

Title	The Traveller Graduate Network (TGN): a formative evaluation of a new initiative to support Travellers in education
Authors	Brennan, Rebekah; Ó Súilleabháin, Fiachra; Leane, Máire; Horgan, Aoife; McGovern, Sheila
Publication date	2025
Original Citation	Brennan, R., Ó Súilleabháin, F., Leane, M., Horgan, A., and McGovern, S. (2025) The Traveller Graduate Network (TGN): a formative evaluation of a new initiative to support Travellers in education. Cork: SOAR Project, Access UCC, University College Cork.
Type of publication	Report
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://www.soarforaccess.ie/evaluation-publications/">https://www.soarforaccess.ie/evaluation-publications/</a>
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Download date	2025-07-05 08:08:35
Item downloaded from	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17615">https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17615</a>



# The Traveller Graduate Network (TGN)

A formative evaluation of  
a new initiative to support  
Travellers in education

Rebekah Brennan  
Fiachra Ó Suilleabháin  
Máire Leane  
Aoife Horgan  
Sheila McGovern





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## Acknowledgements

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster of higher education institutions (HEIs), i.e. Munster Technological University (MTU), Institute of Technology Carlow (IT Carlow), University College Cork (UCC), and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). In collaboration with community partners, the project devises and implements strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The SOAR Project is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3 and is operationalised through five work streams: Travellers in Education; Enabling Transitions; Connecting Communities; Connecting Curriculum; 1916 Bursary Fund and Partnership for Access. The Traveller Graduate Network (TGN) was established by MTU Cork Campus and is part of the Travellers in Education work stream.

We wish to extend our gratitude to the students and Access Practitioners who kindly participated in this research. We also wish to thank in particular the following TGN founding members:

- Leanne McDonagh, Traveller Education Coordinator
- Breda Hogan, Support Worker for Traveller Education
- Ann Marie Quilligan
- Sarah Dineen
- David McCarthy
- Gavin Hennessy



## Foreword



As Registrar of Munster Technological University (Cork Campuses), it is my great pleasure to present this important and much anticipated report on behalf of the South Cluster SOAR Project.

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access; it brings together the South Cluster - Institute of Technology Carlow, Munster Technological University, University College Cork, and Waterford Institute of Technology together with community partners to collaborate on strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. It is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3.

The SOAR Project has enabled our institutions to build on existing access practice, consolidate community partnerships and develop new initiatives to further our collective ambition of widening participation for access target groups. The project has five specific work streams including Travellers in Education. At present, just 1% of the Irish Traveller community have completed higher education nationally; significant effort is required to remedy this. We are committed to developing and embedding innovative responses that are evidence based, informed, and led by Travellers themselves.

Within this context this report *Traveller Graduate Network (TGN) – Formative Evaluation* is particularly welcome. Uniquely, it documents the lived experience of Irish Travellers that have successfully navigated further and higher education. In articulating their experience, the report highlights the myriad of challenges encountered by Travellers throughout the education journey and demonstrates what enabled their success. It showcases the successful Traveller Graduate Network as a model of best practice of a peer-to-peer, community-informed and culturally relevant initiative to support Traveller participation in higher education. Furthermore, the report exemplifies the determination and commitment of the graduates themselves to give back to their community, inspiring and empowering others to reach their potential, and engaging with stakeholders to enable greater access for Travellers to participate and succeed in education.

**Áine Ní Shé**

Registrar & Vice President for Academic Affairs  
Munster Technological University – Cork Campus



## Statement from **Leanne McDonagh,** founding member of the TGN



**Traveller  
Graduate  
Network**

Through regular reflection on my journey in education I have come to understand that many factors have influenced my progression. When speaking to fellow Travellers about their experiences in education we tend to have had a very different experience of the educational system. I realise I have been lucky in my journey and for that, I am incredibly grateful but unfortunately – many others have not been so lucky in theirs. Not everyone has had the same positive experiences as me – and this is not acceptable. Less than 1% of Travellers go onto third level education and only 13% of Traveller children complete their second-level education.

We need to question: why is this so. Educational experiences should not be a hit or miss situation – lucky or not lucky to attend a school where one or two specific teachers take an interest. We need to demand more from current policies, but we also need to demand more from our community. Do we want more for our children? Do we want the lives and the well-being of all Travellers to improve? If so, we need to do more as a community to ensure change happens.

We know that parents can have a critical influence on a child's educational path. However, their own experiences and attainment at school will also have a bearing on how they in turn support their children and engage with the system today.

I interviewed a broad range of Traveller parents in 2016. Their stories of education and their treatment while in school were very much a shared experience: an experience of exclusion, ridicule and neglect. Some children and their families see education as a route to assimilation, partially due to the invisibility of Traveller culture in the curriculum.

However, with the positive development of the Traveller Culture & History in Education Bill in 2018, we could soon see Traveller Culture and History added to the curriculum and taught in recognised schools in Ireland in the coming years. This is a major step forward and an indicator that change is on the way.

The Traveller Graduate Network has come together as a group of graduates, professionals and changemakers from within the community that supports and encourages the development of potential. We want to promote progression among our peers and our younger generations. As we have already progressed in education, we understand the challenges and barriers that may be faced by others who follow in our footsteps. Therefore, we want to help tackle those barriers so that more Travellers can progress through the education system.



We are extremely excited about creating a peer-to-peer network that will offer advice and support to our members. We believe we are stronger together and that by sharing our experiences – both positive and negative – we can help drive change and shift the narrative around the different forms of education among the wider community. We can do this while also encouraging each other to grow and develop as individuals, striving to reach our full potential along the way.

**Leanne McDonagh**

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*This report does not give Travellers a voice.  
Travellers have always had a voice.  
This report provides a platform for those  
voices to be heard.*

The SOAR Project, 2021



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Traveller Graduate Network (TGN) is a group of graduates, professionals and change-makers from within the community who support and encourage the development of the potential of Travellers – specifically within higher education spaces. As TGN members have already progressed through the system, there is an understanding of the challenges and barriers that may be faced by others. Therefore, the TGN aims to help tackle those barriers so that all Travellers have the support and opportunity to progress through the education system. The TGN is a peer-to-peer network which offers advice and support to members and believes that Traveller graduates are stronger together. The TGN aims to shift the narrative around the different types of education among the wider community.

This report presents the results of a formative review of the TGN. Such research is typically conducted when a new initiative is in the early stages of development. The purpose of such an evaluation is to conduct a needs analysis within the target group, to assess the feasibility of the initiative and to identify any opportunities for development.

In this regard, the research questions are outlined below:

## Research questions

1. What are the needs of the Traveller community in higher education (needs assessment of target group)?
2. How feasible and appropriate is the TGN initiative, in terms of meeting those needs, including feedback from students that linked with the TGN?
3. What are the challenges that may be encountered in delivering the TGN initiative?
4. What are the opportunities for the TGN going forward?

## Data collection

Data was collected in two phases between December 2020 and June 2021, as outlined below:

**Phase 1:** Two focus groups of approximately sixty minutes' duration were conducted. One focus group was held with founding members of the TGN. The second focus group was held with Access Practitioners across the South Cluster. Both focus groups were conducted and recorded using the Microsoft Teams online platform and transcribed verbatim.

**Phase 2:** Qualitative interviews with Traveller graduates (n=7) accessing higher education were conducted and recorded using the Microsoft Teams platform and transcribed verbatim.

**Data analysis:** The data from the interviews was thematically coded using NVIVO software. Thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data and organise the findings of the research.



## Key findings

It is not possible to understand the low rates of access to higher education in the Traveller community without acknowledging the racial segregation which has occurred in schools in Ireland. It is not necessary to underscore that few teachers would choose to cause harm to their students. In fact, within the dataset for this study, positive and cherished relationships with some teachers were described by Traveller participants. However, less benevolent accounts of school experiences were also reported in this research, some of which were identified as traumatic by the specific participants. The fallout from such experiences at primary and post-primary levels is likely to create additional emotional barriers which serve as deterrents for Travellers when considering higher education and re-entering a classroom environment – in relation to themselves or their children.

Supports for accessing higher education were explored in this research through interviews with Traveller graduates. The Traveller participants had not had the same access to quality educational opportunities in primary and post-primary schools before they came to college. The most significant finding in relation to research participants' success in accessing higher education, retaining their position and graduating with qualifications was the remarkable levels of self-determination described. Some participants credited supports that they had in accessing and navigating higher education: career guidance counsellors; aftercare workers through Tusla, the Child and Family Agency (where relevant to children in care); key workers for those in recovery from addiction; HEI websites for clear information; Traveller specific Access staff; support from the participants' own circle of family and friends; and now the Traveller Graduate Network (TGN).

The TGN's ambition and passion for progression of its initiatives is clear. Findings from this research include indications of success in supporting Travellers in education, building networks, providing inspiration and encouragement, and challenging stereotypes. Structural and societal challenges faced by the TGN in conducting its work were discussed and centred around the need for collaboration and support across school settings, a whole-university approach and support from industry to achieve the vision of the TGN. A national awareness campaign around Travellers in higher education, strengthening of relationships with stakeholders, and contributing to the provision of inclusive environments and opportunities for Travellers in education and in the workforce are among the opportunities for development.

## Key recommendations – TGN

- This report has identified a definite need for the TGN. It is recommended that the TGN be assisted through allocation of funding, and promotion within all educational spaces, in order to develop and expand the adequacy of the network as a focal point of support for Travellers in accessing higher education.
- The TGN is currently organised as a network and operates without full-time staff. It is recommended that consideration be given to housing and resourcing the TGN as an independent unit within MTU Cork with adequate resourcing in order to support the sustainability of its work.



- A sustainable resourcing stream should be identified to allow for the appointment of a dedicated coordinator for the TGN along with adequate staffing. This would work to embed increased Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives and Access initiatives for Travellers in higher education and would also allow for ongoing and longitudinal review and research on impact.

### Key recommendations – wider practice

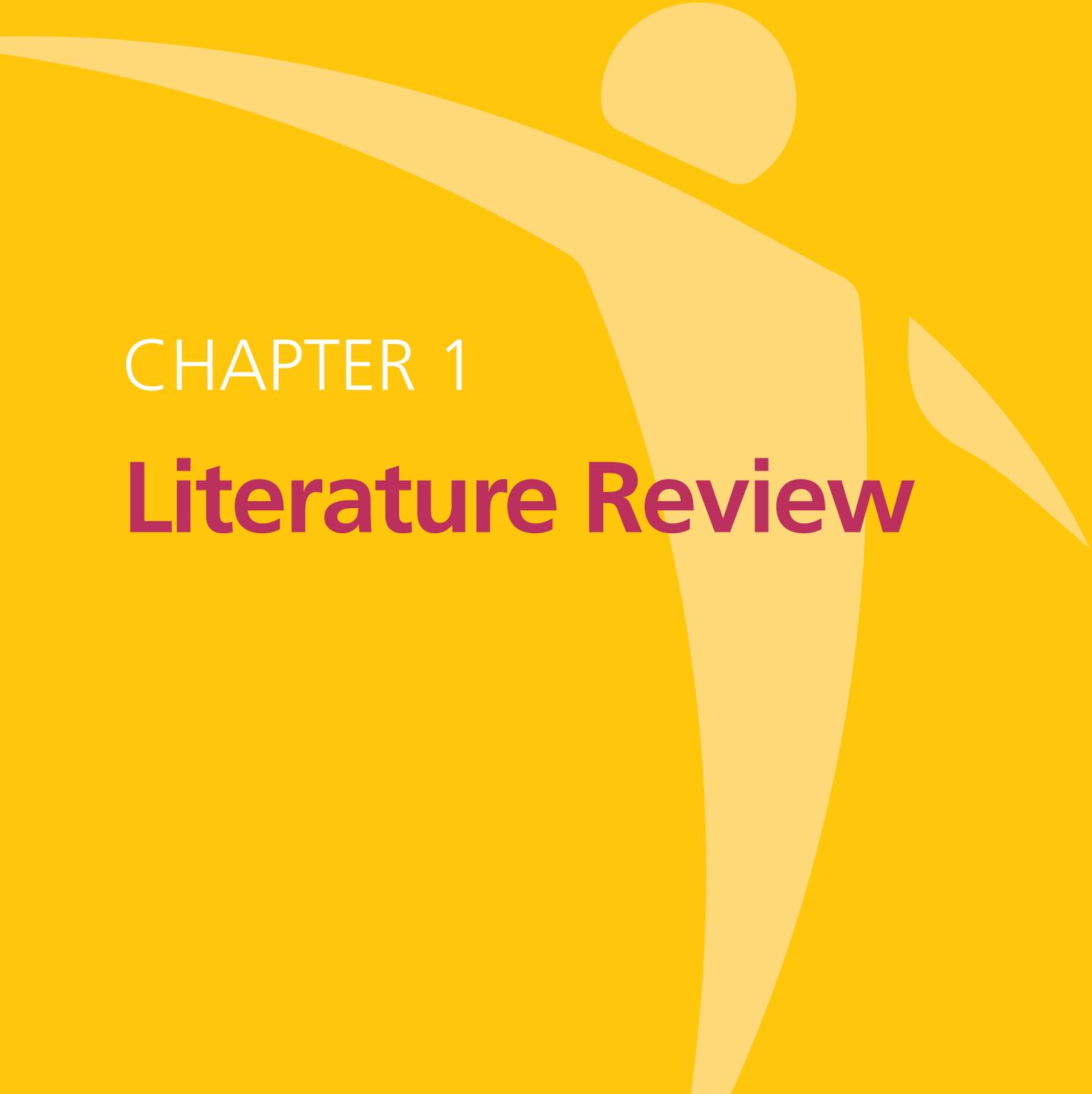
- The appointment of a Traveller Culture and Education Coordinator should be considered for all HEIs. This role would have a focus on outreach; schools' liaison; cultural awareness events; seminars; liaising with lecturers around programmatic review and promotion of Access Services and other student services.
- Primary and post-primary schools to facilitate a culture of recognition of Traveller traditions (including culture and language) and values in addition to the fostering of good communication practices between school and home. The Yellow Flag programme (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019) is a whole-school initiative which promotes the challenging of racism and the celebration of diversity. This and other similar initiatives should be prioritised.
- Compulsory intercultural and anti-racism training should be established in all schools, not just those taking part in specialised programmes, and should include further and higher education and teacher-training programmes. Traveller-specific cultural awareness training and unconscious bias training should be developed and implemented nationally for primary and post-primary teachers and school staff.
- Teachers should demonstrate a socio-historical awareness of how Travellers have been treated in the education system. Classrooms should make Travellers central to the learning environment, as with all other students.
- Consideration should be given to the reinstatement of the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers (VTT) scheme in the education system or a similar initiative.
- Supports for parents whose children have gone on to higher education should continue to be provided by Access Practitioners in the form of familiarisation with HEI campuses and making information readily available to relieve anxiety and promote inclusivity. Stronger links with the community must be built. The onus is on the 'settled' majority to help build these links.
- A peer-to-peer mentorship programme should be established within HEIs and education centres for Travellers. Peer mentorship was emphasised by participants in this research and was also stated as being effective as a support for students in previous work by the SOAR Project.
- Traveller-specific student counselling services should be available for Traveller students who wish to avail of them in recognition of the difficult journey that many Travellers have made to reach their place in higher education.



- To sum, a partnership approach between the TGN, the community, HEIs, education centres and policymakers to support and actuate change for Travellers in education is warranted.

### **Key recommendations – policy**

- Initiatives such as Tobar (funded under the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 1), which support Irish Travellers to become primary and post-primary school teachers, are supported by this research. Further recruitment of Traveller teachers would be transformative in the education system in Ireland.
- This research supports the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill (2018) which makes provision for the embedding of Traveller Culture and History in the school curriculum.
- Attention should be given to the implementation of the aims of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 (NTRIS) in relation to education and the achievement of same. This may cohere with other EDI priorities and strategic plans within the institution.
- Funding levels must be increased to support Traveller access to and retention within education.
- A national education and awareness campaign informed strongly by human rights principles should be initiated around Traveller culture and pride.

A stylized, light yellow silhouette of a human figure in a dynamic, expressive pose, with one arm raised and the other extended downwards. The figure is set against a solid yellow background.

CHAPTER 1

# Literature Review



## 1.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide a narrative review of the extant literature on Travellers in Irish educational settings. It will include a background to the Traveller community's experiences within the education system, legislative reform towards inclusion, and statistics pertaining to Travellers in higher education.

## 1.2 Literature Review

Irish Travellers (Mincéirs/Pavees) are an ethnic minority group indigenous to Ireland comprising less than 1 per cent of the population (Central Statistics Office, 2016). Although distinct, they are a heterogeneous group (All Ireland Traveller Health Study (AITHS), 2010, p. 19) or a 'community of communities' (Parekh, 2000, p. 34). Historically, Travellers have experienced social exclusion and marked educational disadvantage (O'Hanlon, 2010; Burke, 2009; Helleiner, 2007). This is a reality still sorely felt in the community today (Boyle, Hanafin and Flynn, 2018). The underserving of Travellers in educational spaces is well documented in the literature (Bhopal, 2004; Derrington and Kendall, 2008; Devine and Kelly, 2006; Jordan, 2000; Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds, 2005). Devine (2011) highlighted the low expectations that teachers in primary and post-primary schools have of Traveller children's academic abilities. Irish public opinion surveys have documented the prevalence of negative perceptions that continue to be held towards Traveller students (Lynch and Lodge, 2002), which exceed derogatory attitudes towards any other minority ethnic groups in Ireland, e.g., new communities (Tormey and Gleeson, 2012). Irish Traveller children continue to be victimised by racism in educational settings, as did their parents and their grandparents (Bhopal, 2004). Within a wider societal context of widespread discrimination of Travellers, teachers, as decision-makers in the classroom and towards whom the power imbalance tilts, have been documented in the literature historically as making racialised judgements which disrupt any partnership between educator and child (Page, Witting and Mclean, 2007).

