

Marino Institute of Education

Opening Statement

Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community

- I. Marino Institute of Education (MIE) welcomes and appreciates the opportunity to engage with the Joint Committee. MIE is a teaching, learning and research community committed to promoting inclusion and excellence in education. It has a long and proud involvement with education, specifically Initial Teacher Education (ITE), dating back over 100 years.
- II. MIE currently has 1183 students, of whom 52% are registered on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes, at either undergraduate or postgraduate levels. We would like to bring our work on Initial Teacher Education and specifically our efforts to increase access to ITE programmes for members of the Traveller community to the attention of the committee today.
- III. Currently, based on information disclosed to us, there are three members of the Traveller Community enrolled on programmes in the Institute, 0.2% of the student population. Two of these students have enrolled as a direct result of the Institute's TOBAR project, a targeted intervention-based initiative with the purpose of increasing access to ITE programmes for Travellers. TOBAR is a three-year project funded under the HEA's Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH). Strand 1 of PATH specifically focuses on diversifying ITE.
- IV. The TOBAR project commenced in May 2018 with an overall objective of enrolling four Travellers on ITE programmes. To date, two Traveller students have progressed via TOBAR to ITE programmes: one is enrolled in a PME (Primary Teaching) programme at MIE and the other has enrolled in a PME (Post-Primary Teaching) programme at NUI Maynooth. A third student has enrolled in MIE's Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Further Education), which is recognised by the Teaching Council.
- V. You will note that the students mentioned are all studying at postgraduate level, and all of whom have completed a Leaving Certificate and an undergraduate degree programme. From its outset, TOBAR established a two-strand approach for its intervention. Strand 1 focuses on Traveller students (15-18 years old) who aspire to become teachers; and Strand 2 focuses on Travellers who may want to enrol on the B.Ed. programme through the mature entry route or for those who have already completed an undergraduate degree to enrol on the PME programme.
- VI. In 2019/20, the project is putting additional focus on Strand 1 in order to further identify students in post-primary schools who may aspire to become teachers. The project has already established positive relationships with schools, community groups and, in many cases, individual families. Strand 1 of the project has nine students registered at the moment, ranging from Junior Certificate to Leaving Certificate years. In each case, the TOBAR project officer works in collaboration with school staff to determine each student's (i) interest, (ii)

disposition and (iii) academic ability. Suitable supports and interventions are then scheduled depending on the individual needs of the student and what school year the student is in.

- VII. Much of the initial engagement on Strand 1 revolves around the delivery of in-school workshops for students on becoming a primary teacher, meetings with families, and follow up visits to Marino for interested students. Over the course of the project, it is expected that 30 such workshops will be delivered. In addition, our project officer has engaged in sustained collaboration with Traveller groups and, for example, has been invited to join the board of Exchange House.
- VIII. Though the TOBAR project is only in its second year of activity, we have learned a good deal about the concerns, fears and difficulties Traveller students face in school. We have also learned about the frustration of Traveller graduates in terms of their careers post third level study.
- IX. It is telling that the first reaction from Traveller students in the workshops is incredulity at the suggestion that they could, if they so wished, become teachers. The lack of ambition within the students to become a teacher, or to pursue any professional career, reflects society's failure and that of the education system to actively promote careers to Traveller students.
- X. Traveller students we have worked with often show a lack of belief in themselves. This combined with a lack of belief within the education system itself (Higher Education included) that Traveller students *can* succeed in pursuing professional careers often results in a student dropping back to Ordinary Level or Foundation Level in their subjects for reasons not aligned with academic ability, without any intervention to highlight the long term consequences this could have for the student in terms of accessing higher education. ITE programmes have minimum entry requirements and it is vitally important that a student who aspires to a teaching career is aware of the necessity to achieve the minimum entry requirements and to maintain enough Higher Level subjects in order to achieve points to access an ITE programme through the CAO. In such a case, it is equally important for the student's family and teachers to be conscious of the student's aspiration and provide what support they can. We recognise that for many families in the Traveller community this may be difficult as they might not have enough knowledge of the education system or the confidence to insist a student remain at Higher Level. We also recognise that families are very unlikely to be able to provide additional academic supports such as grinds.
- XI. It is important to emphasise that our engagement with schools through TOBAR has been extremely positive. The level of facilitation that has been afforded to TOBAR by school staff has been, and will be, integral to the successful achievement of the project's aims. MIE's partners within the Leinster Pillar 1 Cluster have also been generous with their time, expertise, and resources. We acknowledge the HEA as the funder of TOBAR and we appreciate the HEA's ongoing support for TOBAR.
- XII. Within MIE, TOBAR is operated on a team approach, and I thank all involved. The project has a small operational budget that co-funds 0.5 of an FTE, with the Institute co-funding the

remaining 0.5. The Institute has accessed a small stream of philanthropic funding to support Traveller students who enter our programmes. However, if the Institute is to continue to bring Travellers through either strand of the TOBAR programme additional operational funding and funding to support students while on their ITE programmes will need to be sourced. At MIE, we are acutely conscious that for any third-level institution raising aspirations, and subsequent expectations, for members of the Traveller Community at school level without having the resources to support Traveller students' access, retention and progression through their ITE programmes represents a significant risk. Therefore, as part of our recommendations in our written submission, we strongly suggest consideration be given to establishing a centralised funding stream to support Travellers to pursue ITE opportunities.