

Summary Report on Sharing Good Practice in Higher Education Access & Participation during COVID-19

Use & Impact of the Dormant Accounts Fund for Traveller Students

18th November 2021 (10am – 12.30pm) via Zoom

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Introduction

The *Sharing Good Practice in Higher Education Access & Participation during COVID-19* series of events was organised by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to facilitate reflection and discussion on the challenges faced by Access Officers and support services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The idea stems from the work of the National Access Plan (NAP) Steering Group where it was suggested that a community of practice event would create a space for a collective approach to supporting outreach, retention and completion for NAP target students during the COVID-19 period. The first event – *Delivery of Access and Support Services during COVID-19: One*

Year On – was held in March 2021 and facilitated a wide and varied discussion on the many challenges faced by Access Offices and support services in the 12 months since the emergence of COVID-19.

In November 2020, Minister Harris announced ring-fenced funding of €300,000 to support students from the Traveller community. This funding came from the Dormant Accounts Fund. The funding was aimed at Traveller progression to, and retention in, higher education during the pandemic. It could be used to support students with study spaces, health and social impacts, caring responsibilities and technology supports. On 12 November 2021, Minister Harris announced a continuation of this Fund in the amount of €450,000 to support Travellers and Roma students in higher education.

The *Use & Impact of the Dormant Accounts Fund for Traveller Students* event, held on 18 November 2021, provided an opportunity for stakeholders to share learning and experiences on the use of the Dormant Accounts Fund and evaluate how it is supporting Traveller participation in higher education. This event also provided the opportunity to discuss the ways in which this Fund can be used in 2022 to further support Traveller and Roma participation in higher education.

The event was delivered remotely via Zoom and a total of 74 attendees joined on the day. Participants were from largely representatives of Access, Disability and Support Services, Community Partners, HEI and Further Education (FE) staff, officials from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and HEA staff.

Caitríona Ryan (Head of Access Policy, HEA) opened and introduced the day's event. Dr Denise Frawley (Senior Manager, HEA) provided a summary of HEI project plans and chaired the first session which included presentations from NUIG, TU Dublin and UCD. In the second session, attendees heard from two Traveller students on their experiences of higher education and working life. The third session was chaired by Neil McDermott (Senior Manager, HEA) and involved a discussion of key themes in four breakout rooms. A summary of these sessions will now be outlined.

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Session 1: Presentations on the Use and Impact of the Fund

Representatives from three HEIs presented on their use of the Dormant Accounts Fund so far and how it has impacted students. Dr Mary Surlis (Senior Manager, NUIG Access Centre) presented on NUIG's experience of pre-entry supports for Travellers to progress to higher education. Key discussion points included:

- The importance of consultation with local Irish Traveller organisations and community groups
- Identifying structures that need to be in place to ensure successful progression • In order to

address the social and cultural divide, it firstly needs to be acknowledged and recognised

Sinead Dunne (Student Services Officer, TU Dublin) and Nicola Moses (Access Officer, TU Dublin) presented on post-entry supports for Traveller students in higher education. Key discussion points included:

- Anti-racism and learner's voice centred approaches are critical to ensure success
- Important to highlight and create awareness of the unique barriers experienced by Traveller students when engaging with education during the pandemic
- Workshops and preparing for placements

Dr Hannah McGinley, who comes from a Traveller background, presented on UCD's research on pathways to higher education for Travellers & Roma students. Key discussion points included:

- There needs to be core Traveller representation in HEIs. Traveller students need to 'see it to believe it'
- Inclusion of minority groups needs to be addressed at an institutional level
- Specific mentorship programmes for Traveller students are important

Session 2: Sharing experiences of higher education & how the Fund can be utilised further in 2022

During this session, attendees heard from two Traveller women on their experiences of higher education and working life during COVID-19. Tracey Reilly (Education Officer, Pavee Point) spoke about her experience as a final year student in Maynooth University and how, with the support of the Access office, she was able to secure Wi-Fi and successfully engage with her coursework. Tracey also highlighted the need for adequate study spaces for Traveller students.