In recent decades, Irish legislation and policy has included amendments to protect individuals in minority groups by acknowledging and valuing diversity (Boyle et al., 2018). Key milestones include the Equal Status Act (2000), which promotes equality by forbidding discrimination in employment, vocational training, advertising, collective agreements and the provision of goods and services, and the 2017 formal recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority group within the Irish state. Previously, the Department of Education (2003) recommended that parents of children attending preschools be elected to management committees and that policies be revised to include parental involvement sensitive to Traveller culture. However, government funding for Traveller preschools ceased in 2011 (Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2018) and these recommendations – with the potential to be adapted to other school environments – were lost with this cessation. The Traveller Education Strategy (2006) pointed out that insecure housing and stressful living conditions



were likely to negatively impact on a Traveller child's education (Department of Education and Science, 2006). It discussed how Traveller parents' engagement could depend on such factors as their own limited education and socio-economic background, while also adding that 'their negative experience in school, illiteracy and the widespread experience of exclusion' may impede any involvement (2006, p. 22). The report also admitted that Traveller parents could not assume that their children would be treated well in schools. Of interest is that another recommendation from the Traveller Education Strategy was that Traveller parents should be facilitated to participate in representative structures, those same structures which had demonstrated ill treatment of themselves and their children and where trust in those structures was fractured. Department-funded programmes for Traveller education were also cut by 87% in 2011 (Pavee Point, 2013). Among the services lost was the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers (VTT) scheme, the loss of which is still felt (*ibid*). The visiting teachers were culturally sensitive in their approach and had an in-depth understanding of the Traveller community. The visiting teachers acted as a liaison between families and the schools (Houses of the Oireachtas 2019). Home-school community liaison teachers (HSCL) are also responsible for liaising between schools and families; however, catering to the Traveller community is outside of their remit due to lack of resources (House of the Oireachtas, 2019).

Enduring traumatisation arising from exclusion is understandably a deterrent to engagement with mainstream schools (Prout Quicke and Biddle, 2017, p. 58). Although the legislative narrative has evolved over time from early government reports such as the Commission on Itinerancy (Government of Ireland, 1963), which contained elements reminiscent of ethnic cleansing, and where Travellers were described as deviants and a people 'in deficit' with an invalid culture, more recent efforts to legislate towards inclusion have had mixed results, both within the Traveller community and in schools themselves. As Hébert (2013, p. 5) states in his work on Canadian schools, initiatives to recognise or indeed protect individuals may not be 'sufficient to guarantee against denigration that groups may suffer'. We have witnessed these processes of intergenerational trauma in other settings globally, such as in people of colour in the US (Alexander, 2019) and with other nomadic communities such as the Roma people (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2018).

As part of the shift towards recognising Irish Traveller culture as valid and promoting diversity and inclusion, Irish schools operate under intercultural guidelines today (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2005). Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin (2020) report that Traveller children still experience racialised bullying. The latest Census (2016) statistics show that only 13% of Travellers complete secondary education, which is in stark contrast to 92% of the general population. When discussing the high numbers of Traveller children with non-attendance, early school-leaving, leaving education without qualifications and levels of illiteracy, it is important to also consult the literature on low teacher expectations, bullying in school and lack of self-efficacy in Traveller children (Connolly, 2002; Knipe, Montgomery and Reynolds, 2005). In a recent study (Boyle, Flynn and Hanafin, 2020) Irish Traveller parents confirmed low expectations of their children's persistence in school and formal state education. However, within the findings of this study (*ibid*) parents expressed



a strong desire for their children to have access to the same educational opportunities as their non-nomadic majority peers, and they supported their children to achieve more than they themselves had been allowed to.

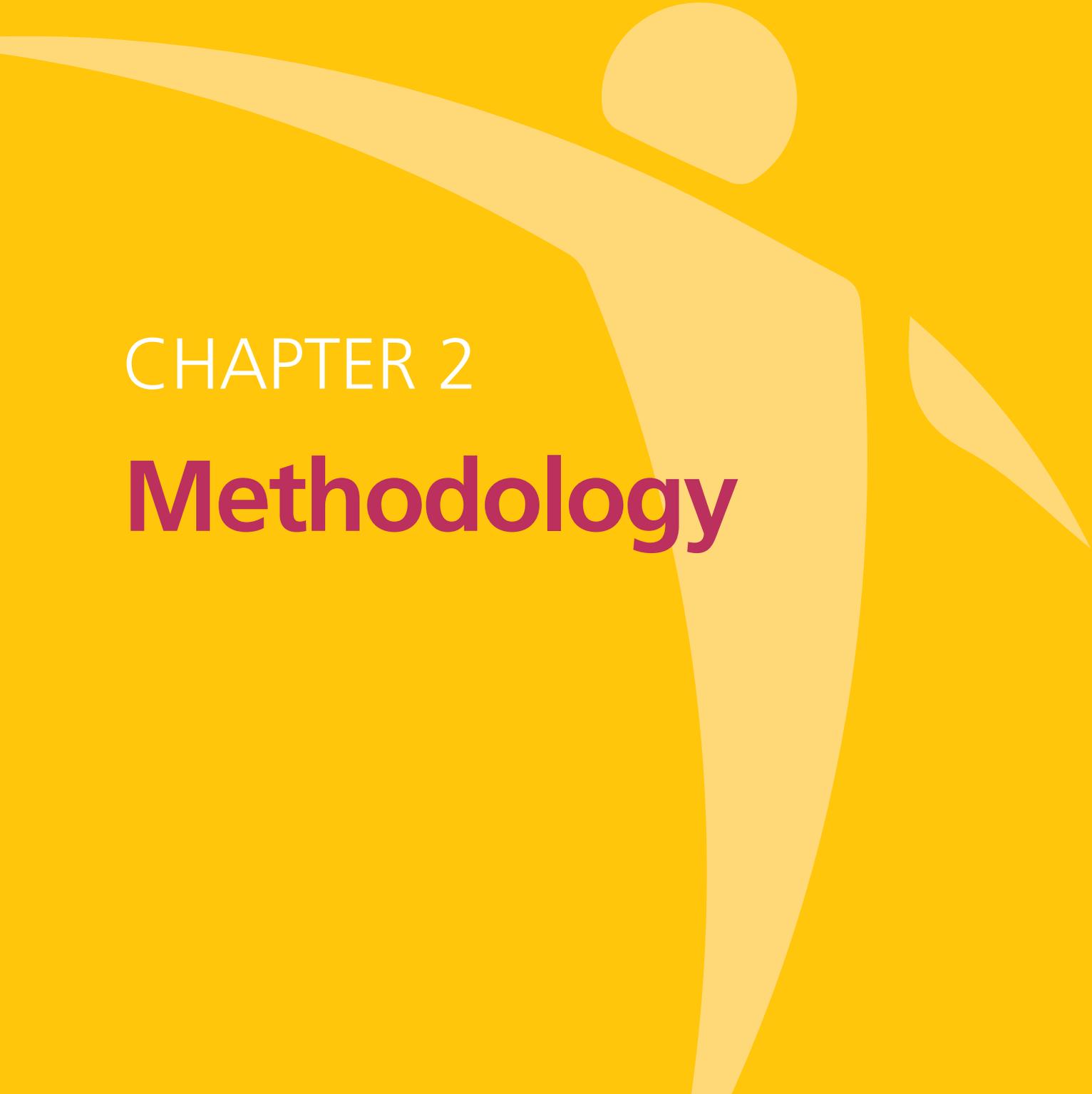
The lack of a sense of belonging in school has a significant impact on aspirations to attend third-level education. Libbey (2004) also highlighted concepts of attachment, connectedness, bonding and engagement in school when discussing belonging, which impacts on many educational outcomes. Belonging in schools may be defined as:

*... psychological membership in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment.* Goodenow, 1993, p. 80

Less than 1% of Travellers are in third-level education, with only 167 adult Travellers holding a third-level qualification (0.5%), according to the House of the Oireachtas (2019). The purpose of this research, which is formative in nature, is to conduct a needs analysis of a new initiative operational by MTU Cork Campus and open to Travellers nationally, named the Traveller Graduate Network (TGN). This initiative is run by Travellers, for Travellers who are either transitioning to higher education, navigating college or are coming to the end of their third-level programme and are seeking support entering the workforce. This research also maps any challenges, innovative practice and opportunities for development in relation to the TGN. It is impossible to talk about the 1% of Travellers in higher education without hearing from those individuals. This report does not give Travellers a voice. Travellers have always had a voice. This report provides a platform for those voices to be heard.

## 1.3 Conclusion

In the literature consulted, although the difficult history of Travellers in educational spaces was well documented, there was a dearth in qualitative research on the 1% of Travellers who go on to third level. The qualitative methods used in this research were purposefully selected to allow the powerful story of Travellers in higher education in Ireland to emerge, in their own voices. Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the methods employed for this research.

A stylized, light-colored silhouette of a human figure in a dynamic, balanced pose, set against a solid yellow background. The figure's right arm is extended upwards and slightly to the right, while the left arm is extended downwards and to the left. The head is represented by a simple circle.

CHAPTER 2

# Methodology



## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter details the methodology employed in the research for this review, including discussion of research approach, ethical protocol, data collection methods, study participants and data analysis.

## 2.2 Research Approach

The aim of this research was to conduct a needs analysis through garnering stakeholder feedback on the TGN initiative in order to conduct a formative review of a new initiative. We wanted to speak to Travellers in higher education and the people that worked with them to ask them to share their experiences, to see what supported them and what the barriers were, in order to inform the TGN and future initiatives.

In terms of research methodology, a qualitative approach was taken. Qualitative data instruments such as open-ended questions within in-depth interview (video) were used to collect data from participants. The reliance on the collection of non-numerical primary data, such as words and stories, makes the researcher also an instrument (Johnson and Christensen, 2012, pp. 29–37) in how they provide a safe space for stories to emerge. Qualitative research has an emphasis on meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). A further rationale for using qualitative methods was to collect rich data about real-life people and situations (De Vaus, 2014, p. 6). A qualitative approach was deemed particularly appropriate within this study as it allowed for the generation of understanding about the specific experiences of Travellers in the Irish education system.

## 2.3 Key Research Questions

Four questions guided this research:

1. What are the needs of the Traveller community in higher education (needs assessment of target group)?
2. How feasible and appropriate is the TGN initiative, in terms of meeting those needs, including feedback from students?
3. What are the challenges that may be encountered in delivering the TGN?
4. What are the opportunities for the TGN going forward?



## 2.4 Ethics

This research received ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) at UCC prior to the commencement of data collection in December 2020. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, both written and verbal, before taking part in recorded interviews. Participants were made aware that the research project had received ethical approval from the SREC and was governed by ethical principles including anonymity, confidentiality, the safety of participants, informed consent, and freedom to withdraw from the study (see Appendices for information sheet, for consent form, for the focus groups/interviews with professional/student participants).

## 2.5 Methodology

Fieldwork for this qualitative research took place between December 2020 and June 2021 and consisted of two phases.

**Phase 1:** Two focus group interviews took place: one with members of the TGN and one with Access Practitioners from the South Cluster who work with Traveller students (see Appendix 2 for both interview guides). Interviews were conducted by Dr Rebekah Brennan and Aoife Horgan of the SOAR Project and recorded using the Microsoft Teams platform and transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews was thematically coded by Dr Brennan using NVIVO software. Thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data and organise the findings of the research.

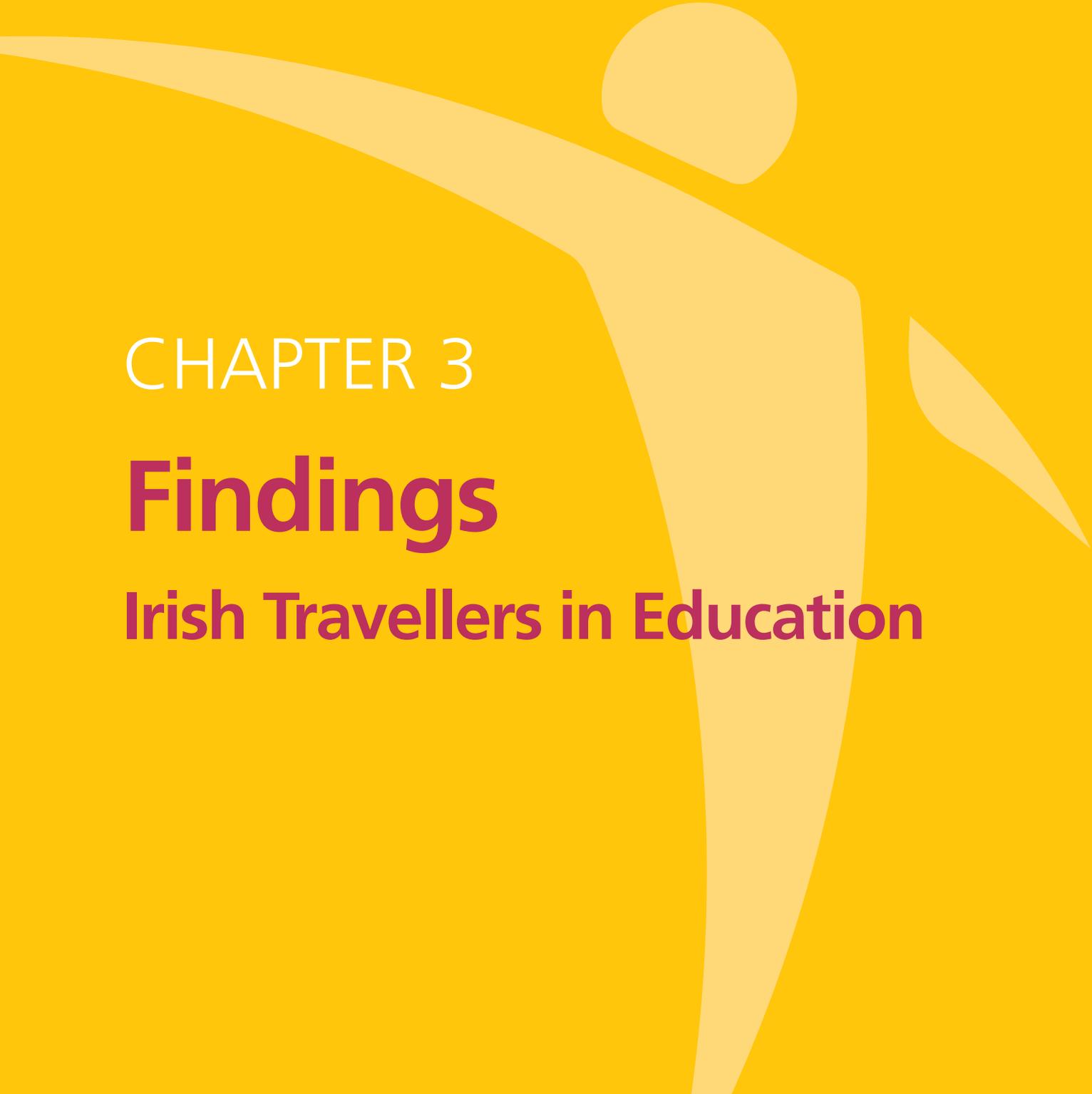
**Phase 2:** Interviews with Traveller graduates (n=7) were conducted by Dr Rebekah Brennan and Aoife Horgan of the SOAR Project and recorded using the Microsoft Teams platform and transcribed verbatim. The data from the interviews was thematically coded using NVIVO, a qualitative data management software programme. Thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2006) was then used to analyse the data and organise the findings of the research.

## 2.6 Limitations

As this research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic it was significantly impacted by the associated restrictions on MTU Cork, as with all higher-education institutions nationally regarding maintaining contact with students. It is worth noting here that COVID-19 had a disproportionate impact on Traveller communities, causing restrictions on movement and also significant stress and compromised well-being (COVID-19 NGO Group Report, 2020). The Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) reported in 2020 that unstable or non-existent internet connections, lack of space and privacy to study and in some cases, and insufficient electricity in sites comprised Travellers' education. Traveller women in particular have many



responsibilities at home, including home schooling younger children during COVID-19, which would leave less time, if any, to engage with HEIs around their own education. Educational disadvantage was exacerbated in the Traveller community during COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. Therefore, it is a limitation of this research that a relatively small sample of Traveller graduates self-selected for interview (n=7). In addition to this, the rare educational context of Travellers in higher education presents some methodological limitations in terms of generalisability. However, user generalisability is relevant here as the findings of this report may be relevant and useful to educational practice and policy (Gillett, Clarke and O'Donoghue, 2016, p. 601; Burns, 1994). This research presented us with a rare opportunity to illuminate the experiences of a marginalised ethnic minority as they engage with the higher-education setting. Another potential limitation of this research is that the interpretation of meaning may be applied through the perspectives of the authors, who are members of the non-nomadic majority/settled community. Nevertheless, rich data was collected on the participants' experiences and the authors remained steadfastly true to their voices and stories. The Traveller community has been well documented from an outsider perspective, through non-nomadic majority voices. This research provides a rare opportunity to hear the voices of Travellers themselves in relation to how, through patterns of blatant, insidious and subtle racism, paternalism and cultural pigeonholing, they have been historically marginalised by the Irish education system and have struggled to secure a seat at the table of our higher education institutes (HEIs). Only 1% of the Traveller community are documented as graduates. In this report, we hear from some of that 1%. In this regard, this report makes a valuable contribution to public insight and knowledge, in addition to making key recommendations for educational practice and policy.

