

Opening Statement to Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community, 3 December 2019

Good morning Chairperson, Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to speak at the Committee today on the topic of access to higher education and the Traveller community.

The third National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015 -2019) was published in December 2015.

The vision of that Plan is to ensure that the student body participating in, and completing, higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. The plan identifies Irish Travellers as one of the target groups that are currently under-represented in higher education. Therefore, improving participation rates in higher education for members of the Traveller community is a priority goal for the HEA and wider higher education sector.

Number of Travellers in Higher Education

In our submission to the Committee, we discuss the targets set for Traveller participation in higher education and progress to date. The Progress Review of the National Access Plan published in December 2018 showed that there were 41 Traveller students in the 2016/17 academic year. This is disappointing given that the baseline at the commencement of the Plan was 35. It is encouraging that there was a significant increase in 2017/18 to 61, but we are still some way off the target in the National Access Plan of 80 students by 2019. There are probably more Travellers in higher education than formally recorded; but determining the actual numbers is ultimately dependent on self-identification by the students concerned.

Policy interventions and actions have been put in place to support the goals of the National Access Plan and in order to increase the participation rate of all National Access Plan target groups, including Irish Travellers.

As part of Budgets 2016 and 2017 the Government committed €16.2m in funding over 3 years for the Programme for Access to Higher Education Fund (PATH). This comprises dedicated funding to support access to higher education and consists of three strands. This funding covers all target group students which means members of the Traveller community can benefit from the range and diversity of projects funded.

PATH 1 seeks to increase the number of students from under-represented groups entering initial teacher education. Our submission to the Committee describes some of the projects funded under this strand of PATH and the impact they have had in respect of students from the Traveller community. The Committee will be aware of the PATH 1 funded project, TOBAR, arising from the meeting with Marino Institute of Education (MIE) last week.

PATH 2 is the 1916 Bursary Fund which provides financial support to students identified by clusters of higher education institutions as being most economically disadvantaged from specified target groups. Funding of €6m has been provided over a three-year period (commencing in the academic year 2017/18). The Fund supports 200 bursaries a year with each bursary in the amount of €5,000 per annum.

As noted in our submission, students from the Traveller community have been successful in applying for bursaries. In the last academic year, 2018/19, 13 students from Traveller community received bursaries from a total number of 17 Traveller students who applied.

PATH 3 supports institutional capacity in developing regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education by specified groups. Funding of €7.5 million will be provided over three years to the clusters of higher education institutions. Projects with a focus on Travellers include an education programme in the Mid-West cluster of institutions and a Traveller-focussed work package in the South cluster.

Our written submission also outlines some of the other supports available to Traveller students in higher education such as the Student Assistance Fund. Through their access and student support services, higher education institutions are also well placed to provide support and care for all students. Our higher education institutions are aware of the challenges faced by students from the Traveller community and all are committed to not only increase the number of Traveller students but also to ensure that the institution is welcoming and supportive environment for them.

In addition to PATH and existing supports, last week the Department of Education and Skills published an Action Plan for increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education. The Action Plan will bring coherence to initiatives and will play an important role in bringing the issue of Traveller participation onto the higher education policy agenda and monitoring progress towards the targets set in the National Action Plan.

There was significant attendance from Traveller organisations at the third National Access Forum held in March 2019 and a Traveller student took part in a panel discussion on building partnerships and breaking down barriers. Similarly, a Student Success Symposium held in October saw a Traveller student take part in a student-led discussion on their college experience. In 2020 the HEA will also conduct a study on mature student participation that as part of its terms of reference will examine the challenges and barriers faced by mature students who are members of the Traveller community.

The HEA recognises that members of the Traveller community are still subject to many forms of discrimination and that many have felt that higher education has not been a realistic option or pathway for them. However, the HEA is committed to working with Traveller groups, the Department of Education and Skills and our higher education system to ensure that the goals and targets for Travellers in the National Access Plan are achieved and that Travellers are equitably represented in the higher education student population.

The work of this Committee also supports these goals and we look forward to hearing the Members' views on these important matters.