

# SOAR

Inter Institutional Collaboration on Access



# Pavee Beoir Leaders

## TRAVELLER WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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STHN





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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 – Cork Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Carlow, Institute of Technology Tralee, University College Cork and Waterford Institute of Technology and community partners to collaborate on devising and delivering strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The project is operationalised through five work streams: Travellers in Education, Enabling Transitions, Connecting Communities, Connecting Curriculum, 1916 Bursary Fund and Partnership for Access. *Pavee Beoir Leaders Traveller Women in Higher Education* is an initiative under the Travellers in Education work stream. The Project is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3.

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## Foreword



It is my great pleasure as Chairperson of the SOAR Steering Group to write the foreword to this timely and important report, which offers the first evaluation of the work of the project.

The SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on Access, led by Access and Participation in UCC. 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 and community partners to collaborate on devising and delivering strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. The Project is funded by the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) Strand 3.

The access initiatives pioneered in the SOAR Project, reflect innovative access practice, which is evidence based, underpinned by the value of inclusion and developed in partnership with communities and learners, who face barriers to accessing higher education.

This report PAVEE BEOIR LEADERS: Traveller Women in Higher Education, exemplifies the value of academic and community engagement. It showcases the meaningful and highly successful work that has been undertaken by the Southern Traveller Health Network, Access & Participation and Adult and Continuing Education at UCC. The Level 6 Leadership in the Community course profiled in this report, provides a case study in best practice and indeed in reflective practice. Above all, it highlights the tenacity and ability of the twenty two Traveller women who have broken new ground and forged a pathway to higher education. Without doubt, their leadership in this regard will pave the way for further access for other adult learners from the Traveller community.

**Professor John O'Halloran**  
*Deputy President and Registrar, UCC*



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## Abbreviations

ACE	Adult & Continuing Education
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CI	Commission of Itinerancy Report
DES	Department of Education and Skills
EFCI	Educational Facilities for Children of Itinerants Report
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HSE	Health Service Executive
IES	Intercultural Education Strategy
NATC	National Association of Travellers
NE	Pre-School for Travellers: National Evaluation Report
NTRIS	National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy
RB	Report of the Travelling People Review Body
STHN	Southern Traveller Health Network
TCAT	Traveller Cultural Awareness Training
TES	Traveller Education Strategy
THU	Traveller Health Unit
TF	Task Force on the Travelling Community
TNC	Travellers North Cork
TVG	Traveller Visibility Group
UCC	University College Cork
VTST	Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Leadership in the Community course was a one-year part-time Level 6 course delivered during the 2019/20 academic year. The course was held on two consecutive mornings a week and students also attended an additional study morning in their local Traveller organisation. The course was divided into four modules: Social Analysis of Community, Principles and Practices of Community Work, History and Theory of Community Development, and Group Work Skills. Initially, twenty-seven enrolled in the course, but five needed to step out during the first semester due to personal reasons. Seventeen of the twenty-two women who completed the Level 6 course plan to progress to the Level 7 Diploma course in Leadership in the Community next year.

## Research Aims

This research aimed to capture the needs and experiences of the Traveller women participating in the initiative and to examine how higher education institutes can best meet the needs of this cohort of adult learners in the future. Informed and guided by the transformational goals set out by the SOAR project, the Leadership in the Community course strived to create an optimal environment for Traveller women to engage in adult learning in University College Cork. The five transformational goals set out by the SOAR project are illustrated in the figure below.