A large, stylized silhouette of a human figure in a dynamic, dancing pose, rendered in a light yellow color against a darker yellow background. The figure has one arm raised and bent, and the other arm extended downwards. The head is a simple circle.

CHAPTER 3

# Findings

## Irish Travellers in Education



## 3.1 Introduction

The following two chapters will present the results of this formative review of the Traveller Graduate Network (TGN). Results include data collected from qualitative focus groups and interviews with professionals and Traveller graduates. This chapter will present a needs assessment of the target group for the TGN initiative: Irish Travellers in education. It is impossible to understand the position of Traveller graduates without understanding their lived experience within the education system before they reached the point they are currently at. This is why data collection focused on Travellers' experiences as children and growing up within hostile communities, attitudes and misconceptions around their capabilities, and 'cultural traits' which spilled into the primary and post-primary school setting. As a result, many participants hid their identities as Travellers to avoid the negative associations that were popularised when they were young, some carrying this identity conflict within them to the present day. Those that overcame these social, environmental, educational and structurally racist obstacles to transition to higher education spoke to us about what inspired them to face those challenges and what that experience was like for them. The aim of this report is to inform the work of the TGN and other initiatives. Results will be organised thematically as follows: discrimination in the community; hybrid identities; experiences of primary and post-primary education; pathways to higher education including barriers and supports; and self-determination.

## 3.2 Discrimination in the community

*A structural view of racism is important because it helps explain how factors outside the school affect students ... both in and out of school contexts.* Blaisdell, 2016, p. 249

To this day, many Travellers experience structural segregation and are, in essence, cut off economically and socially from the communities in which they reside. Mandell (2008), in his writings on people of colour, discussed segregation into neighbourhoods that impeded people's access to equality and social rights and highlighted that to live like this has a significant impact on studentship for children. Travellers are one of the most ostracised groups in Ireland (O'Mahony, 2017). Experiences of prejudice and bullying in the community, which has been described in the literature as 'very frequent in their lives' (ibid), is the result of a public perception of Travellers as undesirable and 'less than', which interconnects with Traveller children's experiences in school, compromises on senses of identity and impacts mental health (Villani and Barry, 2021). In this following quote, a Traveller secondary school teacher describes her experience:



*I went back to my old secondary school – became a teacher there – and taught a group of first years. One of my students – her father refused me entry to a pub. I asked for Ribena – I was with my mother and father – the pub was empty – it was [the] Easter bank holiday – like the whole entire pub were staring at us because there were about ten people in the pub – they could hear everything. I recorded it all – your man didn't know I was recording it – we brought him to court and he basically denied everything – and all I wanted to say was, "I teach your daughter in school – I need to be garda vetted for my job – what do you think you are doing, who do you think you are talking to, who do you think you are serving?" – you know what I mean? It was based on the fact that – our name was [SURNAME] – we were known in the town and "I am not going to serve ye".* Focus Group 1, TGN member

In research by Villani and Barry (2021) many participants recalled examples of discrimination in various everyday community spaces: pubs, restaurants and others. Being refused permission to play pool or have a drink, alcoholic or otherwise, is a common occurrence in public houses for Travellers, causing embarrassment and shame. In this quote from a female graduate, she describes how in her community it came to light that separate masses for Travellers were being asked for from the parish priest:

*We got a new parish priest and he did a survey – he wanted to find out more about the community – like what you are doing now – and the outcome of that was [the settled community] wanted separate masses for the Traveller community so I came home. My family said, "ah – they are bad people". I said, "That is not bad, Mammy, that can't happen – that is not right, that is against every form of discrimination, it is against every form of race, colour, gender – that can't happen".* Interview participant 2, female graduate

Experiences of discrimination such as these acted as a catalyst for one Traveller graduate, who set up a Women's Group in her area to support female Travellers in their pursuit of higher education and to prepare them for the realities of racism in the workplace also. Here she tells her story of being rejected by a 'settled person' she was caring for as a healthcare assistant in her community:

*I grew a lovely relationship with her over five to six months. I was going out of my way for this lady like – I was doing her shopping, her cooking, her cleaning – everything – I wasn't just a health care assistant just going in there, filling out my forms, ticking the boxes, looking at her vital signs – well anyway she found out I was a Traveller and then she didn't want to see me anymore so ... she broke my heart. I was very hurt by it. I overcame it but I always think about her – I was so hurt by it – so this is what I think about my women. I will build them up and let them go to college. They will have to be told that story – I wouldn't hide that from anybody – my women will have to hear that story and to say, no matter how educated you become, it is not going to solve, it is not going to demolish discrimination.*  
Interview participant 2, female graduate



Aside from explicit examples of racism, unintentional racism can occur, where a Traveller's ethnicity can seem to be more visible and useful to the outside world than their value as a person. Two participants relayed their accounts of experiencing this more recent phenomenon. One of them described tokenistic invitations to conferences and events:

*... the higher people in society say, "oh, I am going to invite [NAME] to this conference and have her there because she is a Traveller and she is going to be there for funding" but – **it is like being asked to a party but not being asked to dance** ... I would be there because I would be representing Travellers – they would be getting the funding or whatever purpose I would be there for – but, when it comes to tea or coffee, I would be left standing by myself – there would be no-one.*  
Interview participant 2, female graduate

'Positive discrimination' is a term for the recognition that underserved groups (typically discriminated against because of gender, race/ethnicity, disability, religion, etc.) are disadvantaged unfairly and that that injustice should form part of the criteria for evaluating candidates for employment or educational opportunities, among others (see Moon, 2010). Critics of positive discrimination are often its intended beneficiaries, who perceive its actions as fulfilling quotas rather than giving more equitable recognition of candidates' merits. On the other hand, many see the benefits of positive discrimination (for example, see McMillan-Capehart et al., 2009). In the context of positive discrimination in higher education, the increased involvement of people who have been underserved and excluded has been identified as a valid means of challenging that injustice (Anderson, 2010; Clayton, 2012). However, the following quote from a participant in this research suggests that positive discrimination was seen as a negative:

*I was going to [NAME OF DEGREE PROGRAMME] – but they wanted me to go there because they reserve a place for a Traveller, and I was like "I don't want to get in here because I am a Traveller, I want to get in here on my own merit". To me, that was another part of "Oh, yeah, here is a poster boy – we will stick you up and ..." and I was like "no, I don't want that". Then one of the ladies from [NAME OF HEI] rang me and I said "yeah look I will do it". I remember I said "don't tell anyone I am a Traveller", I said, "until I am actually in".*

*I want to get in on who I am. I want to actually prove myself on my merits and say "yeah, I am equal to you". I deserve this the same as you, do you know what I mean?*

Interview participant 1, male graduate.



## 3.3 Hybrid Identities

### Hidden identities

The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (2013) reported that a large number of Travellers choose to hide their ethnicity in order to avoid widespread discrimination and racism. This was seen in the dataset for this research, as illustrated by the quotes below:

*... I got away with being a country girl<sup>1</sup> for years ... I remember I started a course in [NAME OF PLACE] – I was so nervous. I went in – you get the look – so I toned down, I straightened my hair and said “I am a [SURNAME], I will get away with this”.*  
Interview participant 2, female graduate

Goffman (1963) described a term called ‘passing’, where people opt to conceal an aspect of their identity. This is an established strategy among minority group members. It is well documented as being used within the Traveller community as a means of avoiding negative attention, bullying or ostracisation (see AITHS, 2010, p. 120; Berlin, 2015; Cullen, Hughes and Hayes, 2008; Levinson and Sparkes, 2006; Smith, 2005). It is the presence of oppression that necessitates ‘passing’ (Brown, 1991 p. 3), where minority groups will attempt to create an identity similar to the dominant group, in this case the non-nomadic majority. It is not that Travellers reject their identity. In fact, Traveller pride was acutely evident in the dataset. ‘Passing’ in this context may be better explained by Kanuha (1999), who proposed that this concept was more fluid and tended to happen situationally, but certainly in avoidance of social oppression. The following quotes refer to the school setting and how participants felt that to conceal their identities as Travellers made life easier for them in that particular situation:

*And then the school down here ... everyone just assumes that I am not a Traveller because of the way I am because I grew up around a lot of non-Travellers; so I can fit in really easily. Nobody really knows ... I mean it is good that I can fit in but I would say if people did know then they would have other ideas. It wouldn’t be the same as it is now. I don’t go around telling everyone I am a Traveller.* Interview participant 7, female graduate

*When I was younger people didn’t really know that I was a Traveller until I went into secondary school. So, if my friends were on about, they would say “these [racial slur]” I would say “don’t be saying that around me because I actually am a Traveller”. After that it was just like, you know, the discrimination of just even saying “[racial slur]” now and all that stuff – it used to hurt me so badly – but I wasn’t really discriminated against as much because people didn’t really know – you get me? So, it wasn’t as bad as like my cousins and all that would be discriminated against because they are all full Travellers; so it was harder for them.* Interview participant 4, male graduate

1. ‘country girl’ is a term sometimes used by Travellers to describe a female from the settled community.



The Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) has spotlighted the disproportionate media coverage of Traveller crime and antisocial behaviour. The implication is that antisocial behaviour becomes seen as a cultural trait (ITM, 2012) within communities and in the public consciousness. We have seen similar campaigns by media historically in racist movements against people of colour highlighted in 'The New Jim Crow' by Alexander (2019). Such reporting further exacerbates racialised stereotypes and can incite hatred (ibid). The absorption of stereotypes and generalisations about the Traveller community is evident in the following quotes from participants, where they find it difficult to assert their individuality in the face of such cultural oppression and exclusion:

*We are Travellers. To me, the Traveller is me – it is not my whole culture. I don't accept everything in the culture. I also don't accept that I have to live under this big hand holding me down.* Interview participant 1, male graduate

*I think it is kind of frustrating that people just assume that you are not [a Traveller] because you are not the stereotypical-looking Traveller. They would be like "boy, you are going to school" – "yeah, that doesn't make a difference that I am going to school". They would be "yeah but you don't talk like one" – "well I don't have to talk like one when I am raised around settled people" and stuff like that. And they are like "well you don't look like one" – "well, there is nothing I can do about that to be honest".* Interview participant 7, female graduate

### Distinct identities

While our research findings have suggested that Irish Travellers may employ mechanisms to 'pass' (Goffman, 1963), where they will deliberately conceal their identity to avoid harm, our research also found that 'identity' is a complex issue. Traveller culture in its true form (and not that depicted by media or elements of public opinion) is a source of great pride for the participants in our research. While Travellers may borrow from the 'host cultural environment' (see Liegeois, 1986, p. 13 in his work on European Gypsies), the act of doing so does not dilute their uniquely separate identity (see Hannerz's (1992) discussion about the 'creolization' of Caribbean cultures (pp. 217–67)). In Irish literature, Devine, Kenny and MacNeela (2008) found that non-nomadic (settled) school children had little knowledge of Irish Travellers cultural history. More recently, Watson, Kenny and McGinnity found in their 2017 study that Traveller culture, history and traditions (e.g. in music and art) needed to become part of the school curriculum to counteract the existent threat to Travellers' ethnic identity within the education system. A call for this very policy had been put forward two years earlier by Harmon (2015), and the *National Traveller and Roma Strategy 2017–2021* (Department of Justice and Equality, 2018) supports such initiatives. In the dataset for this research, the importance of retaining Traveller traditions and history in the school setting was evident:



*Accept their culture for what it is – don't try and change it. In primary school and secondary school – from what I heard in secondary school – these are the rules you have to follow. Some things as Travellers we can't follow. It goes against tradition – it goes against who we are. I will use one example. There were sex classes that were there when I came in, like learning about sex and stuff like that. I went home and said that to my mother and she nearly killed me in the house. It was like "you don't talk like that here". Interview participant 1, male graduate*

One important feature of Traveller culture is their indigenous language, known as Gammon, Cant or Shelta (Rieder, 2018). Most Travellers speak fluent English, but Gammon is held dear to Travellers as a distinct marker of their culture. Many Travellers find it empowering to speak Gammon (Binchy, 1994), although it is not spoken in schools. The lack of recognition of Gammon within the formal Irish education system seems to be a marker of difference for Traveller students. While there is strong regard for Gammon, educational progress and integration can also be seen by parents through their children's use of English:

*I love using bigger words deliberately at home – I have said that before – I love using words like "extraordinary". My son can speak a lot of the Gammon – I wouldn't take that from him – that is him – he is a Traveller – but yeah I integrate bigger words to him too. Interview participant 2, female graduate*

It has been suggested that there are other elements of Traveller culture that are in opposition to the majority culture and where boundaries are evident (Liégeois, 1987; Belton, 2005; Bauman, 1989). It has been written that Travellers live in two worlds: their own world and the settled world, which can be hostile and intrusive (Kenny and Binchy, 2009). 'Marking of differences' (Hall, 1996) occurs where identities are challenged, and power is felt to be undermined. The Traveller identity remains distinct, as do their cultural traditions (Kelleher et al., 2012; Van Hout and Staniewicz, 2012). One participant described how her participation in higher education marked her as different within her Traveller family:

*I felt a lot of hurt and discrimination during those couple of years from my family. I would have an older brother and younger sister and they would be saying "[NAME], are you being paid to do that? Why are you doing that? [NAME], you are not a country girl. [NAME], don't be doing that – that is stupid, [NAME]". Interview participant 2, female*

In the following quotes, both the 'marking of differences' (Hall, 1996)' and the impact that has had on Traveller graduates navigating an environment where they are in a tiny minority is clear through expressions of isolation and loneliness:

*... if one brother gets into an argument, all the other brothers have to stand behind him even if he is in the wrong and I would be saying that to [NAME] and he would be like "this is your life – you are going to die, not them. You have to put yourself first".*



*That was tough and I had to go away and find that myself. I had to go away on my own and I am still dealing with it now. I go out to my family – they are caught up in stuff or they are arguing or whatever ... I always say, “when I am here to see my mother, I don’t want to hear anything else”. That is hard because there was no-one for me to reach out to and say well, “how did you do this?” or “what happened with this?” and I had to discover it on my own.*

*In our community, the man is brought up to be strong. He is not supposed to have any fears or worries or anything like that which, to me now actually looking at it, actually a real man looks at his fears and says “yeah, here I am”. Interview participant 1, male graduate*

### 3.4 Experiences of primary and post-primary education

Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises children’s right to an education. Article 12 of the convention is concerned with children’s right to express their views freely on all matters concerning them. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) underscores the participation of children in school life, peer education and peer counselling and the involvement of children in school disciplinary proceedings as part of the process of learning and experiencing the realisation of those rights (ibid, para. 107).

