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Moving on: Achieving Equity of Access to Education in Ireland – the case of travelers

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## Moving On: Achieving Equity of Access to Education in Ireland - the Case of Travellers

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This paper examines the issues of Traveller access to higher education in general, and how the Moving On Project at Mary Immaculate College (MIC) is addressing them specifically.

### Overview of Policy Developments at National Level in Ireland

The key legislation and policy developments pertinent to Traveller access to higher education include the following:

#### a) Universities Act (1997)

This Act states universities are required to 'promote access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented'.

#### b) Establishment of the National Office of Equity of Access to Higher Education (2003)

The Office's Action Plan 2005 - 2007, was launched in 2004. Travellers and ethnic minorities are target groups in this Action Plan (but no percentages were set).

#### c) Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy (2006).

In 2003 a Joint Working Group was established drawing membership from the Education Disadvantage Committee (EDC) and the Advisory Committee on Traveller Education (ACTE). The group consisted of representatives from Traveller groups and the education sector.

The general objective in the sector of higher education is that 'higher education, with greater and easier access, should become a real option for Travellers (p.77).'

### Overview of Policy Developments at Mary Immaculate College

#### a) Mary Immaculate College's Special Access Policy (2005)

In 2005 Mary Immaculate College, as part of its commitment to equality and inclusion, developed a Special Access Policy which contains targets for Traveller, Refugee and Ethnic Minority access to college programmes.

#### b) Positive Discrimination for disadvantaged students

Up to 5% of places on college programmes are reserved for Travellers, Refugees and Ethnic Minority Access (MIC, Access Policy 5.1).

## Moving On

Through the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Initiative funding, "Moving On" was created in 2000 to promote access and progression by Travellers and ethnic minorities in third level education.

One of the key objectives includes liaising with local and national Traveller organisations, community groups, community education providers, the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers and voluntary groups.

The first phase of the project involved research on the small number of Travellers (12) who had participated in higher education to examine their experiences and needs. Findings are published in a report by J. Binchy and C. Healy in 2005.

## The current situation of Travellers participating in Third Level

Participation by Travellers in third level remains low. At the present time, third level education is not a possibility for the vast majority of Travellers. Currently, no statistics are compiled by higher education institutions or the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on the ethnic background of entrants to higher education. However, this is changing.

Traveller participation in third level is believed to be just over 1% according to the 2002 Census. This compares to 21% of the general population. Central Statistics Office (CSO) data shows that only 2% of Travellers have completed senior cycle at second level, compared to 23% of the general population for all age groups.

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## Seven Issues of Traveller Education

The following seven issues have been identified by policy-makers, researchers and practitioners in the area of Traveller education:

### Issue 1: Data Collection

For Travellers to become visible to policymakers, accurate data must be gathered by HEIs and the CAO (Recommendation 7 - DES, 2006). This data must be collected and evaluated if targets are to be realistically set and met.

### Issue 2: Supporting Families

There is a need to assist families to be more supportive and open to the idea of Traveller children going on to higher education. Cultural issues often conflict with academic issues for Travellers.

### Issue 3: Promoting Access

There is a need for higher education institutions to provide access to higher education through:

- i) the conventional school leaver route;
  - ii) the mature student route;
  - iii) the further education route;
  - iv) the positive action route;
- Recommendation 2 (DES, 2006).

"Moving On" Access initiatives include:



- iii) Traveller Mentoring Programme at Second Level;
- iv) Mentoring Programme for Ethnic Minority Second Level Students.

“Moving On” has focused on all routes to higher education. Pre-entry mentoring and information has been provided. One school-leaver has gained entry to the B.Ed (2006/07) and an individual tutor/mentor has been appointed. One mature traveller student has completed the college’s pre-entry Foundation Programme (2006/07) and has applied for the B.A. (2007/08).

#### **Issue 4: Financial Barriers**

The financial costs of further and higher education are prohibitive for most Traveller families.

#### **Issue 5: Role Models**

Traveller role models are needed to encourage Traveller pupils in primary and post-primary schools and for adult Travellers considering further and higher education (Recommendation 6 - DES, 2006).

#### **Issue 6: Awareness Training**

Issues of Traveller Education are addressed with student teachers in Sociology modules and in an elective Educational Disadvantage Curriculum Specialisation course. Such training has recently become a higher priority for the Department of Education and Science. Limerick Travellers Development Group has linked with the college to deliver this training.

#### **Issue 7: Mentoring & Academic Supports**

The provision of mentoring and academic supports in higher education to encourage the pursuit of education and progression in education by Travellers is essential. The National Office of Equity of Access to Higher Education should support such initiatives (Recommendation 5- DES, 2006).

## **Outcomes for the future and the Next Steps for the Moving On Project**

Greater numbers of Traveller school-leavers and mature Travellers to increase in higher education.

New funding for the Moving On Project has been received via the Higher Education Authority’s New Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF). The funding is being channeled through the Regional Shannon Consortium of higher education institutions which has enhanced collaboration among third level institutions in the area of access.

## **References**

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