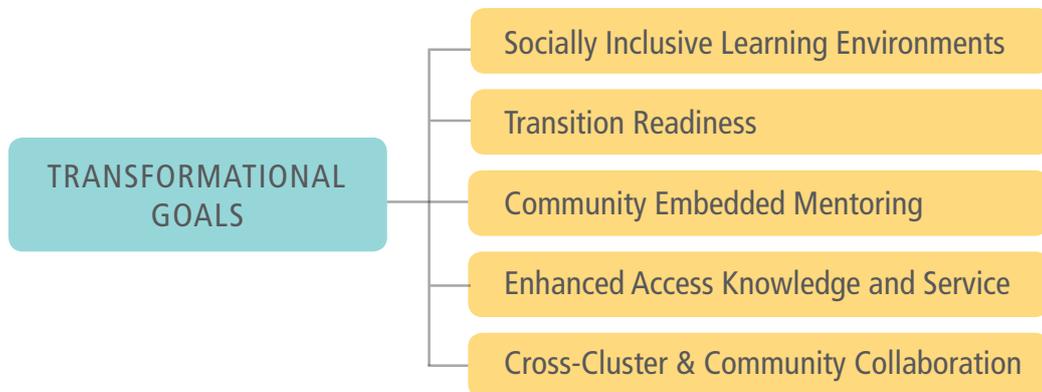


Figure 1: Five transformational goals set out by the SOAR project

## Structure of Research

This research began by gathering and reviewing the literature on Travellers and their engagement in the Irish education system. The empirical strand of the research consisted of two phases of focus groups with twelve Traveller women on the Leadership in the Community course. These focus groups were conducted in the Traveller Visibility Group (TVG) premises in Cork City. Eight interviews were carried out with education and community stakeholders. These interviews were conducted either in UCC, TVG or online. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The data gathered during the research process was coded and analysed using NVIVO 12, a qualitative data management software programme. Emerging issues were divided into



three themes: prior educational experiences; experience of engaging in the Leadership course; and plans or recommendations to support progression.

## Findings

Historically, the field of education has perpetuated disadvantage for Travellers through practices of segregation, exclusion and disempowerment. The majority of Travellers leave school before completing the Junior Cycle. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2016) found that 8% of Travellers completed the Senior Cycle in post-primary school and only 1% progress to third-level education.

## Inhibitors to Accessing Higher Education

The findings from this research identified a number of factors that cause significant concern for Travellers accessing higher education as adult learners. These factors include:

- Practices of segregation within the education system
- Travellers remain one of the most marginalised groups within Irish society, and therefore structural inequalities such as homelessness and poverty impact on opportunities to access higher education
- Concerns for safety due to experiences of racism and discrimination can prevent Travellers from engaging in higher education
- Travellers are more likely to experience low literacy levels due to factors associated with early school leaving
- Traveller women are responsible for the bulk of domestic responsibilities and care work
- Lack of recognition of Traveller culture within the education system

## Enablers for Accessing Higher Education

Supporting Travellers' access to higher education requires long-term commitment and a strong, trusting relationship between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and community partners as identified in the transformational goals of the SOAR Project. Support from HEIs, family, lecturing and tutoring staff, Traveller organisations and classmates were identified as the key factor to positively engaging in the Leadership course.

- HEI: Access and Participation and the Centre for Adult & Continuing Education in UCC supported the women's engagement through their willingness to be flexible in adapting the course to respond to the students' needs
- Family: Without support from home, the women would not be in a position to access or engage in the course
- Lecturing and tutoring staff: Educational staff needed to be non-judgemental, supportive and approachable. The women spoke positively about the lecturing staff from ACE and the support staff from the different Traveller organisations
- Traveller organisations: As members of the Traveller organisations, the women had a good relationship with the staff at these organisations, who played a key role in preparing and supporting the women on the course



- **Classmates:** The group were very supportive of one another. The participants felt they could rely on their classmates to support them in class and during periods of independent learning
- **Funding:** Financial support was vital to removing barriers to higher education. As part-time learners, the women engaging in the Leadership in the Community course were not entitled to SUSI fees or maintenance grants, and therefore the financial cost of returning to education would be beyond their reach. For this reason, Access and Participation UCC, through the SOAR Project, funded student fees and some course material and the Traveller Organisations subsidised maintenance grants. Furthermore, the Access and Participation services in UCC also supported participants to apply for the Student Assistant Fund

### **Challenges Experienced by Participants**

A number of issues and challenges arose during the year for both the women on the course and the staff in the Traveller organisations. These include:

- The course was moved from UCC campus to Traveller Visibility Group (TVG) during the first semester as the students had difficulty with parking, accessing childcare and feeling out of place
- The women on the course were not prepared for the amount of coursework required outside of class time
- The women (especially those with young children) found the number of assignments difficult to manage in addition to care responsibilities
- Some participants did not have access to computers or laptops at home and were dependent on access to devices in the Traveller organisations
- Digital literacy was an issue for some of the participants and more support is needed to develop these skills
- Literacy issues persisted throughout the course and more support is needed around assistive technology