The following quotes from participants in this research will demonstrate how Traveller children’s rights in school have not been protected as laid out in the UN Convention. While there are mixed reports, and primary school is described as a more positive experience than post-primary school by many, the nature of the historical school experience inflicted on Travellers cannot be minimised. Some of our research participants had been to several schools. According to the ITM, approximately one quarter of all Irish Travellers are mobile at any given time (McVeigh, Donahue and Ward, 2007, p. 5). However, more recently AITHS (2010) has stated that the majority of Travellers remain in one place, with some going on the road once a year:

*I have been to quite a few primary schools now. I have been to definitely over fifteen anyway because we travelled around a lot you see; so it wasn’t too bad but I am guessing that is also because I just wasn’t really around, you see. I didn’t really stick around in a school that long but when I did people could just tell that I wasn’t like them. I wasn’t like everyone else. I didn’t really fit in and, after a while you know, I just moved so it wasn’t really a big deal to me. Interview participant 7, female graduate*



Within some quotes, there are profound indications of the reality of being a Traveller in the school system and in the community:

*At first, in primary school – that was good. It was a convent school and a boys' school, so it was good – there was no ... I was just a **normal person** when I was there. It was a small community, and we all knew one another; so, it was positive. Then I was moved to [NAME OF SCHOOL] in [NAME OF PLACE]. I think I struggled in that school because of anger and stuff but I do believe it was the one school where I had two or three particular teachers that kind of got around me. I was always into sport and that and they kind of knew what was going on at home because my father was a drinker as well – he was an alcoholic – and they had seen the little outbursts, but they gave me special time. [NAME OF TEACHER] would always hold me back for games of chess or something. I liked playing chess, so I played there with him. He gave me the extra time with the Gaelic team. They are the only happy times that I had from school, playing Gaelic. Then I came back to [NAME OF PLACE] when I was ten and that was a shock. I was put into a Traveller School and it was hard because the Travellers were on one side and the settled kids were on the other side – we weren't allowed out to the yard when they were in the yard and they weren't in the yard when we were there. So that was tough.* Interview participant 1, male graduate

The Oireachtas Committee published a report in 2019 in which it stated that many Travellers today remember having separate play and lunch times to their settled peers. Children are individuals who live relationally, inter-generationally and in their communities. Interdependence between adults and children is highlighted in Forde et al. (2018) as a key element of children's participation in things that involve them – in this case, participation in the school system:

*It was always grand. Like my mother obviously is a Traveller – she dropped out of secondary school – so like I didn't really have much help from her, and she didn't really know what was going on as well.* Interview participant 5, male graduate

*... I was treated very equally but there were other members of my class that would have been from the Traveller community and they were treated differently because I think my teacher – she could see that I was good at my work – I was a good reader – I was a good writer, I was good at maths, I was good at history and well able to keep up with the class. As for my cousin, when I was studying history, she was probably cleaning the paint brushes and cleaning the paint trays. I envied her, to be honest ... I don't envy her today. I did back then but not today.* Interview participant 2, female graduate



*I was the only Traveller in that school. There were no other Travellers in it and I was in the corner. I would be playing by myself in the corner, so I was never really a part of it. I was always kind of isolated in that and I was afraid – if I am being honest about it – because I couldn't put my hand up in class and answer questions that I knew. I was the silent person in the corner. If I had done something wrong, I was made to stand up in class; so it was very, very difficult and you would be put outside the door. I mean sitting outside the door just because you disturbed the class, or you wanted to get up and go to the toilet; so I was put outside the door a lot and I was spoken down to a lot in that school. Interview participant 1, male graduate*

If we look at Lundy's (2007) typology of participation,<sup>2</sup> it places great emphasis on the student voice. Lundy says that adults should provide an audience for children's voices and give them an opportunity to influence decisions that impact them (Welty and Lundy, 2013). This following quote illustrates how Traveller children were placed in 'special classes', regardless of their abilities or literacy levels. Some examples of harsh treatment of young Traveller children were seen in the dataset:

*I came to that school and it was like an education, but you were still in the corner, you would be called "[racial slur]" you would be looked down on, you were never first in line to get anything. It was really ... it dragged the life out of you and the teachers never gave you enough time. You never – like give him a book, let him read in the corner or send him to a special class. I didn't need special classes; I could read and I could write? Interview participant 1, male graduate*

In Hyland's (2005) analysis of the teaching of children of colour, she describes hidden racism in the 'helper metaphor', where the subjects of racism are paternalised and patronised in an attempt to offer 'help', which undermines their capabilities and potential. According to the Houses of the Oireachtas (2019), many Traveller children were left to draw pictures and play, and many today as a result are unable to read or write. This is in line with Hyland's work, where minority children are seen as 'incapable'. According to Villani and Barry (2021), many mental health problems start in school, because some teachers considered Traveller children as 'slow learners':

*The other Travellers that were in my class would have been all my cousins and we would be taken out at least four or five times a day to go to a Traveller teacher. Now what we would do in that room would be just mess – I never learnt anything from the Traveller teacher – she was lovely. We loved her because we got away from the other rest of the class.*

*I never felt discrimination from the teachers as such because they were just ... I couldn't blame them because they didn't know what they were dealing with.*

Interview participant 2, female graduate

2. Laura Lundy's model provides a way of conceptualising a child's right to participation, as laid down in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is intended to focus decision-makers on four elements: space, voice, audience, influence.



*We are also left on our own a lot. A lot of Travellers are left at the back of the class. I love history, I loved reading, I loved maths, I loved English, do you know what I mean? They were my strong points. I loved anything that got to do with chess or anything like that, but I noticed, where other Travellers hadn't got the same interest as me, it was like well you just sit – we are not given an opportunity to move on – that is what I am more or less trying to say – there is not enough focus put on those individuals in the class. That is kind of hard when you are a kid, and you are looking at everyone else getting all these different things and you are like "I have to live on the site when I go home and that is it". There is no bigger picture. Interview participant 1, male graduate*

*My first one – our school was a bit of a mess to be honest – nobody in that school really took anything seriously even though academically they are very serious about their work and stuff, but it is the environment that you are in. I suppose the big thing for me is like do you know when you go into college there is a mix of different people and you get used to all the different cultures being around different people – and then like the work ethic. When I moved to [NAME OF PLACE] – that school wasn't as academically driven – so you just kind of had to give yourself the push. That is why I decided to do the year in [NAME OF PLC COLLEGE] as well because I feel it definitely made a huge difference. Interview participant 7, female graduate*

*Other than that, there wasn't much from teachers. Like I remember – what was it – fifth year I think – and the teacher was going around the class and she was asking everyone "what do you want to do?" and "where do you see yourself?" and all this and I felt like she purposefully left me to last just like oh she forgot me, but it was like she didn't even bother asking me what I wanted to do. I was like Oh my God ... I just kind of shrugged it off and said whatever. Yeah, there was definitely no support from teachers anyway – they just assumed the littlest from you. Interview participant 3, male graduate*

*... all different Travellers in my secondary school were just given iPads and just thrown to the side which I think is very wrong. I know some of them didn't want to learn – and I understand that – but some of them probably ... Well, they weren't really given the chance either. That was the way I saw it. I think the discriminations in secondary school are very bad, to be honest. Interview participant 3, male graduate*



## 3.5 Pathways to higher education

### Thirst for education

Villani and Barry (2021) highlighted that despite the many negative experiences documented in the literature and the high rates of early school-leaving in the Traveller community, the participants in their study placed great value on education. There were similar findings in the data from this research:

*[MY CHILD] grew up with me in college ... he would be doing his soccer training and I would be in the front of the car with the laptop and I deliberately do that to introduce him. I would say [NAME] – he wants to be a vet – I would say "... that is very good, you are going to be a vet" – encourage him. He tells me – like last month I was doing Introductory studies and it was a portfolio I had to make up. I couldn't believe it – there were eighty-four certs – and I just had them in a folder. Interview participant 2, female graduate*

*I was always a good student anyway because I used to always get my homework done. I always knew I wanted a future for myself ... As you know, there are not a lot of Travellers even going to college; so just to even get in myself – I am proud of myself for getting in. Interview participant 4, male graduate*

*At first, I really wanted COURSE TITLE ... I got accepted into the course anyway, but it got taken out. I remember just sitting there – I was actually even crying sitting on the side of my bed. I remember reading the sheet – "There are not enough people applying for the course, the course isn't going ahead" – and I said, "Oh my God, what am I going to do?" and it was the only course I put down on my [NAME OF PLC COLLEGE]. Yeah, I was so shocked. After everything now, was it just done then and there like? Then I saw COURSE TITLE ... I got accepted into (that) anyway. I am in second year of it and next year is my last year. I absolutely love it – it was a great choice for me. Interview participant 3, male graduate*

*My mam – she would have accepted it from the beginning. She would be a little bit nervous. She would be like – she would hate to see me getting hurt or she would hate to see me ... not in a competitive way – she is not competitive – but she would hate to see me fail – to get hurt – but she would always ... I would say, "Mam, I am finished this" but I am addicted to education now – honestly, I am addicted, right ... I was seven – I was almost skin and bones – I could read and write before I went to school. She said my dad would be selling door to door and maybe he would get £2 for a mat and she said I would write it down in a book and she said, at the end of the day, I would be able to calculate it all up. Interview participant 2, female graduate*

The House of Education published a report in 2019 that stated that 67% of Traveller children live in families where the mother has either no formal education or primary



education only. This clearly impacted participants in our research. However, awareness was very high that structural factors had impacted on their parent's access to education:

*My mam – when we started painting – she had a paint brush and she kept looking at it, like. Even I learned from my mam, like – I live with her – and it was the first time that she ever painted a picture in her life. She never had painted. Now, she wasn't the only one but that is OK. I didn't feel hurt by that because I didn't know the other people personally but my mam ...*

*... homework wouldn't be done. It would just be left in the bag. It is not down to neglect; it is just that the parents don't know how to read or write and it is not their fault.* Interview participant 2, female graduate

For the participants in this research, in terms of their own pathway to higher education, their enthusiasm for education was palpable in their interviews:

*... in the PLC we used to always talk about Travellers in the Social Studies and one day the teacher was like "does anybody know any Travellers who had done their Leaving Cert?" and I was like – my far relation was actually next to me and my friend – but she is actually related to me – and we were like "oh us" and "what – have you really done yours?" He pulled us back after and said, "thanks very much for speaking up" and all that. I was happy.* Interview participant 4, male graduate

*I was kind of torn ... because one of my friends did an apprenticeship and he said there was a place there at his company. I was torn because it would be money, but I don't know ... I like college ... so I am glad I did it.* Interview participant 5, male graduate

*Because there are a lot of Travelling young fellows and young ones who grow up and they are actually looking at the wrong role models, do you know what I mean? It is kind of all focus on "oh this is what my family does so I have to do that" so I just ask them personally "how do you think education benefits you or benefits the Travellers?" For me to answer that, it gives us a wider view on life, it opens up our minds. I mean Travellers are very educated, they are very work orientated. They love arts, they love music, they have a great imagination, but they are very close-minded as well. They are very blinker minded – "it is us against the world". Now, all I would say is that education is key to success – that is it.* Interview participant 1, male graduate

Transition pathways from post-primary to higher education were largely through PLC courses for participants in this research, with only one of the seven participants in this research having entered higher education directly from Leaving Certificate. One participant noted that the transition via a PLC programme facilitated their learning process:



*I feel like it was a lot easier for me than it would have been for all the first years that went in this year because I got that one year of experience – that one year of ... It is kind of like a recap year for me now in terms of the modules that we are studying and the content we are taking in because it is very similar with the Psychology and the Social Studies and all that; so, it was a lot easier for me. I kind of knew what to expect from it like with the assignments and the exams and the workload that you get as well; so, it was a lot easier for me I would say.* Interview participant 7, female graduate

## Barriers and challenges

Villani and Barry (2021) use the word 'traumatic' to describe Traveller children's experiences in primary and post-primary school. The fallout from these experiences is likely to create an emotional barrier for any Traveller who accesses higher education and re-enters a classroom environment:

*I felt like I was tiny. I felt I wasn't able for it; I was overwhelmed and if anyone was to look at me, I was going to cry, so ... It is a big, crazy, scary world when you put that foot in that college and you feel microscopic – it is frightening – and you have to be so brave, to be honest. Then you are going upstairs, and you don't know who wants to sit beside you, where will you sit.*

*I said nothing for the first two weeks and then I just sort of got confidence and said I am a Traveller and I started to share my experiences. During all the modules, I did feel discrimination, but I challenged it.* Interview participant 2, female graduate

Another barrier to accessing further or higher education described by participants in this study is grounded in cultural shifts that occurred in recent decades. Against a backdrop of urbanisation, public policies which restricted nomadic practices, valorised settled culture and promoted assimilation were catalysts for Travellers feeling compelled into housing schemes.

Purposeful at worst, thoughtless at best, the disintegration of the social and cultural identity of Travellers has been devastating. The mental health status of many Travellers is fragile, with low self-worth documented in the literature (Villani and Barry, 2021). This participant explains poignantly how the cultural shifts impacted his life course:

*I am talking the nineties – like in the fifties there was no ... Like you hear of Travellers now in college and stuff like that. Back then, you never heard that.*

*... if I was talking to another Traveller or some of the people I meet, I don't have to say the whole sentence. I just have to say so much and they understand exactly what I am saying. So, the language is what I would struggle with.*

*It was like you have two ways to go: you can either work for nothing or you can turn to crime. The only opportunity I had was crime and that is the road that I went.*



*I think the other one was doubts – like am I worth being here?* Interview participant 1, male graduate

An additional and very powerful barrier for Travellers in accessing higher education is the longstanding poor relationship between educational structures and the Traveller community. In this research, it is the manner in which the participants and their children have been treated and managed within the school system that fractured this key relationship. A newer generation of Travellers, who are determined to remain or return to education, can sometimes face expressions of fear, doubt and scorn within their family nucleus:

*Family, yeah – my mother is very old-fashioned, very, very old-fashioned – “education is no good for a Traveller” and all that kind of stuff. “You are not going to get anything from it”. My sisters kind of slag me at the moment and some of my nieces – when I come in it is “oh, here is my educated uncle”.* Interview participant 1, male graduate

Some 55% of Travellers have ended their formal education by the age of fifteen (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019). This norm can impact expectations in families for their children’s educational pathways:

*My dad told me that, I remember when I was in second year, he said, “look boy you just have to make it to third year and then after that do what you want”.* Interview participant 3, male graduate

*I wouldn’t say negative but my grandfather would be very traditional so he would be like “as soon as you have done your Leaving Cert come over to me and we will work” – work for money, like.* Interview participant 5, male graduate

*Some people just couldn’t understand why I would want to do it because, in the whole community, you wouldn’t ever really see much of going on to do something like this. Some of them asked me what was I going to do if I ever got married – how was I going to do that because he wouldn’t want me working all day – as bad as that sounds. Some of them asked me why I would want to work – why I didn’t want to kind of ... In their own words, they wanted to know why I wouldn’t rely on a husband that would give me money or even my own family and why would I want to go through hard work to make it for myself.* Interview participant 6, female graduate

While comments from family and friends were sometimes less than supportive, two participants also reported that personnel within school settings also lacked confidence in their potential and capabilities:



*I actually went to a guidance counsellor in [PLC COURSE] and I just spoke about what I wanted to do. Originally, I was going for [an IT COURSE] – COURSE TITLE – and then I was like “no, I can probably go higher than that again, you know”; so I was like “alright, let me go and talk to the guidance counsellor and see if I could get COURSE TITLE in NAME OF HEI” and, when I went in there – she was like “well, personally, I think you are wasting your time even applying because I don’t think you will be accepted” and I was like ... “I am confused” and I was like “I don’t really understand”, I was like “I get the highest grades in my class – surely I will be accepted?” and she was like “there are only 30 places and they are not going to take you on”. I was like “right” and “that is weird”. How are you going to say that someone isn’t going to get something when you don’t even know what their marks are like. I ended up getting eight distinctions anyway so ... Interview participant 7, female graduate*

*The career guidance was absolutely useless in my school. I went to [NAME OF SCHOOL]. He just told me “join the army” – that was about all I got from him. He was like “join the army”. I was like do I look like I want to join the bloody army, like! Interview participant 3, male graduate*

## Supports

This section will focus on the supports that enabled the Traveller graduates in this research to access and navigate higher education. Some of the supports mentioned were guidance counsellors in post-primary school; aftercare workers from Tusla the Child and Family Agency; key workers for those in recovery from addiction; HEI websites for information-gathering.

### Intrafamilial supports

Of significance is the support from the participants’ own family which was documented in this research:

*[Dad] was happy – he was delighted. He was more happy that I got into college. He just thought at first it was kind of a “good boy” phase but then ... They are delighted now. All my friends are delighted. The ones that I thought would go to college kind of never did and the ones that I assumed never would did go, so it was kind of strange that way looking at it now. They are very supportive – they are saying they are proud of me and things like that. Interview participant 3, male graduate*

*They were all delighted. You see like my mum’s family are very old-tradition-style Travellers, so I am the first one to go to college and, to them, I am basically like a doctor or a lawyer or something – I am that high up – just because I even finished my PLC course. They are all so amazed because nobody has ever done it before – nobody has even finished secondary school in my family – so they think it is amazing that I*



*am going doing something with my life. No bad things. And all my friends really are settled people, so all my friends go to college.* Interview participant 7, female graduate

*My family supported me an awful lot. My friends did as well. My family were extremely supportive – they always were. They always wanted me to do something but not pressure me into doing something so then, when I came with this to them, they were delighted.* Interview participant 6, female graduate

### **Support from HEIs**

Some participants spoke warmly about the reception they received in the HEIs they attended, where Traveller culture and history is discussed, creating a more welcoming atmosphere, and encouraging participants to continue with their course. Helpful lecturers and Access Practitioners were also described as being motivators to continue in higher education:

*Yeah. It is basically now even doing this college course there is a lot about Travellers, which is actually nice. Even in our Sociology class and all that – they speak about Travellers a lot – which is grand. I never realised they were going to speak about them that much.* Interview participant 4, male graduate

*I just think all the lecturers are very helpful even if I have ... Like, if I am stuck on something, they will always just say they will email me back straightaway to give me a hand or anything like that – they are very good that way. If I am stuck, they will give me the answer straightaway.* Interview participant 7, male graduate

*I would say [ACCESS PRACTITIONER] – he would help me through. He would always, like – like if I needed any help – like referencing to do in college ... he basically told me of all the grants that I was able to get, and he told me how to go about it and stuff.* Interview participant 5, male graduate

In terms of funding to attend HEIs, there were mixed experiences in the dataset with regard to ease of accessing funds:

*I didn't know how to go about grants or anything – I was kind of like go do your own thing because my grandparents wouldn't have the slightest clue of how to do anything like that; so yeah, I went about SUSI more or less myself. My mother helped me as well, but it was really awkward. Like if you didn't know how to do it, it is whatever – you are just left there. I couldn't ring anyone up and every time I tried to ring SUSI – they were a nightmare. It was kind of like "oh yeah, fill out the form there and just press submit" – that was literally it – that as long as your call was lasting – like goodbye!* Interview participant 5, male graduate



*I can say that since – I didn't get any support from Traveller organisations apart from that girl, [NAME], because I was struggling to get funding for [NAME OF HEI] – I went to Pavee Point and that – and I don't know if they get money for funding for higher education for Travellers, but they refused me. They told me to run a marathon and ask my family to sponsor me. I wasn't entitled to [the SUSI grant]. I sent a message and asked where or how I can get funding for [NAME OF HEI] and that is when [NAME] sent me the SOAR information ... that is how I got it; you know what I mean? I did get funding. Interview participant 1, male graduate*

