



The Irish Traveller Movement

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Submission to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Re: The Committee's examination of Leaving Certificate Reform

Background

Founded in 1990, the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) is the national advocacy and membership platform which brings together Travellers and representative organisations to develop collective solutions on issues faced by the community to achieve greater equality for Travellers. We represent Traveller interests in national governmental, international and human rights settings. We challenge racism- individual, cultural and structural which Travellers face and promote integration and equality. We are led by our grassroots community membership, deliver expertise in shaping organisations locally and promote community leadership ensuring Traveller's voices are at the forefront of all discussions.

ITM is mandated by our membership of over 40 local Traveller groups to bring forward policy and related matters to national structures and represented on the national NTRIS Education Working Group Sub-committee coordinated under the Department of Education (DE). We are also the innovators of the Yellow Flag Programme -the school based intercultural programme.

The Irish Traveller Movement welcome the invitation to make a submission to the Joint Committee on the subject of Leaving Cert Reform in general and on the following key areas:

1. **Assessment Options**
2. **Key Subject Areas and Digital Learning**
3. **Access, Equality and Well Being Supports**
4. **Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths**

The Irish Traveller Movement refer here also, to observations made in the **Yellow Flag Programme** submission to the Joint Committee regarding Leaving Cert Reform and to the recommendations therein.

Summary recommendations

Assessment options

Review and revision of current assessment approaches in favour of increasing emphasis on non-exam approaches to better supporting the overall wellbeing of students.

Introduce greater variety of assessment approaches, for example, project or practical work, with flexible language supports, to provide a more accurate reflection of the range of skills in the diverse student population

Any final proposal for Leaving Cert assessment methods to be submitted to a diversity/ethnic minority panel for approval

Continue with practice of external and blind assessment in order to override issues pertaining to racism and unconscious bias

Key Subject areas and digital learning

Incorporate life skills and wellbeing as core components of the senior cycle/ leaving cert curriculum
More diverse, flexible and student-centred pathways available which are more suitable and inclusive of all students
Embed intercultural education across all Leaving cert subjects
Conduct a diversity audit of Leaving Cert learning materials for key subjects, to ensure that they accurately reflect the demographic make-up of Ireland, such as Travellers, Roma and other minority groups
Implement an anti-racism component in the curricula.
Ensure equal access to digital technology and associated measures to address the digital divide where digital learning is a core component of the senior cycle

Access, Equality and Well Being Supports

Require all schools to develop and implement an anti-racism policy and a whole-school strategy to combat racism
Compulsory anti-racism and intercultural training for all teachers as part of pre-service and in-service teacher training developed and implemented to root out conscious and unconscious bias, to create intercultural understanding

Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths

Develop more targeted approach and in-school support for Travellers to transition from senior cycle to third level

Context

Travellers are an indigenous ethnic minority confirmed by historical sources to be part of Irish society for centuries. Travellers' long shared history, cultural values, language, customs and traditions make them a self-defined group and one which is recognisable and distinct. Traveller culture and way of life, of which nomadism is an essential factor, is distinct from the settled population.

Census 2016 showed 30,987 Travellers self-identified, but a closer estimation of population is found in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) last available data 2019, where 10,809 families were enumerated (between 45,397 and 57,287 people) throughout the 31 local authority areas.

Travellers are among the most marginalised communities in Ireland. Long term exclusion, and experience of discrimination has had a detrimental effect on Traveller's life chances and outcomes across the various social indicators such as health, education, employment, and socio-economic status. Gaps in participation, progression and achievement between Travellers and their settled counterparts in education are significantly lower.

Of 1 million pupils enrolled nationally in Ireland in 2019, primary and post primary, 11,000 were Travellers, **3,000** of whom were in second level. In 2020 it's estimated **300 Travellers** took the leaving cert, half for the traditional exam and half for the Vocational or Applied Cert¹.

