learning from pilot projects should be mainstreamed, and initiatives drawn from them to support access, progression and outcomes should be funded and supported on an ongoing basis
- Traveller education must be seen in a holistic way from pre-school to third level – focusing solely on third level will not achieve true education equality for Travellers.

Plenary Session

Following feedback from discussion groups participants were asked for additional comments. Points raised included the following:

- There is potential for provision of online mentoring for Traveller 2020 Leaving Cert students in association with Traveller organisations
- Eileen Flynn's achievement is historic, for Eileen and for the Traveller community as a whole, and is having a powerful impact on all Travellers. We need to see Travellers in all aspects of the body politic and all aspects of the Irish state. The Forum report contextualises the inequalities Travellers experience in the education system. We need to move beyond re-articulation of issues to implementation of strategies and plans with resources and supports for implementation.
- ICT grants need to be actioned straight away as a matter of priority to ensure no digital divide and equality for all students in relation to remote learning
- Issues remain regarding getting access to funding for part time 3rd level students
- Local Traveller education interagency groups, inclusive of local Traveller organisations, should be established to develop and implement local strategies and action plans
- GDPR is not a block to ethnic data collection, which should be done centrally with a comprehensive strategic approach
 - Such strategies need to be national policy with a structure in place to collect and examine data, linking locally and engaging with Traveller groups.
 - Further Education Institutions need to be accountable, with entry routes for Travellers specifically designed for them
- Pilots are useful but lessons and effective models must be mainstreamed
- We need to track the kinds of courses Travellers are accessing and those they may feel excluded from
- Greater numbers of Traveller students will enter and succeed at third level when an integrated progression strategy from Post Primary to Further Education exists.

- The HEA Equal Access Survey asks questions on ethnic identity. Incoming first year students complete the survey. In 2020/21 it will ask about Roma students for the first time. The survey needs to follow the census formula and use an ethnic identifier.

Closing Comments

Anastasia Crickley

Anastasia noted that the Roundtable created the space to take steps forward towards a very practical and action-oriented agenda with national level implications calling for a national strategy and immediate progress. She reiterated the need for an urgent strategy to avoid a lost generation, a strategy that focuses on key priorities such as funding, disaggregated data and IT supports. She highlighted renewed calls for institutional level commitments to ensure Traveller and Roma culture and identity are acknowledged, supported and resourced within institutions. She underlined issues regarding funding and relationship building and collaboration with Traveller organisations locally all of whom are ready and willing to engage.

Niamh Reilly

Niamh pledged the support of Aontas, the national learning organization, to support the work being undertaken. Aontas are chairing the Mitigating Education Disadvantage Group - a key space to identify issues in the new learning context to feed into the Department of Education and ensure that they are addressed in an immediate way. Niamh drew attention to the new Department of Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, stating that there is an opportunity to ensure that there is a focus on inclusion, and that all key stakeholders are at the table to be part of those discussions. She highlighted the importance of ensuring collaboration in amplifying the issues raised and recommendations made with a strong united voice.

Eilish Bergin

Eilish thanked the organisers for the opportunity to hear again the voices and concerns of those present and to explore the potential for future collaboration. There is a new opportunity now with a new department for higher education and commitment in the Programme for Government to improve Traveller participation in higher education. Acknowledging that the current target for Travellers in third level is low, she stressed that having a target gave impetus to moving forward. She referenced the importance of the new *Action Plan to Promote Traveller Participation in Higher Education* which refocuses attention on Traveller participation and supports, and the potential of the PATH program to increase Traveller participation in higher education. She noted the year-on-year increases in the number of Travellers coming through the 1916 scheme and specific resources being allocated for this. She highlighted the importance of pilots in terms of developing learning and building a strong evidence base for particular approaches.

She acknowledged the importance of resourcing for part time programmes and reinforced the need for the collection and collation of disaggregated data and for collaboration and interagency approaches at local and national levels which she said, the Department are committed to advancing.

Valerie Moore

Valerie thanked the organisers, speakers, all participants and those who attended the previous Forum for the passionate, enthusiastic, and dedicated response to the recommendations of the report. She raised the immediate concern that the progress made to date for Traveller students may be lost in the crisis, and that present and future learners will experience a new legacy of disadvantage, on top of a history of exclusion and discrimination in access to education.

Traveller and Roma communities, she said have spoken. Their experiences have been documented, shared and heard. The recommendations made have been received positively by all who have engaged. It is encouraging too she said, that government has made a commitment to the Traveller and Roma communities in terms of education.

She reiterated key issues raised in the discussions and referred particularly to concerns in relation to a 'lost generation' including the 300 students mentioned in the report, who were due to sit their Leaving Cert this summer. As well as responding to COVID-19, these processes and recommendations, she said, are also responding to a history of Traveller educational disadvantage.

Valerie posed two questions for those present: What *can* I do now? and What am I *going to* do now? Key to the answer, she said, are collaboration, sharing and partnership. '*There is no new policy, no new funding, needed to do that: that can happen now*'.