*I remember when I was doing the PLC, I wasn't entitled to the SUSI grant and I paid for the PLC myself. It was actually [NAME OF ORGANISATION] – I signed up with them – and they paid something like €200 towards my fees. I thought that was really helpful – it got me through it anyway. Interview participant 3, male graduate*

## 3.6 Self-determination

Self-determination theory is a framework for human motivation and personality that largely considers social-environmental conditions that best foster self-motivation (Bartholomew et al., 2011). Similarly, social environments can be so detrimental that they thwart and disrupt self-determination and positive, psychological health-supportive behaviours (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In this report, we have highlighted the barriers to accessing higher education in the Traveller community, including their eroded culture and self-worth in the hands of the non-nomadic majority which spilled from the community mindset into educational spaces, where Traveller children were perceived as being incapable of grasping educational/curricular concepts like most non-nomadic ('settled'). We have also highlighted the supports which exist for Travellers: good guidance from counsellors in post-primary; support from family members; Access Practitioners and lecturing staff. However, one key finding emerged from the dataset that warrants attention. The levels of self-determination that were evident in the qualitative interviews conducted with Traveller graduates was beyond remarkable. This is in spite of, or perhaps because of, the adversity that Travellers have navigated physically, mentally and emotionally from a very young age, on the margins of a society that only sometimes, and in particular circumstances, extended them acceptance or solidarity. The following quotes illustrate that self-determination, an intrinsic motivation to study at third level:

*There were many times I questioned myself. I said, "is it worth it? Was I happier back in the bubble? Would I go back in the bubble? Was I happier?" and then I would say, "no, I am not – I want to make change".*

*My mam sat me down one night and she said, "you are always talking about change – listen, you are not magic" she said. "You are not going to instantly change [NAME of PLACE] and stop discrimination" ... I said, "a change for me would be the tiniest little thing". I am actually tutoring my mam, my auntie, my sister, my cousins.*



*I am their tutor. I have personally designed a module as well myself and I have proposed it – it is a six-week Traveller cultural awareness programme for the settled communities so I would love it to be mandatory.* Interview participant 2, female graduate

*I listened to people, I asked people questions. I have other friends who were in college and I was like “well, how did you start?” and they gave me ideas and I went looking for them, you know what I mean?* Interview participant 1, male graduate

*I am also a very self-motivated person and I knew what my goal was and I knew, in order for me to reach that goal, I had to do certain things. I am glad it just didn't really bother me. I just wasn't the type of person you could say something to and it will affect me but, if it was someone else, I could see how it could really “bug” them but, for me, it was just kind of like “I don't care – whatever – I am just going to do my own thing and prove you wrong”.* Interview participant 3, male graduate

*I just told them that it was kind of my own choice. I told them I would rather have a job over a husband. I would rather have my own life than to live someone else's life, so that was it really.* Interview participant 6, female graduate

*I didn't really go for information anywhere, I did it all myself, to be honest. I did it all myself and I saw that there were a lot of girls that I knew from social media that were on that course so what I did was I actually got onto those girls and I asked them all about the course, what to expect from it and then I compared it to the course at [NAME OF IT] and just did the pros and cons between the two and then kind of lined it up that way and just did a lot of my own research on it, to be honest. I would say I am a very self-driven person anyway. I guide myself through a lot of stuff so I don't think I would have even needed [help], to be honest.* Interview participant 7, female graduate

Basic psychological needs theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) proposes that the more social-environmental supports people have in their lives, the better they will function and develop autonomy, responsibility and self-efficacy. The Traveller graduates who took part in this research, although limited by reduced social-environmental supports, found within themselves the autonomy and self-efficacy to overcome their fears, the societal barriers and 'break the cycle' of early school-leaving that may have been longstanding in their families and communities. These individuals achieved all this without histories of a secure sense of belonging and connection within the social environments of their educational settings. The findings of this report invite the reader to consider what Travellers and the Traveller community could achieve in a socio-environmental space which celebrated them, their traditions, their culture and their children's learning in schools.



## 3.7 Change: recommendations from Traveller graduates

To conclude this chapter, presented here will be recommendations for change in the Irish education system in Traveller graduate voices:

*[My mother] says she didn't go to school, but she met the scholars in her home. Just because she can't read and write doesn't mean that she is less intelligent than I am – if I am writing an essay that she wouldn't be able to do it. So, I am looking at that as well. I am looking at designing specific modules for the Traveller community that can be done by video, can it be accredited by video, can it be done through a piece of art, can it be done by a talk. Just because my mam can't read and write doesn't mean that she is not intelligent. She could be anything – she is the most intelligent person and inspirational person I know. That needs to be looked at too because you are not going to find ten out of ten Travelling women that can read and write. You know with college – even referencing your bibliography – the problem is being tailored around. Interview participant 2, female graduate*

*I think definitely a few workshops or something within colleges and stuff like that just to bring them together and just show them simple things like even just have a SUSI stand – a new KD stand – a Study Skills workshop – things like that. Bring them all up to the college, put them in the college environment and show them around – things like that. Be like "look, this is what it is – it is not as big and scary as you think it is. This is how you are going to go about it and how you apply for your CAO" and things like that because I didn't even know how to do that. Interview participant 3, male graduate*

*If I took anything away from today that is there needs to be a Traveller in every college that can accommodate, facilitate and speak in their own words about your experience and have it not just one day – maybe six weeks – that needs to happen before. Interview participant 2, female graduate*

*I think the Traveller community should be taught as a syllabus in the secondary school. As I say ... you don't understand what way the Traveller community is. I would say include it more. When I was in secondary school we would learn about – like they say "tinker" now and all that – but it was a book that we were doing for my Leaving Cert – which I actually thought was discrimination to be honest with you – they were saying you have got to honour it ...*



*We did learn a small bit, but that bit was about oh they were going door to door selling –tinsmiths and doing this and that – but it wasn't that much.*

*The teachers and the students don't know much about the culture, so they are obviously going to judge us more, you get me? That is what I was thinking anyway.*

Interview participant 4, male graduate

## 3.8 Conclusion

This chapter presented a history and background of the Traveller community in the Irish education system through their own voices. This serves as part of a needs assessment of the target group for the Traveller Graduate Network (TGN) initiative.

### Revisiting the research question:

#### **What are the needs of the Traveller community in higher education (needs assessment of target group)?**

- A. A rebuilding of the relationship between the Traveller community and the education system as a whole. Negative experiences at primary and post-primary level impact significantly on whether a student will want to remain in the education system.
- B. Placement of the Traveller child at the centre of the learning environment in schools prior to higher education alongside all other children of all other ethnicities.
- C. Encouragement from all relevant professionals along the continuum of student educational trajectories: career guidance counsellors; educators; mentors – encouragement to continue, building of self-efficacy in the student, provision of supports where there may be additional needs. Diversification of modes of assessment (e.g. creative submissions) would be in line with Universal Design for Learning principles.<sup>3</sup>
- D. A sense of belonging – this can be assisted through the resourcing of the TGN, who provide a peer-to-peer support network for Travellers aspiring to, accessing and navigating higher education.
- E. The cooperation and involvement of the community, business and industry in supporting work placements and work opportunities post-graduation. This will communicate and underscore the positives, the opportunities and the welcoming of Travellers as valuable Irish citizens – as they have always been.

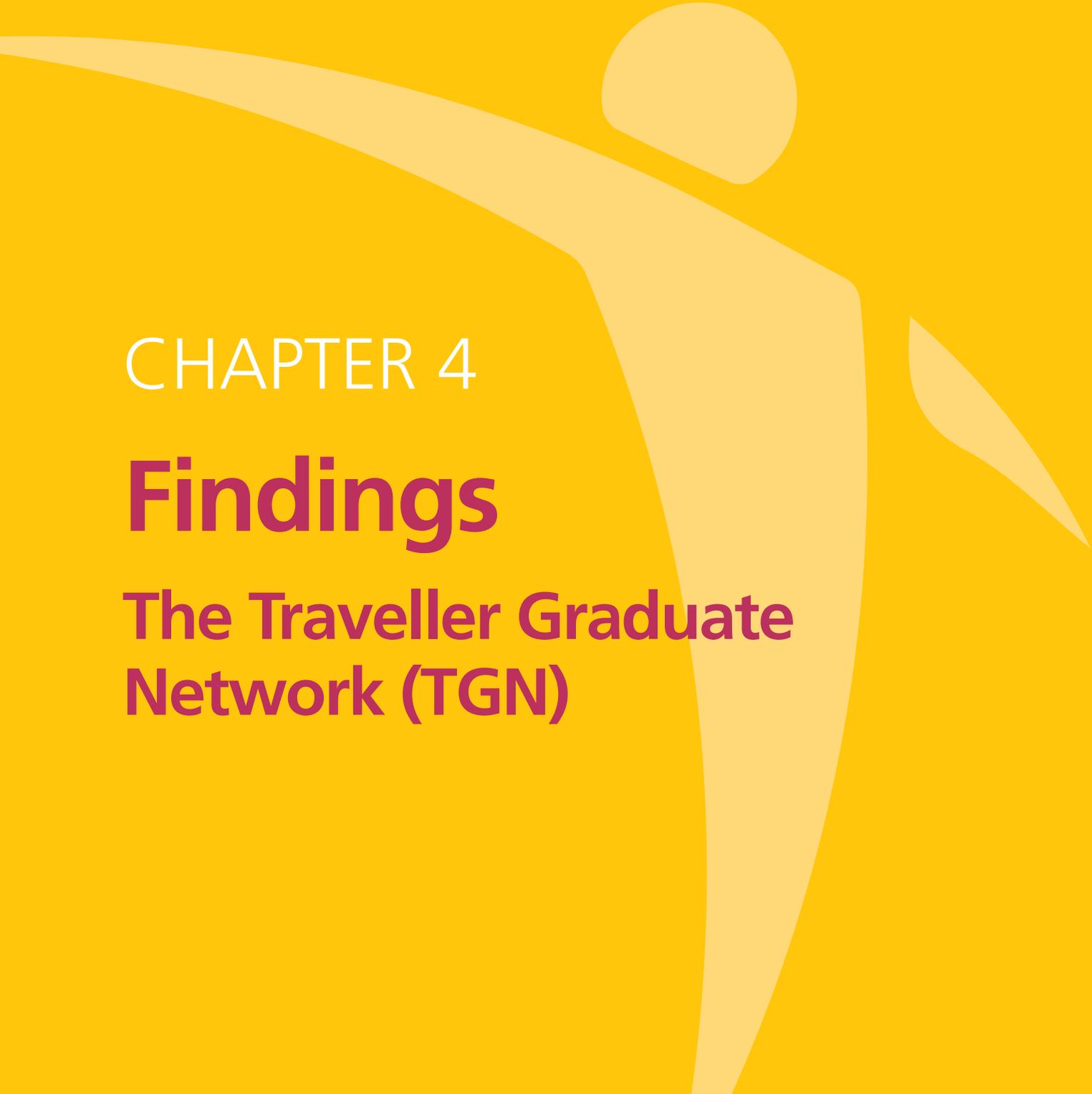
As already stated, without an understanding of the experience of Traveller graduates within the education system before they reached the point they are currently at, it is

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3. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to teaching and learning that gives all students equal opportunity to succeed. See Universal Design for Learning – AHEAD.



impossible to plan for change. Results were organised thematically as such: discrimination in the community; hybrid identities (hidden and distinct); Traveller graduate experiences of primary and post-primary education; pathways to higher education including a thirst for knowledge, barriers, supports, funding and self-determination. Chapter 4 will now examine the TGN and its feasibility as a support for Traveller graduates and as an innovative model of practice and will explore opportunities for development.

A large, stylized silhouette of a human figure in a dynamic, reaching pose, rendered in a light yellow color against a darker yellow background. The figure's right arm is extended upwards and to the right, while the left arm is bent at the elbow. The head is a simple circle, and the torso and legs are broad, tapering shapes.

CHAPTER 4

# Findings

**The Traveller Graduate  
Network (TGN)**



## *Encourage. Educate. Employ.*

Traveller Graduate Network (TGN)

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of the TGN as a model of practice. It will provide a background to the TGN and outline the individual aims and objectives of the programme. As part of the formative evaluation, feasibility will be considered through identifying challenges faced, innovative practice and opportunities for development. These areas will be illuminated by findings from two focus group interviews: one with the members of the TGN and another with Access Practitioners in higher education in the South Cluster. Some data will also be included from Travellers who accessed the TGN as part of their higher education journey.

### 4.2 Background

The TGN was initially established in 2019. Research was undertaken by the founding member of the TGN with Traveller parents in 2016. Collectively, their self-reported experiences of education were of ridicule, loneliness and neglect. Often Access Practitioners speak about the 'trickle-down effect' where when one member of an underserved and disadvantaged family goes to college and has a positive experience, other family members tend to follow their course, and this has a visible impact on generations to come. In the case of Irish Travellers, the 'trickle-down effect' of what generations of Travellers have experienced within the education system has had a similar, yet converse, effect. Education systems may be feared, education systems may be thought of as engaging in assimilation tactics. Above all, no parent wants their child to suffer. It comes as no surprise that a Traveller parent may be reluctant to see their child take a risk that may impact them psychologically and diminish their self-worth. There are just under 1% of Travellers accessing higher education as a result of these historical norms. The TGN is made up of some of those 1%. Its aim is to increase this percentage significantly over the coming years.

The TGN is a group of graduates, professionals and changemakers from within the Traveller community that promotes progression among their peers and younger generations. The TGN is a peer-to-peer network which offers advice, support and solidarity to its members – Travellers in further, higher education and within the workforce.

The TGN has clear ambitions to support and orientate Traveller students towards higher-level education through liaising with post-primary schools; providing supports and encouragement in the higher education space for Travellers and to continue this support post-graduation into the workforce, promoting inclusive working environments in business and industry. The TGN's core belief is that Travellers can be empowered to fulfil their potential and continue with their education if the right supports are put in place – within



the community as well as supports from outside the community. For Travellers, staying in education and continuing to further or higher education means overcoming many obstacles, which are sometimes invisible to the settled community. The TGN enables Travellers who have already experienced the system to help, mentor, support and advise other Travellers, and their families, to progress to further or higher education. However, it is the responsibility of the entire Irish community to support these aims and objectives.

The TGN is now being relaunched and strengthened post-pandemic. An initiative in its developmental stages, the TGN is a group of Traveller graduates who are working to support present and prospective higher-education students from the Traveller community in Ireland in achieving their goals:

*We want to keep it a safe space for Travellers. I suppose that is the simplest way to put it. Now obviously we will need help and support and funds but, regardless of where that help and support comes from, we will always want this to remain a Travellers only space, so they can be open and free and understand that they won't be judged or discriminated against; so, I think that is very important going forward.*  
Focus Group 1 – TGN

In this regard, the TGN may be the first initiative of its kind in Ireland:

*At the moment, I don't believe there is any Travellers only space out there as in Travellers completely working with Travellers. There are Traveller organisations, but I think in terms of education and employment I think we would possibly be the first one and the only one on the island.* Focus Group 1 – TGN

As already stated, findings of this research were that many Travellers have hidden their ethnicity in order to survive in a society rife with judgement. Berkely, Beard and Daus (2019) have written about the emotional cost of concealing a stigmatised identity. While the intent is to avoid stigma and the negativity associated with that, there is a shame and affective distress (Panchankis, 2007) linked to being unable to embody the authentic self. It is vital that we celebrate Traveller culture, so that Travellers no longer have to engage in 'passing' (Goffman, 1963) or 'polishing' – where Travellers may maintain their named identity but adopt other identities alongside their own to raise their status in the outsider community (Cavaliero and Levinson, 2019). As the numbers of Travellers in higher education are currently so low, there is an understanding as to why, at this point, a Travellers for Travellers space is a safe place, where others have walked 'in their shoes'.

The TGN endeavours to promote more inclusive learning and working environments for Irish Travellers. This includes highlighting the roles and responsibilities of other educational settings in achieving the best outcomes for Travellers:

*I think the reality is as well we are just going to be a small network starting off so we are not going to be able to tackle every issue – that should be the schools' and the educators' job – to educate all children equally.* Focus Group 1 – TGN



The core belief underpinning the TGN is that Travellers can be empowered to fulfil their potential and continue into higher education if the right supports are put in place – within their community, in the educational community and the outside community:

*A big thing when we all came together was that we didn't want to just be another community group that was fighting for human rights. So, we fully support all the community groups that are fighting for Travellers' rights – and have done for years – but our main focus is to support students through education and into employment.*

*So, we will advocate, and we will speak to issues that are creating barriers, but our main focus is to students and getting them into employment.* Focus Group 1 – TGN

As illustrated by the quote above, a partnership approach between the TGN, the community, education providers and policymakers is required to make real change for Travellers in education.

## 4.3 TGN core values

The core values of the TGN are outlined below. These are important in recognising where the TGN positions itself in higher education and identifying what is at the heart of its actions and its plans going forward.

1. We recognise that all families are different and that not all Travellers are the same. We understand that our environments and life circumstances can often further compound the challenges we experience as individuals and as family members.
2. We value the power of the family support system and its importance within our community. We believe there is great potential for development and progression using the family support system.
3. We value collective unity within the community along with personal autonomy and independence. We believe personal autonomy empowers individuals to be their true selves.
4. We believe in and value an inclusive education system as it supports students to flourish and broaden their horizons.
5. We value our partnerships with parents and teachers, schools and colleges, Traveller organisations and the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science (DFHERIS).
6. We value collaboration with business and enterprise, and we acknowledge that Travellers need to know that they have a chance of meaningful employment if they continue with their education.