Gaps in Traveller participation, progression and achievement in education compared to their settled counterparts are significantly lower and many decades long showing;

- In 2016 only 13% of Travellers had completed senior cycle at second level versus 92% non-Travellers²
- 57% of Traveller boys had only primary-education compared to 13% nationally¹
- 13% of female Travellers were educated to upper secondary or above compared with 69.1% of the general population¹
- Of those who left second level education early, 55% left by the age of 15³
- 4 out of 10 Travellers said they or their children had been bullied in school because of their identity as Travellers²

Challenges to progression in Education

¹ Department of Education POD and PPOD on request

² CSO, Available: <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/presspages/2017/census2016profile8-irishtravellersethnicityandreligion/>

³ Behaviours & Attitudes (2017), Traveller Community National Survey. Available at: https://exchangehouse.ie/publications_nationaltravellerssurvey2017.php

Any reform to the Leaving cert and senior cycle must be considered within the context and structures of the wider education system and therefore must take into account the challenges and obstacles faced by Travellers in the junior cycle and at primary level, as well as the challenges in progressing to third level or employment, subsequent to completing the leaving cert and senior cycle.

These challenges include:

1. **Retention of Traveller students in post primary** which remains a concern and additional resources are urgently required to defeat early school leaving. The long called for Traveller Education Strategy across primary, post primary and higher/further education, is still anticipated, and critical to advancing those aims.
2. **No restoration of cuts to the Traveller-specific education supports** (86-100%) in 2011, despite recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to address Ireland's obligations under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Impacts from these cuts have taken more than a decade to erase, and little evidence of improvements in completion rates since then, or equivalent supports in the system towards retention.
3. **No emphasis on targeted supports or a national oversight plan** in second level with the capacity to ensure the Traveller student is supported across the lifetime of their education to enhance the possibility of improving retention and attainment.
4. **Parental experience of the education system**, low literacy, education levels and lack of confidence in the education system as a whole.
5. **Lack of visibility** of Traveller culture in the curriculum and in teaching practice.
6. **Identity based bullying**, and low-level expectation of schools of Traveller pupils.
7. Disproportionate application of a **Reduced Timetable** for Travellers, despite Department of Education guidelines on the practice.
8. The **digital divide and inequality** for Traveller pupils exposed by Covid-19 caused concern. The impacts on Travellers pupils in leaving certificate year 2020 and 2021 is unknown.
9. The **intergenerational experience of unemployment and socio-economic disadvantage**, which might further deter children and parents to pursue third level, the cost of which is more than what a direct bursary scheme can offer.
10. The **impact of inadequate accommodation and overcrowding** on children's overall wellbeing and education progression (over 2,000 families living in inadequate, unsafe conditions in shared and overcrowded accommodation or on roadsides. Travellers also account for 10% of all people in emergency accommodation nationally).

With regard to Leaving Cert Reform, ITM makes the following observations in relation to the key areas indicated.

Assessment Options

There is widespread recognition of the undue stress and anxiety associated with the high-stakes nature of the Leaving Cert Established terminal examinations and the pressure placed on students^{4 5}. The over-emphasis on examinations is having a negative effect on students' wellbeing.

The focus on the terminal exams favours those who are better at exams and more oriented towards written rather than practical displays of learning and fails to recognise and value a wider, more diverse range of knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Options to broaden assessment and examination approaches and methods should be explored so that students have opportunities to display a wider range of learning in a variety of ways. Strong consideration should be given to significantly reducing the weighting given to high-stakes terminal examinations and prioritising different assessment approaches that fully capture the span of student learning and achievements. The greater use of continuous assessment across senior cycle and the use of non-exam approaches should be embraced for their ability to enhance the engagement of students and better reflect and reward the differing sets of skills they develop throughout senior cycle.

However, it is imperative that any model of senior cycle assessment remains objective, fair and free from potential prejudice and anti-Traveller bias.

Key Subject Areas and Digital Learning

Key subject areas

⁴ NCCA (2019), *Interim report of review of senior cycle education*

⁵ ESRI (2019), *Student, Teacher and Parent Perspectives on Senior Cycle Education*, Research Series Number 94.