### **Opportunities experienced by participants**

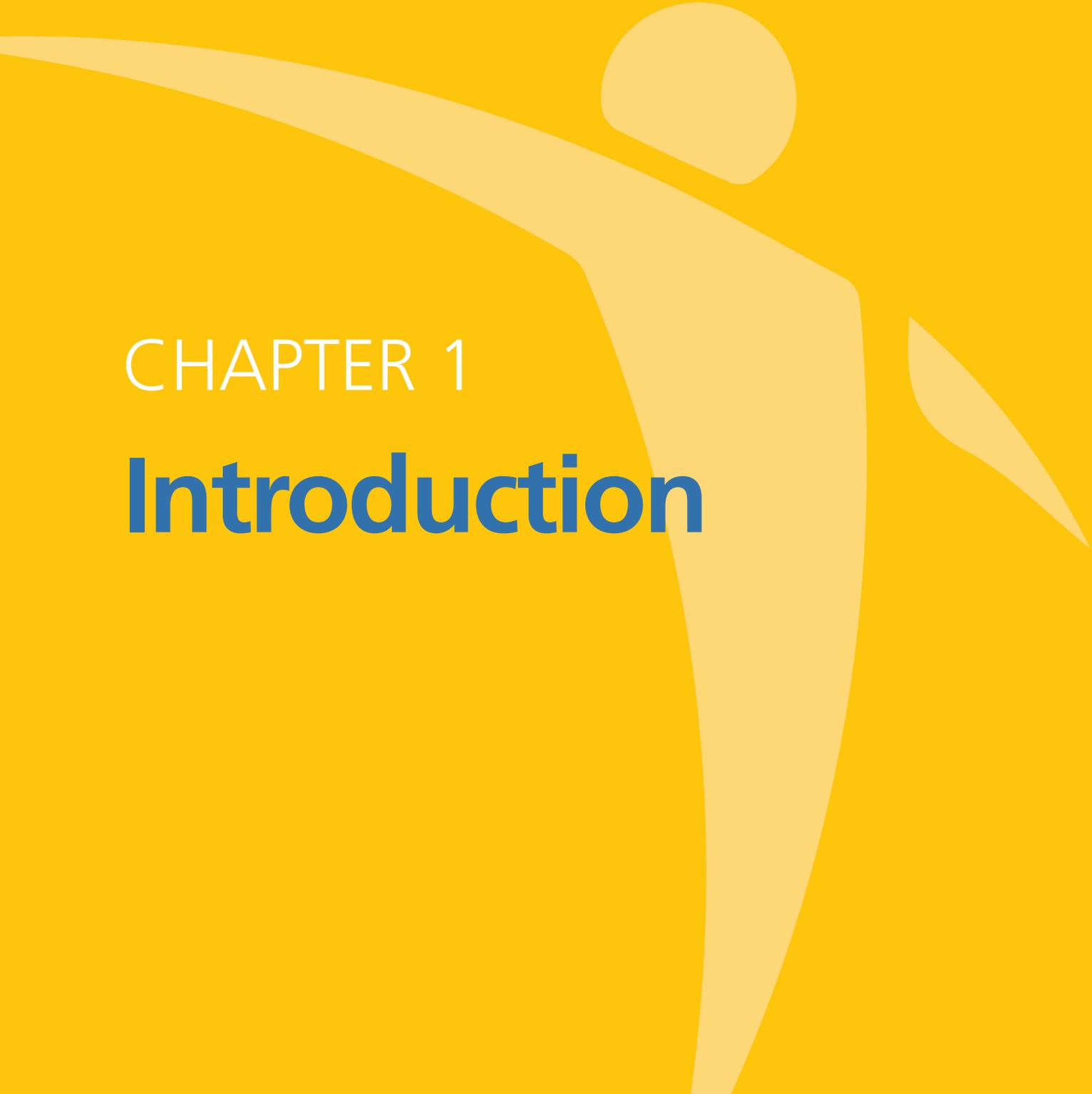
Despite the challenges mentioned above, a number of positive outcomes occurred, which included:

- Many of the participants experienced increased confidence and used their learning to improve their circumstances (promotion in the workplace, resolved their family's homelessness, addressed child's reduced timetable)
- Many of the women saw themselves as role models for their own family and hoped they would inspire their children to continue to higher education
- The majority of the participants planned on progressing with their studies and have expressed an interest in participating in the Level 7 Leadership in the Community course next year



*The truth is that we're people like everybody else but we're a different speaking people with our own traditions and our own way of life and this is the way we should be treated, like the Gaeltachts, not like dirt or drop-outs from the settled community*

– Nan Joyce (1985:1)

A large, stylized silhouette of a human figure in a dynamic, reaching pose, rendered in a light yellow color against a solid 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 represented by a simple circle.