## 4.4 Aims and objectives of the TGN

This section will present the objectives of the TGN alongside relevant findings from this research. It is important to note that the TGN is in the early stages of building membership and building national awareness, so these findings may include future aspirations in addition to current roles.

### ENCOURAGE – second-level education objectives

**No. 1: To link supports, initiatives and information sessions for potential members and their parents which will encourage and enable them to progress through their second-level education and beyond.**

The TGN provides support for Travellers in post-primary school education through dissemination of relevant information and encouragement of the transition to third level. Data from this research has shown that this has been received well to date:

*I remember [MEMBER OF TGN] came up to the school and brought us out to [NAME OF COLLEGE] and even at the end I wasn't signing up for it until she convinced me to. Not even convinced me, she just said you don't even have to do it if you get it, but it is just to chance it. I don't think it would have worked other than that – if that makes sense? I don't think personally, by just the guidance counsellor or the school, I would have gone on to do something else. I think it was just that extra push.*  
Interview participant 6, male graduate

A smooth transition from post-primary education to higher education requires the collaboration and partnership of the student, his or her family and a representative for the HEI, which the TGN provides, either through members themselves or through referrals:

*I also met with [NAME]'s mother prior to her starting in [NAME of HEI]; so those kinds of things ... Like certainly the visiting teacher was significant in allowing for those things to happen. I suppose [NAME]'s role now is somewhat similar to what that visiting teacher's position was – except that it is coming from the third level side as opposed to the second level side. You know that key person though can make a massive difference in just allowing for that smooth transition to happen.* Focus Group 1 – TGN

*They prepped me 100% for the interview [for college]. I remember going into them. They showed me what would be asked – they explained to me how to answer these questions – not telling me what to do but gave me guidance about it. It really did mean a lot – the support from them – because I don't think I would have – not even that I wouldn't have done it but I wouldn't have been as prepared or as determined to do it if it wasn't for the help that I got.* Interview participant 6, male graduate



**No. 2: The TGN will use its members to showcase the amazing role models that we have so that potential members can see that there are many options and pathways available to them.**

Chapter 3 gave an in-depth account of the barriers that Traveller students face in accessing higher education or in having the confidence to identify as Travellers in some cases. This objective of the TGN seeks to encourage pride in Traveller achievements and to help broaden the menu of options that a young Traveller student might see for their future:

*So, I am worried or kind of thinking they have gone through three years now hiding their identity or not knowing what is available to them. If we were further down the road or when we are established, those students who are going onto third level won't be in a position where they feel they have to hide who they are or, even if they do want to remain – keep their identity hidden – that is personal choice, they will still be able to reach out to somebody like our network. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

Being connected to other Travellers in the higher-education space is something that was expressed as positive by participants in this research:

*I think something within the college to get the chance to actually talk to other Travellers. I remember [NAME OF TRAVELLER ACCESS PRACTITIONER] told me that there are one or two other Travellers inside the college, but I just have no idea who they are and they probably have no idea who I am. It would be nice to actually meet them and be like “oh you are doing this” and stuff like that. Just like “what are you doing?” – just to talk to them about their course and things like that and asking them how they found it – comparing our experiences – because mine seems very straightforward and went from primary to there but some people took a few years out, then came back and did it, you know. Interview participant 3, male graduate*

*It is great to go on to – I think I have been on it twice – the TGN page<sup>4</sup> – and it is ... I think it was a [SURNAME] girl or something I was looking at. She got her degree and something like that and that was very big...I think it needs to be put out more – that is the only thing I can say. I mean I haven't found a page in Dublin yet about that. Interview participant 1, male graduate*

*I suppose the other thing would be positive role models of people they know from their family or community who have actually gone into a school and have had a positive experience. Obviously, if they haven't had a positive experience, that then becomes the disabling factor rather than an enabling one. Focus Group 2 – Access Practitioners*

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4. The Traveller Graduate Network (TGN) Facebook page



## EDUCATE – third-level education

**No. 3: During a student member's time at college the TGN will continue to provide support. Informing them of various opportunities that might be coming their way or drawing their attention to the various possibilities they could explore.**

Relieving anxieties; making connections for students to relevant supports; encouraging retention and being realistic and open about the challenges of higher-level education are all objectives of the TGN when working with students:

*There is the third level piece then as well where you are actually wanting to support to make sure that they actually get their qualification and that they don't fall through the cracks. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

*If it was for me in [NAME OF COUNTY], I would be saying get in touch with [NAME], get in touch with [NAME] – who is working in our office – and become familiar with all of the supports that are available, enjoy it, grasp it with both hands – you know, those kinds of things really – but try to encourage them as much as possible. Focus Group 2 – Access Practitioners*

*Just take away any worries if you can – there are supports – whatever the issue – whether it is financial, whether it is academic, whether it is digital skills – don't let that be a barrier – and policy – you have to probably know the student in terms of their mind-set and where they are coming from but yeah obviously there are supports there and colleges are only too willing to put everything behind that student, encourage them and get success – to see them get through college but that is a difficult first step as we all talked about. Focus Group 2 – Access Practitioners*

*Across the board I would say it to every individual no matter what students or background it is, you know. I suppose be very realistic about your goals, do something that you are happy about – the supports are very much there – and all the worries are very much there – so it is not specific to the Traveller community – it is every single student that I speak the exact same to. Just to be happy and comfortable in what you are going into and then the supports will be there and they are very much there so just go for it. The first steps are going to be challenging for everybody so, you know. Focus Group 2 – Access Practitioners*

*I saw – like there was a list of different support people. So, I saw the [NAME] then because it said a Traveller yoke, but I never actually realised there was a Traveller Graduate Network until I actually saw it online and then I clicked and then basically me and [NAME] got in touch. Interview participant 4, male graduate*

*That [the TGN] was very good. Basically ... [NAME] was just there to support me and, if I needed anything, I could just email or ring. At least I knew someone was there. Interview participant 2, female graduate*



**No. 4: The TGN will create awareness about and promote the various funding bodies which its members can apply to.**

The TGN described its plans to identify funding options for Traveller students in higher education and assist them in applying for that funding. There was also data from a Traveller graduate who spoke about going through this process with the TGN:

*I suppose in a second then is kind of around funding – things like 1916 bursaries – which Travellers are – not prioritised – but basically the way we all have set it up is that they more than likely would get a 1916 bursary if they applied for it in first year and then, with this new dormant account funding as well – the extra supports and mechanisms are put in place. Focus Group 2 – Access Practitioners*

*I wasn't entitled to [the SUSI grant]. I sent a message and asked where or how I can get funding for [NAME OF HEI] and that is when you sent me the SOAR. I think it was you [TGN MEMBER] who sent me the SOAR application and you also said you would get in contact with IT and that is how I got it ... you know what I mean? I did get funding. Interview participant 1, male graduate*

**No. 5: The TGN will also provide support and advice to members when looking for placements as required for some courses of study.**

The subject of work placements was identified as a potentially difficult area for a Traveller student in higher education, discrimination being one concern. The TGN through a SOAR Project response is developing a Traveller work experience initiative to address this area:

*I suppose build a network of employers who are willing to step up and say yes we will take a student on placement or we will take a student on work experience.*

*It goes back to what we were saying at the very beginning about that discrimination within the workforce that is present and that needs to not be a thing. Just have pockets of choices. I saw the guards and TUSLA and things like that are running short-term programmes and placements for students but that is very targeted and very small specific areas for students – you know, it needs to be more broad and wider within the community. I suppose because it is so acknowledged that discrimination is so rife within our community that it must be just so difficult if you were a student who is studying at third level – from the Traveller community. I mean like wouldn't you want to be ultra-confident to actually step up and say "actually – yeah – I am a Traveller". Focus Group 1 – TGN*



## EMPLOY – postgraduation employment objectives

**No. 6: The TGN will create networking opportunities for our members by bringing likeminded people together and signposting different events which may be of interest also.**

Over time and through word of mouth, the hope is that the TGN will become a household name among the Traveller community and the settled community as the 'go to' place to support Traveller students through higher-education trajectories, in addition to the supports that should be embedded and available in HEIs:

**No. 7: The TGN will facilitate career-building advancement and progression opportunities for our members through access to mentoring, workshops and job fairs.**

There are mentoring programmes running in the South Cluster which support Travellers in post-primary through to higher education. One objective of the TGN is to facilitate access for students to these mentoring programmes, but also to raise awareness of any workshops or continuing professional development opportunities that Traveller students could avail of to prepare them for the workforce:

*I suppose what feeds into that as well then are the mentoring programmes that are run locally. There is the Cork city inter-agency one which is run in several schools in the city. And the UCC plus one which is also run in several schools in the city and county. Ultimately there is someone in paid employment to help and support Traveller students in secondary school. It is just simple messages, being there for them, helping them with anything, pointing them in the right direction and just trying to link the different services within the school to the benefit of the student and their family.*

Focus Group 1 – TGN

*NTRIS has been key in targeting in the south-east Travellers who would be in junior cycle and they have been key for those students transitioning from primary level to secondary level and also to just, I suppose, sow the seed with them – they have been linking in with us to arrange visits and things like that. Now nothing has happened lately, but it has also been a key factor in just promoting the idea of third level and encouraging them to stay in school; so they have been a great resource for us.*

Focus Group 1 – TGN

The importance of mentorship was also highlighted by two Traveller graduates in this research:

*Yes. I think for me – it was personally for me – I always say it was meeting that right person – that lady that mentored me and got me set up – because I feel that she did it very cleverly. She built a relationship, she built trust because, as I said, I was*



*down a very steep alley and there was no life for me. I wanted to get back up, but I needed that help; so I feel that she was there, she saw that interest and she saw that I was determined to make change so she helped me.* Interview participant 2, female graduate

*Motivation really – if I didn't motivate myself then no-one else would have really; so there definitely needs to be a bit more support there for students. There are policies there to obviously help them not discriminate and stuff, but it is more the ethical side as well – just to be like “OK, we actually need to boost them up and tell them why they need to carry on their education” – things like that – what it can do for them.* Interview participant 5, male graduate

**No. 8: The TGN will work in partnership with business and enterprise ensuring that our members have a fair chance of employment in their area of expertise.**

The TGN is concerned with what happens after graduation in addition to supporting Travellers into and through the higher-education system:

*We want to be able to provide our community with real-life job prospects, a real-life paid job where they – like they are not just going to some place for the sake of it – are going there to learn and going there to enhance their working skills and possibly creating a working space where they see themselves working in the future and not just something just “oh, I will give you a job” – tick the box and “good luck and thanks”, you know what I mean?.* Focus Group 1 – TGN

*I suppose one of the big benefits of us coming together – and even in the past year or so – of us being together as a group – is being able to talk about our experiences and being able to share those experiences and actually provide support to each other in terms of “here is where you need to go for financial support”, “here is where you should go for employment supports”.*

*We have already used our networks to get other Traveller graduates into employment. It just shows already the early stages of the value and the power of us working collectively instead of individually.* Focus Group 1 – TGN

One professional spoke about how supporting Travellers to gain employment in senior positions, combating discrimination in the workplace and familiarising Travellers with grievance processes are key goals of the TGN:

*I am probably one of the few [Traveller] people that anyone can point to in terms of being in a senior management position in the corporate world in Ireland.*

*I have been very much in the vanguard there of trying to change how people perceive Travellers, how we tackle discrimination in the workplace and that hasn't been an easy job either, you know, in terms of tackling the discrimination around*



*having to use Dignity and Respect policies, having to go into Grievances with people – things like that – for things they have said in my presence not knowing that I was a Traveller. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

In addition to roles in industry, the TGN acknowledges that some Travellers may want to take on an apprenticeship in a trade. We heard from one such Traveller student who was pleased with how the TGN was able to facilitate this:

*If it is a case of a student wanting to go and do ... an apprenticeship, then that is great – that is brilliant – and that is what we will kind of help them towards as well.*

*So, things like apprenticeships or Earn as you Learn programmes are really important for the community so that, if you do want to stay close to your traditions and you do want to have a family, you can do that and study at the same time; whereas too many times we are trying to fit the Traveller community into third-level education when it is not right for everyone. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

*[TGN MEMBER] supported me a lot with getting the apprenticeship. I applied for it and then they assign you to a job. Then I did the job interview with [NAME] and then we had a meeting with [NAME] because also you go to college as well with this – college one day a week and work four days a week – with [NAME] as well in the [NAME OF COLLEGE]. Interview participant 6, male graduate*

## 4.5 Challenges the TGN wishes to address

The bulk of the challenges faced by the TGN in achieving its aims and objectives are structural, environmental and attitudinal in nature and have been discussed in depth in Chapter 3. Some additional challenges identified by TGN founding members were access to funding, levels of support from teachers and universities, and the historical relationship between the education system and the Traveller community.

In discussions about the limitations of the education system in terms of progression for Travellers, the post-primary space was identified as a key turning point for Traveller children and adolescents. This is where they are often directed to Leaving Cert. Applied (LCA) and PLC courses. This is also where they come into contact with guidance counsellors, whose advice is pivotal in decision-making. In a community where mistrust exists in the system, strong encouragement and belief is needed here from teachers in post-primary to guide and direct Travellers to the same options as other students:

*I mean we certainly would have met students over the years who found themselves on that LCA route and you are kind of going why are they on this LCA route when, you know, they have a very strong Junior Cert – a lot of the students that we would have met – and doing LCA. You are kind of going “God, why are you taking that particular route now?”. I don’t know is that the aspirations of the teachers or are*



*there assumptions being made where they are going to take that route without consideration going to the normal senior cycle for Leaving Cert. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

The role of the home–school community liaison was also discussed as being important at that time in a Traveller student’s life:

*I suppose a strong teacher who encourages that progression and facilitates that progression and the linking between primary and second level. I know in some schools that we work with at second level, the home–school liaison co-ordinator would be very instrumental in creating that link with the sixth class students prior to entry, you know, meeting with parents, meeting with the children themselves in order to just kind of make that transition as smooth as possible. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

Home–school liaison officers could also act as a support for those Traveller parents who are reticent to expose their children to third-level education, due to justifications outlined in Chapter 3:

*I think certainly, by having a parent who is focused on making those transitions or that will support – that can make the difference or that is keen for the student to progress, then I think that will make a difference. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

A ‘whole-university’ approach to raising awareness around equality for Travellers in higher education was discussed as being needed. A member of the TGN described a recent awareness event which was organised by a HEI in the South Cluster as part of Equality Week:

*This year we are running our second Equality Week where we are having a focus on Travellers. I have to think that may partially have something to do with the fact that I am now in employment there and so is [NAME].*

*In the group that I attended that day, there might have been a maximum of twenty people and I already knew the twenty people – you speak to the converted, like. The people that are there are the people that are already open-minded.*

*This time we are running it we want to try and open it up to a much broader group of people and we are hoping that they might have more numbers because it is going to be online. But, unfortunately, I think a lot of the time the campaigns within colleges can be very limited and, unless you have actual voices having a presentation engaging in conversation, they are not making much of a change. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

The above illustrative quote points to a need for embedding sustained equality work in higher-education institutions to target those who need to be informed.



## 4.6 Opportunities

Throughout the experience of conducting this research, it became clear that contemporary and Traveller-focused research itself was considered valuable by the TGN in terms of providing a platform for Travellers to have their voices heard:

*From the perspective of the TGN, we look at this piece of research as important because we want to be able to use it to back up what we are saying in the sense that – everybody is saying if it comes from the mouth of another Traveller it has more meaning and it has more power. I suppose as the network is a group of Travellers who are coming together to try and help each other, we want to be able to influence policymakers going forward to say this is what we think should happen, this is what is working, and this isn't working.*

*In my ten years that I have worked in and around education, these reports have been done loads of time – similar reports – and, when I look back at them and I read them, I am like “yeah, we know this – we are already aware of this”. It was written about ten years ago, but the problems are still the same.*

*I think by coming at it from a different angle – from a group of Travellers – to be able to stand up and say, “this is what we think should happen” – I think it might have a stronger stance. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

This was also evident during data collection where one participant described his experience of taking part in the interview:

*That is for me the first time I have actually opened up properly about [my experience in education]. Interview participant 1, male graduate*

Another opportunity is for support networks to continue to be built across HEIs themselves through further development of support programmes and enhancement of cultural awareness across the whole university, through outreach and community groups and enterprise services. The message is clear: everybody needs to be involved in a continuation of supports for Traveller students:

*I suppose for institutions that have well developed support programmes, it is identifying them and then bringing them into those support programmes and being kind of culturally aware. For other institutions which may not have that, then it is a slightly more complex conundrum on how to actually support and solve that particular one.*

*It could be outreach I suppose between community groups – local enterprise services – everyone – it just becomes part of a continuation of supports along and no matter what or what needs you have – that the support is in place and there is a signpost of how to get it, where to go and who to speak to.*

*Overall, there is definitely a need for greater, I suppose, building of bridges and support networks, you know. Focus Group 1 – TGN*



The TGN itself was recognised by its members as being newly operational due to the disruptive climate of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, future aspirations for the TGN include being a central point of contact in supporting Traveller graduates, to include ensuring that all schools – primary and post-primary – embed supports in helping Traveller students to reach their goals within third level. Links to Access and provision of information was also mentioned as a planned function of the TGN when fully established:

*We would hope, down the line, that the network would be seen within the island of Ireland as a go-to place for information or support. I would hope that all schools, secondary schools, colleges would be aware of us, and if they had a student that needed help or support or if they wanted advice as to how this child or this student might receive supports tailored to them, that they could ask us for that information ... there are students within the college that may not even know that the Access office exists but we do and we all have our own contacts in different locations throughout Ireland. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

In order to reach full potential, collaboration and partnerships with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and with businesses and industry in creating inclusive working opportunities for Traveller graduates were identified as being vital to the TGN's progression in reaching its objectives:

*I am in talks with the Higher Education Authority and they do want to meet us in the next few months to have a conversation ... we will also approach the Department of Education and Skills. Our partners or collaborators will definitely be the schools, the colleges, the Higher Education Authority, the Department of Education and Skills but also business and industry. They have to be part of this conversation going forward ... I see ourselves working in parallel with industry in trying to create that more inclusive working environment but also trying to seek, from different employers, commitment in the sense that they will provide actual paid internships or paid placements or hold a certain quota that they might have available for specific members of the community. Focus Group 1 – TGN*

The TGN suggested that in future, government funding would be welcomed; however, autonomy over same would be crucial to the network as one of the focal point organisations for Travellers in higher education. As part of raising the profile of the TGN, a national awareness campaign was discussed, perhaps in tandem with the new Traveller Culture History in Education Bill where Traveller culture will be instated as part of the curriculum in primary and post-primary schools. Promotional videos may be a part of this awareness campaign. Partnership collaborations with key stakeholders as identified by the TGN are required to support its efforts. Ultimately, those in positions of power need to get behind this new movement:

*I do think a national campaign is necessary– you need to be really careful though and I think especially when within a college context because, like that, not everybody*



*is ready or at a point where they want to say “I am a Traveller” and that is not OK. I do feel hopeful, however, with the new History in Education Bill coming in that kids won’t necessarily feel like this anymore.*

*When we get to an established point, we can obviously do some promotional videos to highlight the network and become more visible. I think visibility is massive but, ultimately, it does come down to the schools and the educators changing. They have the position of power. They are dealing with our kids every day; they have to want to teach every student equally.* Focus Group 1 – TGN

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the TGN as it currently operates. The TGN is in early development stages but the ambition and passion for progression is clear.