A more holistic approach to education should be supported at senior cycle which focuses on student-centred pathways, responsive to the diverse needs of students, providing more flexible options and a tailored approach.

Life skills and wellbeing should form a core component of the senior cycle curriculum. A greater emphasis on the development of personal and interpersonal skills and enhancing young people's wellbeing and ability to cope with challenges, has been identified as necessary to better prepare young people for further/higher education, employment and adult life⁶

Ireland is a diverse society made up of a multitude of different cultures, nationalities, ethnicities and identities. Regardless of subject choices, all students should learn about culture, racial justice and further key human rights concepts in order to equip young people with the skills to navigate an intercultural world and work environment.

Similarly, Travellers and other minority groups should see themselves reflected across the Leaving cert curriculum, and not just limited to visibility in diversity and inclusion contexts or in ring-fenced subject areas such as racial justice covered in history.

Digital learning

Any development which places further emphasis on digital learning at senior cycle must also address the current digital divide which exists in our society and which was exposed through the move towards remote and online learning during the Covid pandemic. It highlighted how certain groups including Travellers and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have unequal access to technology, digital devices and adequate internet connection.

Case Study: Digital divide and lack of access supports for Travellers

A post-primary school in South Dublin moved to full digital learning in 2021 and is now 'book free'. A Traveller family with 4 children had one child attending this school and was informed they would be required to pay 70% of the cost of a device and associated programmes uploaded which amounted to €700. This family, who were economically vulnerable and reliant on social welfare payments, were not offered an alternative and instead had to rely on an ad hoc philanthropic donation.

The digital divide has greatly contributed to educational disadvantage for Travellers during Covid. Many Traveller students were unable to participate in their education during Covid due to poor internet connectivity, lack of suitable devices, lack of space, and digital literacy of parents. As a result, many fell behind their peers, were unable to participate in their education, were disconnected from school, and even dropped out altogether.

The shift towards digital learning and digitisation in schools or in wider education policy must make provisions to address this digital inequality, such as free access to digital devices, broadband access, and education and support for students and parents to engage with the technology.

Access, Equality and Well Being Supports

ITM are concerned about the inclusion of all students in senior cycle and in the wider school community and culture.

A soon to be published Government-commissioned report, *Out of the Shadows*⁷, refers to "institutional and structural discrimination and racism within the education system" and includes testimony from Traveller students and parents of low expectations from schools and teachers, bullying, and not feeling included, wanted or safe in school – especially at second level.

As discussed earlier in this submission, Travellers fare far worse than their settled counterparts in terms of progression, achievement, and experiences in education. Travellers should be afforded the same opportunities and equal expectations to non-Travellers at senior cycle.

Higher and Further Education Requirements, Vocational Options and Career Paths

Progression rates of Travellers to third level are low, with only 1% on average having progressed to higher education. Little progress has been made to increase this figure despite the Government's *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* which named Travellers as a target group with a dedicated plan and objectives therein. Many barriers still exist for Travellers in their journey towards third level.

⁶ ESRI (2019), Student, Teacher and Parent Perspectives on Senior Cycle Education, Research Series Number 94

⁷ Quinlan, Maria (2020), *Out of the Shadows: Traveller and Roma Education – Voices from the Communities* (to be published)

Diverse and flexible pathways should be available for students, for example creative, arts-based, vocational or technical pathways, and the ability for students to engage in multiple elements. A student-centred model is required which meaningfully supports and values the wide range of career, education, and training opportunities other than direct entry to third level such as apprenticeships, traineeships and vocational training.

ITM support enhancing provision for students who wish to transition from senior cycle education to apprenticeships, traineeships and further training and employment. Transitioning from senior cycle to third level can be particularly challenging for Travellers without the adequate supports in place to help them navigate this transition. In many cases they are the first person in their family or community to progress to third level due to historic educational disadvantage. Without adequate support through what can be an intimidating, bureaucratic, and complex process, many will fail to progress to third level.