Megan Berry (Traveller Outreach Officer, Maynooth University) spoke about her experience as a Traveller student and the impact that her new role as Traveller Outreach Officer is having on other students. Megan highlighted the need for more roles like hers in a full-time capacity, something that can only be made possible with long-term and sustainable funding.

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Session 3: Discussion of Key Themes

Attendees were divided into four breakout rooms to discuss a number of important themes. The questions to be considered by the groups included the following:

- What are the main learnings from the use of the Fund in 2021?
- What are the challenges for Traveller & Roma students?
- How can this Fund be used in 2022 to further support Traveller and Roma participation in higher education?
- Should a similar allocation model be used for 2022?

The next section provides a summary of the main points raised throughout the discussions.

Targeted supports

COVID-19 has exacerbated financial hardship for many Traveller students and highlighted the need for additional funding in order to ensure progression and retention of students from this group in higher education. The use of this Fund to provide targeted financial supports or bursaries to Traveller students has been helpful to these students during an extremely difficult time. However, it was also noted that supports should not just be focused on financial supports. Funding should also be used to increase targeted careers guidance for Traveller students at all levels.

Evidence-based supports

Ensuring that supports are evidence-based and consider research approaches with ethnic minority communities is critical. The different types of barriers that exist at separate key transition points for Traveller and Roma students should be factored into the design of these focused supports and interventions.

Inter-institutional collaboration

Stronger and more effective mechanisms for sharing information and building linkages between HEIs would be extremely beneficial. The Whidden Workshops and Traveller Graduate Network were highlighted as good examples of this. Some attendees also welcomed the opportunity to hold more events such as the Sharing of Good Practice event with a Traveller focus to build connections and work to ensure a collective voice that can also impact on national policy. Several participants supported the idea of a Traveller education support network to share experiences and support.

Traveller representation in HE sector

Some participants called for more Traveller representation and awareness in HEIs. For example, this can be achieved through greater employment of Travellers within the HE sector, and Traveller representation should not be limited to Access offices. Necessary training should be provided to Travellers who wish to expand their careers outside of Access. HEIs should also

ensure that there are anti-racism policies in place and that they are addressing any cultural barriers. Funding should be used to ensure this.

Limitations of the Dormant Accounts Fund

Several attendees discussed how effectively the Dormant Accounts Fund worked in 2021 but noted that the timing of the allocation was flagged as a serious issue, with a number of attendees advising that they felt the notification of the allocation of the fund felt rushed. The time constraints of the funding were too tight for some HEIs, resulting in it being difficult to spend. Similarly, the deadlines for spending impede HEIs' ability to plan and be strategic.

HEIs should be given maximum flexibility to decide what is best in their regions and to decide how the funds should be utilised so it can be given to students, partners and communities. Examples were given of some community organisations which had very specific requests for

supporting Travellers but because of the limitations of where the funding could be used it could not be provided. Likewise, if money is provided to community groups from a college, these partners also require time to put things in place and this may not be achievable for them, putting them under significant pressure. One organisation could not accept funding because of this.

Sustainable Funding

While the Dormant Accounts funding was welcome as an immediate fix to address issues affecting Traveller students exacerbated by the pandemic, it was noted by several attendees that longer term funding and planning is absolutely vital. It is very difficult to have a long-term vision for programmes when there is no certainty in future funding to support and deliver these programmes. Reliable long term funding infrastructure and long-term supports are required, particularly in achieving ambitious targets for Traveller and Roma students in higher education. These outreach projects need to take a longitudinal approach to ensure successful outcomes including sufficient time, planning, and resourcing and the opportunity for proper relationships with the community and key stakeholders to be developed.