### Revisiting the research questions:

#### **How feasible and appropriate is the TGN initiative, in terms of meeting the needs of the target group (to include feedback from students)?**

A. The TGN provides examples of Traveller students who may have experienced the same negativity within the education system and who overcame those to go on and graduate from higher education programmes. This peer-to-peer modelling may be inspirational and also a source of encouragement and support for anybody experiencing doubts around whether they may enjoy, succeed or suffer more within the system. This will go some way towards addressing the need for belonging.

B. The TGN aims to make referrals and links within the levels of the Irish education system (primary and post-primary) in order to foster an environment of encouragement, retention and inclusion for Traveller children to thrive within. This will go towards building new and positive relationships between schools and the Traveller community.

C. By establishing relationships with industry/business and the community to support Travellers in securing work placements and indeed work opportunities after graduation, the TGN will meet the need for progression and create new norms around Traveller educational pathways to the workforce.

D. All of the above are dependent on the adequate support and resourcing of the TGN by relevant bodies.

#### **What are the challenges that may be encountered in delivering the TGN as a programme?**

This report identified many structural and societal challenges that the TGN wishes to address in trying to forge a new pathway in higher education. The TGN seeks to dissolve core beliefs and learned ideas around higher education within the Traveller community,

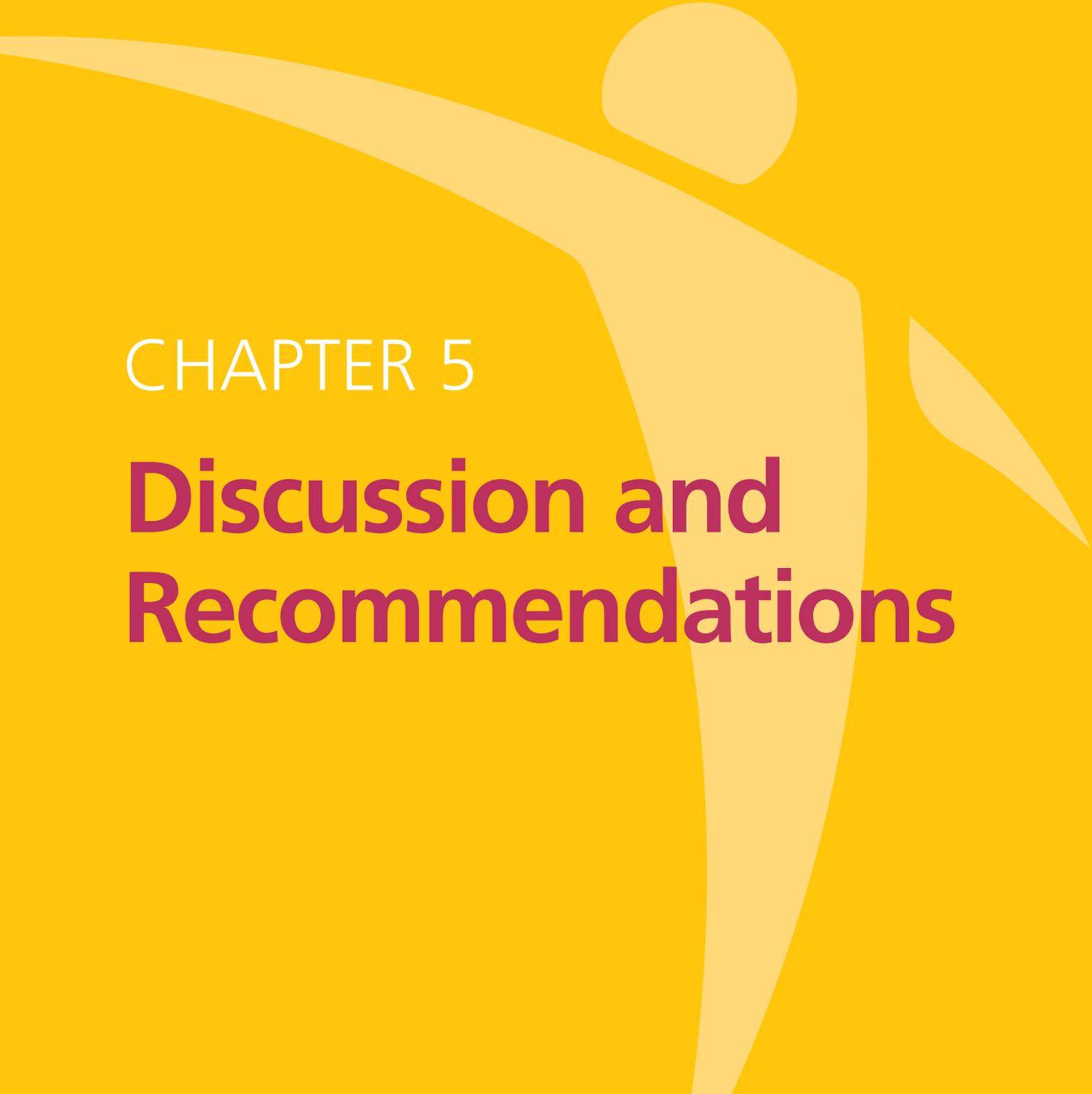


which have been detailed in depth in Chapter 3. Additional challenges discussed were centred around the need for collaboration and support across school settings, a whole-university approach and support from industry to achieve the vision of the TGN. Key to a strategic plan for the TGN going forward is consideration of housing the network as a unit within MTU Cork, along with adequate resourcing and staffing of same. As a network whose members are otherwise employed in full-time roles, sustainability is a challenge.

### **What are the opportunities for the TGN going forward?**

The TGN is a much-needed initiative, as outlined above, and should be staffed and resourced as such in order to realise the following opportunities for development:

- A. Liaising with primary and post-primary schools, in the absence of the reinstatement of the VTT, or perhaps alongside it, in order to change the narrative around where Travellers belong in the Irish education system. The message needs to be clear: Ireland will benefit from a strengthened presence in all spaces of this rich cultural and ethnic group. The messaging needs to begin when children first leave their homes for school and come under the care of the education system at an early age. The TGN can facilitate this with the resourcing for more role-specific staff of this nature.
- B. Awareness campaigns to build the profile of the TGN are needed. These need to be national and focused on the small percentage of Traveller graduates, the reasons for why this is the case and what we as a society can do to repair this damage to a community. The TGN can be put forward as an example of an initiative that will address some of the issues that have arisen from this in the higher education space.
- C. Ongoing development and progression of the TGN requires meaningful partnerships and collaboration from stakeholders and educational bodies as identified by the TGN in order to support and bolster its work. The TGN has proven its worth and potential – it now needs to be resourced through sustainable funding in order to be advanced.

A stylized, light-colored silhouette of a human figure in a dynamic, balanced pose, set against a solid yellow background. The figure's right arm is raised and curved, while the left arm is extended downwards. The head is represented by a simple circle.

CHAPTER 5

# Discussion and Recommendations



## 5.1 Discussion

This report is best positioned as a formative evaluation of the Traveller Graduate Network (TGN), a new initiative developed to support Traveller students in education. The TGN's work includes orienting students towards higher level education through liaising with post-primary schools; providing supports and encouragement in the higher education space for Travellers; and continuing this support post-graduation into the workforce, promoting inclusive working environments in business and industry. To analyse a need for the TGN, research with Traveller participants took place around their experiences of accessing and navigating higher education. A narrative review was conducted as part of this work, which found that although the difficult history of Travellers in educational spaces was well documented, there was a dearth in qualitative research on the just under 1% of Travellers who go on to third level. This report makes a novel contribution to the existing literature.

The qualitative methods used in this research were purposefully selected to allow the powerful story of Travellers in higher education in Ireland to emerge, in their own voices. The experiences of Travellers within the education system as a whole and within communities act as vital evidence for why there is such a low rate of access to higher education in the Travelling community. In addition to providing a formative evaluation of the TGN, this report aims to explore this evidence in depth in order to contribute to public knowledge, further discussion and understanding around Travellers in education and make recommendations for change in terms of educational practice and policy.

### **Discrimination in the community**

Factors outside of school impact on students inside of school (Blaisdell, 2016). The participants in this research spoke about incidents of racism and discrimination that communicated a clear message to them as children and as young people – 'you are not wanted here'. Experiences of prejudice against Travellers have been described in the literature as 'very frequent in their lives' (O'Mahony, 2017) and have undoubtedly resulted in the 'otherising' of Travellers by the non-nomadic majority, a concept which is absorbed by Travellers themselves, rendering them outsiders in the communities in which they reside. Why then would the school environment be a different experience? Racialised attacks, verbal or otherwise, create a hostile social environment which can create feelings of powerlessness, inferiority and subordination. These have all been associated with poor mental health outcomes (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018). This has been reiterated in the literature on other minority groups, who have suffered psychologically because of prejudice and lack of acceptance (Williams et al., 2019; Paradies et al., 2015). It is difficult to conceive how such mental distress can be experienced by a child in their community, only to enter a classroom and be the subject of further ostracisation. No other conclusion can be drawn than to say the psychological abuse of Travellers in Ireland was layered and sustained. The loneliness described in participant accounts of their school experience speaks to that conclusion. In recent times where spaces have been opened up in which Travellers can be accepted and accommodated, participants spoke of being chosen to



appear at events, or being offered places on courses in a manner that seemed tokenistic and orchestrated to fill a 'Traveller quota'. Although positive discrimination has been utilised in the past to increase access for minority groups to previously closed-off spaces, it was experienced as patronising and dehumanising by participants. The TGN has provided an alternative response through its Traveller-led initiative. Such a lack of understanding around the legacy of exclusion is absent within 'nothing about us without us' informed activism.

### **Hybrid identities**

A key finding of this research was that many Travellers have hidden their ethnicity in order to survive in a society rife with judgement. Berkely, Beard and Daus (2019) have written about the emotional cost of concealing a stigmatised identity. While the intent is to avoid stigma and the negativity associated with that, there is a shame and affective distress (Panchankis, 2007) linked to being unable to embody the authentic self. A significant amount of emotional labour is involved in hiding one's identity. There are high levels of mental distress, anxiety and depression documented in the Traveller community (Goward et al., 2006; Peters et al., 2009; AITHS Team, 2010; Millan and Smith, 2019). It is vital that we celebrate Traveller culture, so that Travellers no longer have to engage in 'passing' (Goffman, 1963) or 'polishing' – where Travellers maintain their named identity but adopt other identities alongside their own to raise their status in the outsider community (Cavaliero and Levinson, 2019). Travellers are a heterogenous and nuanced group of individuals, and identity construction should not be centred around the outsider-insider division that exists between Travellers and the non-nomadic majority.

### **Thirst for education**

A recent report from the House of the Oireachtas (2019) gathered feedback from schools around Traveller engagement and inclusion. This is an excerpt from page 9 of that report:

*Often Travellers do not see the relevance or benefits of mainstream education. This may be due to a number of factors. Firstly, there is not the same culture of formal education within the Traveller community as there is in the non-nomadic majority and this can contribute to participating with and continuing in education. Secondly, there is a tradition of manual and skills-based work within the Traveller community that is not reflected in mainstream education. Finally, Traveller history and culture does not feature in the current curriculum which leads to a sense of exclusion for Traveller students.*

The findings from this research contradict the statement that Travellers do not see the benefit of education or that skills-based work is their primary interest. What emerged from this dataset is that older generations of Travellers, through traumatic experiences within the school system, were wary and reticent to encourage their own children to pursue higher education or in some cases post-primary education past Junior Certificate level. However, many of our participants were supported fully to engage in education by their parents. Participants used the words 'happy' 'thrilled' and 'excited' to describe their



parents' reactions to the participants' transition to higher education. Many participants described their natural love of learning, maths, English, art, music that began in childhood. It is common for families who are underserved by society to be described as 'hard to reach' (Duvnjak and Fraser, 2013, p. 186). This arises from a concept known as moral underclass discourse (Levitas, 1998), which places the responsibility on the marginalised for their own marginalisation. Under this framework, socially excluded groups should be encouraged to integrate and conform through use of 'carrots' but also through use of 'sticks' – an example in this case is that of reduced timetables, which are commonly put in place for Traveller children in schools (House of the Oireachtas, 2019). Rather than avoiding education, Travellers have been documented in the literature as attributing poor mental health to a lack of a welcoming social environment and education (Villiani and Barry, 2021). The authors support the inclusion of Traveller history and culture in school curriculums as highlighted by the above extract, as outlined in the Education (Welfare) (Amendment) Bill 2017 (the 2017 Bill).

### **Primary and post-primary education experiences**

As already stated, this report has a focus on Travellers who access higher education. It is not possible to understand these low rates of access without acknowledging the racial segregation which occurred in our schools here in Ireland historically (Kailin, 2002, pp. 18–19). It is not necessary to underscore that few teachers would choose to cause harm to their students. In fact, within the dataset for this study, positive and cherished relationships with some teachers were described by Traveller participants. However, racism can be constructed in schools through the simple act of following the school 'norms' or even through paternalism: through 'care taking' of the children and allowing them to play and colour during school hours, as depicted in participant accounts, while their 'settled' counterparts learned their reading and writing skills. Such subtle racism is well described in Hyland's (2005) work on children of colour and contains untold damage for the children who are its subject along the continuum of their life course. This practice is also contrary to Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which recognises children's right to an education. In addition to this, using Lundy's typology of participation, significant weight is given to the provision of an adult audience for children's voices (Welty and Lundy, 2013). The placing of children in 'special classes' regardless of their abilities, capacity to learn or literacy levels goes against their human rights. There were less than benevolent accounts of school experiences seen in the dataset, ones which have been described previously in the literature and categorised by Villani and Barry (2021) as 'traumatic'. The fallout from these experiences is likely to create an emotional barrier for any Traveller who considers accessing higher education and re-entering a classroom environment, either in relation to themselves or to their children. It is far less likely to be a disinterest in education itself that acts as a deterrent. At an event hosted by the Department of Education to publish an action plan to increase Traveller engagement in higher education, Owen Ward, history teacher, was quoted (Holland, 2016) as saying that more Traveller teachers would be 'transformative' as he found his own primary and secondary school experience to be isolating and that he felt 'lost' through that sustained isolation and lack of empathy.



## Higher education

Barriers to accessing higher education – and supports available – were explored in this research through conversations with Traveller graduates. Drawing a parallel with Blaisdell's (2016) work on students of colour, these participants did not enter higher education with any 'cultural deficit or lack of intelligence'. Rather, in most cases, they had not had the same access to quality educational opportunities before they came to college. Additionally, as already explored, the mental health status of many Travellers may be described as tenuous, with low self-worth as a result of intergenerational trauma (Villani and Barry, 2021) caused by exposure to racism, exclusion and demonisation in the community, in society and in media discourse. Nevertheless, Traveller participants in this research credited many supports that they had in accessing and navigating higher education: career guidance counsellors; aftercare workers through Tusla the Child and Family Agency (where relevant to children in care); key workers for those in recovery from addiction; HEI websites for clear information; the Traveller Graduate Network (TGN) members; and support from the participants' own circle of family and friends. The most significant finding in relation to the success of research participants in accessing higher education, retaining their position and graduating with qualifications was the remarkable levels of self-determination described. The presence of autonomy despite the absence of a notably autonomy supportive environment (Vallerand, Pellertier and Koestner, 2008; Grolnick, Ryan and Deci, 1991; Deci and Ryan, 2004) is truly striking. As already stated, the findings of this report invite the reader to reflect on what Travellers could achieve in a socio-environmental space which celebrates them, their traditions, their culture and their education.

## The Traveller Graduate Network (TGN)

This report has presented an overview of the TGN initiative in its developmental stages. It is welcomed as a model of practice along with its core values, aims and objectives. The TGN has clear ambition and passion to progress its goals. Findings from this research include indications of success in supporting Travellers in higher education, building networks, providing inspiration and encouragement, and challenging stereotypes. However, as it currently exists, the TGN is a network without full-time staff, which is not sustainable if it is to achieve its aims. Challenges around processes and implementation were discussed; these centred on the need for additional collaboration and support across primary and post-primary school settings; 'a whole-university' approach to supporting Travellers in higher education; and additional support from industry in providing work placements and job opportunities. A national awareness campaign around Travellers in higher education, strengthening of relationships with stakeholders, and contributing to the provision of inclusive environments and opportunities for Travellers – in education and in the workforce – are among the opportunities for development.

## Key recommendations – TGN

- This report has identified a definite need for the TGN. It is recommended that the TGN be assisted through allocation of funding, and promotion within all educational spaces, in order to develop and expand the adequacy of the network as a focal point of support for Travellers in accessing higher education.



- The TGN is currently organised as a network and operates without full-time staff. It is recommended that consideration be given to housing and resourcing the TGN as an independent unit within MTU Cork with adequate resourcing in order to support the sustainability of its work.
- A sustainable resourcing stream should be identified to allow for the appointment of a dedicated coordinator for the TGN along with adequate staffing. This would work to embed increased Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives and Access initiatives for Travellers in higher education and would also allow for ongoing and longitudinal review and research on impact.

### Key recommendations – wider practice

- The appointment of a Traveller Culture and Education Coordinator should be considered for all HEIs. This role would have a focus on outreach; schools' liaison; cultural awareness events; seminars; liaising with lecturers around programmatic review and promotion of Access Services and other student services.
- Primary and post-primary schools to facilitate a culture of recognition of Traveller traditions (including culture and language) and values in addition to the fostering of good communication practices between school and home. The Yellow Flag programme (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019) is a whole-school initiative which promotes the challenging of racism and the celebration of diversity. This and other similar initiatives should be prioritised.
- Compulsory intercultural and anti-racism training should be established in all schools, not just those taking part in specialised programmes, and should include further and higher education and teacher-training programmes. Traveller-specific cultural awareness training and unconscious bias training should be developed and implemented nationally for primary and post-primary teachers and school staff.
- Teachers should demonstrate a socio-historical awareness of how Travellers have been treated in the education system. Classrooms should make Travellers central to the learning environment, as with all other students.
- Consideration should be given to the reinstatement of the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers (VTT) scheme in the education system or a similar initiative.
- Supports for parents whose children have gone on to higher education should continue to be provided by Access Practitioners in the form of familiarisation with HEI campuses and making information readily available to relieve anxiety and promote inclusivity. Stronger links with the community must be built. The onus is on the 'settled' majority to help build these links.
- A peer-to-peer mentorship programme should be established within HEIs and education centres for Travellers. Peer mentorship was emphasised by participants in this research and was also stated as being effective as a support for students in previous work by the SOAR Project.



- Traveller-specific student counselling services should be available for Traveller students who wish to avail of them in recognition of the difficult journey that many Travellers have made to reach their place in higher education.
- To sum, a partnership approach between the TGN, the community, HEIs, education centres and policymakers to support and actuate change for Travellers in education is warranted.

### **Key recommendations – policy**

- Initiatives such as Tobar (funded under the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 1), which support Irish Travellers to become primary and post-primary school teachers, are supported by this research. Further recruitment of Traveller teachers would be transformative in the education system in Ireland.
- This research supports the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill (2018) which makes provision for the embedding of Traveller Culture and History in the school curriculum.
- Attention should be given to the implementation of the aims of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 (NTRIS) in relation to education and the achievement of same. This may cohere with other EDI priorities and strategic plans within the institution.
- Funding levels must be increased to support Traveller access to and retention within education.
- A national education and awareness campaign informed strongly by human rights principles should be initiated around Traveller culture and pride.



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## Appendix 1

### Information sheet for Traveller Graduate Network evaluation participants

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access. It brings together the South Cluster – Cork Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Carlow, Institute of Technology Tralee, University College Cork and Waterford Institute of Technology together with community partners to collaborate on devising and delivering strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The Traveller Graduate Network research will focus on current third level students who are members of the Traveller community. The focus group is being conducted in order to further understand their transition into college life and identify any barriers or issues regarding access that may have been encountered. The factors that also enabled their transition to higher education will be examined. In addition to this, their experience of negotiating college life will be explored. This research will seek to find models of good practice in terms of the support received by the students and also identify areas where further or enhanced levels of support may be required.

#### **What will the study involve?**

The study will involve your participation in group interview with a researcher and other participants to discuss your opinions, experiences, ideas and the challenges that under-represented groups may encounter in transitioning, engaging, performing and progressing in higher education.

#### **Why have you been asked to take part?**

You have been asked to take part in this study because you are registered as a student in a third level institution and are a member of the Travelling community, are an Access practitioner in a participating HEI in the South Cluster of the SOAR project, or are a member of the Traveller Graduate Network.

#### **Do you have to take part?**

No. Participation is voluntary. You will be asked to sign a consent form. You also have the option of withdrawing before the study commences (even if you have agreed to participate) or discontinuing two weeks after the discussion.

#### **Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?**

Yes. We will ensure that your identity will not appear in the final report or subsequent publications. Any extracts from the interview that are quoted, in any subsequent report and publications, will be entirely anonymous. We ask participants to respect the confidentiality of other participants and do not share information disclosed in the group. However, we cannot guarantee this.

#### **What will happen to the information that you give?**

The data gathered will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. It will be securely stored on password-protected computers and only be available to the research team on the UCC Access and Participation Services project. On completion of the project, data will be retained for a minimum of a further ten years and then destroyed, according to policy at UCC.

#### **What will happen to the results?**

It is expected that results of this study will be published in a project report, academic articles as well as on the project website.

#### **What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?**

We do not envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part.

#### **Who has reviewed this study?**

Approval has been given by the Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC.

#### **Any further queries?**

If you have any queries or concerns about this research, you can contact Dr Máire Leane, the Principal Investigator (PI) at [m.lean@ucc.ie](mailto:m.lean@ucc.ie) or you can contact the head of the School of Applied Social Studies Prof. Cathal O'Connell at [c.oconnell@ucc.ie](mailto:c.oconnell@ucc.ie)



## Appendix 2

### Consent form for focus groups/interviews

- I ..... agree to participate in a focus group/interview for the SOAR Project.
- The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing and I have had an opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification.
- I understand that participation is voluntary.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted. This is in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) introduced in 2018.
- I give permission for my interview with the UCC Access and Participation Services research team to be audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I agree to maintain and uphold the complete confidentiality of all participants within the focus group.
- I will keep all information shared by participants during the focus group private and will not repeat or discuss outside of the focus group.
- I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in progress reports, academic journals and/or the project website.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a minimum of ten years, in line with UCC policy.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.
- I am over the age of 18.

Signed: ..... Date: .....

PRINT NAME: .....



## Appendix 3

### TGN evaluation interview guide

#### **Introduction**

Thank participant for agreeing to the interview.

#### **Consent and information check**

Check participant received Information sheet – briefly explain purpose of interview.

Check participant has completed consent form – explain the nature of voluntarism, i.e. rights withdraw without redress, etc.

Permission to record interview via MS Teams.

Any questions?

#### **Indicative questions**

1. Please describe your experience of primary school and post-primary school.
2. What factors enabled your progression from primary to secondary school?
3. What role did your secondary school play in helping you transition to college/university?
4. Did your secondary school provide enough support/information to enable you to transition to college/university?
5. Did you do a post-leaving certificate (PLC) course or did you transition to third-level education immediately after secondary school?
6. Please describe your experience of transitioning to third-level education.
7. What factors enabled your progression from secondary school to third-level education?
8. Did you experience any barriers along the way? (Probe: financial, structural, access, information, support, grants, childcare responsibility, family, conflict)
9. Were there any issues in accessing information regarding attending third-level education?
10. Did you have any support from community organisations to help you transition to third-level education?
11. How did your family/friends feel about you attending third-level education?
12. Did you experience any conflict/negative attitudes in relation to your plans to attend third-level education?
13. What would you consider to be the greatest form of support you received to enable your progression to third-level education?
14. Did you have a mentor who encouraged you and guided you through the process of transitioning to third-level education?
15. Was there anything that was missing in terms of support to help you progress to third-level education?
16. What advice would you give to other members of the Traveller community who are thinking of going to third-level education?

#### **Close**

Any other comment you would like to add?

Was there anything I should have asked you that I didn't?

Any questions for me?

Thanks, and appreciations.



## Appendix 4

### TGN evaluation focus group – Access Practitioners interview guide

#### **Introduction**

Thank participant for agreeing to the interview.

#### **Informed Consent**

Check participant received Information sheet – briefly explain purpose of interview.

Check participant has completed consent form – explain the nature of voluntarism, i.e. rights withdraw without redress, etc.

Permission to record interview via MS Teams.

Any questions?

#### **Indicative questions**

1. What factors do you think enable Travellers' progression from primary to secondary school?
2. What role does secondary school play in helping Travellers transition to college/university?
3. Did secondary schools provide enough support/information to enable Travellers to transition to college/university?
4. What are the main factors/structures that enable Travellers to access and progress to higher education?
5. What barriers are faced by Travellers in accessing higher education? (Probe: financial, structural, access, information, support, grants, childcare responsibility, family, conflict)
6. Do you think that there any issues in accessing information regarding attending third-level education?
7. Did you think that support from community organisations helps Travellers to transition to third-level education?
8. Do you think that Travellers experience any conflict/negative attitudes in relation to their plans to attend third-level education?
9. What would you consider to be the greatest form of support that Travellers receive to enable your progression to third-level education?
10. Do you think that having a mentor who encourages Travellers and guides them through the process of transitioning to third-level education is crucial?
11. Is there anything that was missing in terms of support to help Travellers progress to third-level education?
12. What advice would you give to members of the Traveller community who are thinking of going to third-level education?

#### **Close**

Any comments?

Any questions?

Is there anything that I didn't ask you that I should have?

Thanks, and appreciations.

Thanks, and appreciations.



## Appendix 5

### TGN evaluation focus group – TGN interview guide

#### **Open**

Thank participants for agreeing to the interview.

#### **Informed Consent**

Check participant received Information sheet – briefly explain purpose of interview.

Check participant has completed consent form – explain the nature of voluntarism, i.e. rights withdraw without redress, etc.

Permission to record interview via MS Teams.

Any questions?

#### **Indicative questions**

1. Why was there a need for a Traveller Graduate Network?
2. What is the current main focus of the Traveller Graduate Network?
3. How can the Traveller Graduate Network enable higher participation rates in HE for members of the Travelling community?
4. What factors do you think enable Travellers' progression from primary to secondary school?
5. What role does secondary school play in helping Travellers transition to college/university?
6. Do secondary schools provide enough support/information to enable Travellers to transition to college/university?
7. What are the main factors/structures that enable Travellers to access and progress to higher education?
8. What barriers are faced by Travellers in accessing higher education? (Probe: financial, structural, access, information, support, grants, childcare responsibility, family, conflict)
9. Do you think that there any issues in accessing information regarding attending third-level education?
10. Did you think that support from community organisations helps Travellers to transition to third-level education?
11. Do you think that Travellers experience any conflict/negative attitudes in relation to their plans to attend third-level education?
12. What would you consider to be the greatest form of support that Travellers receive to enable their progression to third-level education?
13. Do you think that having a mentor who encourages Travellers and guides them through the process of transitioning to third-level education is crucial?
14. Is there anything that was missing in terms of support to help Travellers progress to third-level education?
15. What advice would you give to members of the Traveller community who are thinking of going to third-level education?

#### **Close**

Any other comment you would like to add?

Was there anything I should have asked you that I didn't?

Any questions for me?

Thanks, and appreciations.



## Appendix 6

### Founding member profiles

#### Leanne McDonagh

Leanne is the Traveller Education Coordinator with Munster Technological University. Munster Technological University welcomes students from all backgrounds, preparing and supporting them to participate in activities related to higher education from pre-entry through to graduation and beyond. Her role specifically is to provide one-to-one consultation to both second-level and third-level students from the Travelling community. Signposting academic, financial and social supports throughout one's studies and through to employment via the Access Service at MTU Cork Campus.

Additionally, through the Traveller education services at MTU Cork, she is developing a work experience programme, the Access All Areas work experience. She is currently creating a directory of businesses that are willing to open their doors to students from the community, offering them work experience, job shadowing, placements, internships and sponsorship throughout Cork city and county.

Prior to her role at MTU she worked as teacher teaching art, and she has previously designed and delivered numerous arts-based projects in both primary and post-primary schools as well as community groups and organisations throughout Ireland.

In addition to her role at MTU she continues to build her practice as a visual artist, and she feels she has a unique opportunity to represent and record her community from within. Since her artistic debut in 2015 she has hung numerous exhibitions across the provinces and has received several awards and bursaries to aid her in her practice. In 2021 numerous pieces of her artwork were acquired by the Irish Museum of Modern Art and are now a part of the National Collection of Ireland.

Her work also features in both private and public collections nationally and internationally. In addition to this she has recently illustrated a short-story book titled *Why the Moon Travels*, written by a fellow Traveller, Oein De Bhairduin which is the first of its kind in Ireland and which is the recipient of many awards. She is currently working on a public sculpture funded by the % for Art scheme, and she looks forward to seeing this through to completion. She has spoken at numerous conferences and events about her experiences of art, anthropology, education, equality, diversity and inclusion and she enjoys learning from others' lived experience also.

She established the Traveller Graduate Network in 2019 and she believes that we are stronger together. By sharing our experiences, both positive and negative, we can help drive change and shift the narrative around the different types of education among the wider community. While also encouraging each other to grow and develop as individuals, striving to reach our full potential.

#### Breda Hogan

*'Your route to success may be different but so are you! Embrace it!'*

Breda is currently a support worker for Traveller education within the Access office in MTU Cork, she works alongside Leanne McDonagh to ensure that all Travellers are supported both pre and post third-level entry. She is a student studying a master's in Digital Media Strategy. She graduated from CIT in 2019 with an honours degree in Business Administration, she also holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration, a higher cert in Digital Media and a QQI level 6 in Event Management.



Breda is also an events coordinator and hopes to set up her own event management business in the near future. She has coordinated events for many organisations, such as Minceirs Whiden, Traveller Pride Week, East Cork Travellers, among many others.

Breda was the first woman and the second person in her entire extended family to graduate from college with a third-level degree. She hopes that by encouraging other Travellers and sharing her journey she will be able to change the stigma around education within the Travelling community and the 'role' of a Traveller woman.

She recognises that the TGN is put together with the sole purpose of Traveller support, no matter what stage of your career you are at. With the aim to bridge the gap between Travellers and the education and employment system without losing who we are along the way, which is the most important part. She believes that all her experiences within the employment and education system, both negative and positive, serve a purpose: 'You either learn from it, or learn to push through it, which builds the strength of your character and changes other people's perceptions of all Travellers along the way.'

## Gavin Hennessey

Gavin is a graduate of UCC and the UCD Michael Smurfit Business School, he has a BSc in International Development and an MSc in Management Consultancy. His achievements working with charities and the community earned him the Bank of Ireland Millennium Scholarship at UCC and the UCD Aspire Scholarship. During his time at UCC Gavin founded the International Development Society and was appointed to the University Diversity Advisory Board. At UCD, he partnered with UCD Dept. of Health to develop the first paediatric community physiotherapy programme in Uganda as part of his work with the charity Nurture Africa.

In his early career, Gavin worked across the globe in Africa, India and Eastern Europe developing projects to support the education and livelihoods of people living in extreme poverty. Today, Gavin is D&I Lead at AXA Ireland, having previously held D&I roles at Irish Life, LinkedIn, and Business in the Community Ireland.

With his work he has established ground-breaking programmes to reduce barriers to returning to the workforce for family carers, hard to reach youth, persons with disabilities, and refugees. This has positioned him as a thought leader in business and the D&I space and he is often invited to speak at high-profile events to share his insights and work. Gavin's passion lies in ensuring Travellers and other minorities have access to work and are included in workspaces in Ireland.

## Ann Marie Quilligan

Anne Marie Quilligan is a campaigner for housing rights, education, equality, inclusion and raising political awareness. She graduated from the Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) with a BA (Hons) in Social Care Work and an award for overall excellence in legal studies.

As a social care practitioner, she supports young adults who are transitioning from residential living to independent living via Rehab Care. She also works as a community development worker with Tipperary Rural Traveller Project and is on the board of management in Bedford Row Family Project, which supports individuals and families impacted by imprisonment.

In addition, as a peer researcher with the Social Work and Research Practice (Dr Sinead O'Malley) she helps to explore the mental health and well-being of Traveller mothers in prison. She is a member of the Traveller Graduate Network which aims to support Travellers accessing higher or further education.



### **Contact Details**

Email: [info@travellergraduatenetwork.com](mailto:info@travellergraduatenetwork.com)

Website: [www.travellergraduatenetwork.com](http://www.travellergraduatenetwork.com)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/traveller-graduate-network>

Facebook: Closed Group – Invites sent to members