Funding is also required for further resourcing and staffing of Access offices. Many Access offices do not have adequate resources, the administrative and reporting burden is becoming increasingly heavier, and hours have increased for Access and Outreach officers during the pandemic. The short-term nature of funding impacts on staffing and can make it difficult to secure staff due to the lack of security around project timelines and contracts. A sustainable funding infrastructure needs to be put in place to ensure that Access offices can acquire the staff they need to continue supporting Traveller students accessing higher education.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the barriers that already existed for Traveller students. There is serious concern that the impact of the pandemic will continue to exacerbate educational disadvantage. For example, digital divide continues to be a serious issue affecting the Traveller Community. Some attendees highlighted the importance of ensuring that all students have an adequate level of digital literacy skills and access to broadband and digital

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devices in order to have the best opportunity to succeed. The impact of the pandemic may result in a 'lost generation' as a result of school closures, widespread disruption to teaching and learning and ongoing lack of access to digital resources and skills, and study spaces to engage in online learning. This needs to be factored into planning and funding responses to mitigate against and avoid deepening these educational and social inequalities.

Whole-of-Education approach

The critical importance of a Whole-of-Education approach to supporting Traveller progression to higher education was underlined by several attendees. It is extremely difficult for HEIs and Access offices to work on the progression of Traveller students into higher education if these students are not successfully advancing through primary and secondary levels. There is a need for focused attention on the widespread issues affecting Traveller students across all levels of the education system in Ireland and the real barriers and discrimination affecting these students

at pre-school, primary and post-primary stages of their educational journey.

Anti-racism and discrimination policies

Some attendees highlighted the ongoing and continued discrimination Travellers continue to face during their studies and after graduation. This can make students reluctant to identify themselves as members of the Traveller community or become involved in mentorship or network opportunities as it can be perceived as potentially adversely impacting their education or career prospects. Attendees discussed HEI policies taken across the sector, including anti racism policies and training for staff, changes to HEI culture, curricula, and language as core elements. This would allow for the creation of more inclusive and welcoming campus environments.

Traveller-led initiatives and a co-design approach to projects

Several participants advised that they were greatly encouraged to learn more about some of the Traveller-led initiatives during this event, noting the impressive and impactful projects happening in HEIs across the country. Hearing directly from some of the strong Traveller representatives working within the sector and getting their perspective and insight was also welcome. The importance of Traveller-led projects and outreach activities was highlighted. These projects ensure that the Traveller voice is heard. Outreach activities and supports should be properly researched and developed in collaboration with Traveller organisations and communities, in line with the 'nothing about us without us' approach.

Community-based approach and partnership model

Many attendees agreed on the importance of properly recognising and investing in relationship building with community groups and taking a community-based approach to outreach work. Improving links with community groups and partners should be a priority of every HEI. It can be difficult to measure success in this aspect of outreach work, especially in the short term, but the value of investing in relationships and building trust with community groups is immense. Successful engagement with DEIS schools and STAR projects were highlighted as examples. Community partnerships are extremely important when working with the parents and families

of Traveller students when addressing some of the cultural barriers that may prevent them from accessing higher education.

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Summary

The *Use & Impact of the Dormant Accounts Fund for Traveller Students* event provided an important opportunity for stakeholders to come together to discuss the barriers facing Traveller students in accessing higher education and the actions that can be taken to support both Traveller and Roma students. As emphasised throughout the presentations, it is vital that Traveller students are supported throughout their higher education journey.

The event highlighted how COVID-19 has exacerbated many of the challenges faced by Traveller

and Roma students. In addition to structural barriers, Traveller and Roma students also face attitudinal and cultural barriers. Participants highlighted how these issues can be addressed further through anti-racism and discrimination policies in HEIs, staff training and awareness programmes, and working with Traveller and Roma students and their families/communities to better understand their culture. Most importantly, the Traveller voice needs to be central in these discussions and there needs to be greater representation in the HE sector to provide mentorship to Traveller students.

The Dormant Accounts Fund has been used in 2021 to provide widespread supports to Traveller students to alleviate the burden and stresses exacerbated by the pandemic. In 2022, HEIs will be afforded the opportunity to build on their excellent work through the continuation of the Dormant Accounts Fund for a second year. This funding will also be used to support the participation of Roma students in higher education.