CHAPTER 1

# Introduction



## 1.1 Introduction

This research was carried out by the SOAR Project in collaboration with Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN) and Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) in University College Cork (UCC). Positioned within the Access and Participation Unit in University College Cork, the SOAR Project is an inter-institutional collaboration on access to higher education that brings together the South Cluster of higher education institutions - Cork Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Carlow, Institute of Technology Tralee, Waterford Institute of Technology and University College Cork (lead) - with community partners to collaborate on devising and delivering strategies to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups. This three-year project is funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015 – 2019 set out five goals to support greater access for under-represented groups in higher education:

- Goal 1: To mainstream the delivery of equity of access in HEIs
- Goal 2: To assess the impact of current initiatives to support equity of access to higher education (HE)
- Goal 3: To gather accurate data and evidence on access and participation, that will inform policy
- Goal 4: To build coherent pathways from further education and to foster other entry routes to HE
- Goal 5: To develop regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education with a particular focus on mentoring

The inclusion of a target for increasing the number of Travellers in higher education from 35 to 80 represents a significant step to addressing Traveller access to higher education. In 2017, the Department of Education and Skills introduced the Programme for Access to Higher Education Fund to support the goals of the National Access Plan. This fund was valued at €6.5 million and broken into three strands:

- PATH 1: Initial teacher training
- PATH 2: 1916 Bursary Fund
- PATH 3: Support the objectives of Goal 5 of the National Access Plan by developing regional and community partnerships for increasing access to HE for targeted groups

While Travellers were a target group for all three strands, this report focuses on one initiative carried out under the PATH Strand 3 funded SOAR Project. Under this project, the South Cluster acknowledged the challenges faced by Travellers and dedicated an entire project work stream to supporting their access and participation. In partnership with Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN), Access and Participation and Adult &



Continuing Education (ACE) in University College Cork (UCC), the SOAR Project supported participation for twenty-seven Traveller women on the Level 6 Leadership in the Community course.

The Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN) was established in the 1990s and initially consisted of a small group of women advocating for improved living conditions for Travellers in the Cork region. Over the years, the STHN has become the regional Traveller Community development network for five Traveller projects: The Traveller Visibility Group (TVG), Travellers of North Cork (TNC), The Cork Travellers Women's Network (CTWN), West Cork Travellers (WCT), and Kerry Travellers Health and Community Development Project (KTCP). Four or five volunteers from each of the organisations meet monthly to explore areas of interest and to support external training and/or capacity building among its members. Funded by the Traveller Health Unit and based in the Traveller Visibility Group (TVG) in Cork City, the main aim of the STHN is to ensure that Travellers and Traveller organisations can have a strong common voice to ensure the improvement of Traveller health. The objectives of the STHN include:

- to bring groups together regionally on issues that impact on Traveller health
- to work towards building Travellers' capacity and leadership skills to participate fully at local, regional and national levels
- to support the identification of training needs on a regional basis, which enhances Traveller participation within their own organisations, the Traveller Health Unit (THU) and other areas
- to support new members within the THU
- to work on lobbying and advocacy issues and the discrimination and racism faced by Travellers

Over the years, the ground-up community development approach carried out by the STHN has addressed issues concerning Travellers such as mental health, racism, and food choices, to name just a few. The 2016 review of the Traveller Health Unit identified the STHN as the ideal establishment to promote leadership within the community. Since the review, the STHN has committed to working in partnership with UCC to developing a recognised qualification in a Leadership in the Community course for Traveller women.



## 1.2 Brief Overview of Irish Travellers

Irish Travellers are an indigenous minority who have lived on the margins of society for centuries (Burke, 2009; Hayes, 2006a; Helleiner, 2000; Moore, 2012). Due to a strong oral culture among Irish Travellers, there is a lack of documentary evidence on their origins (Moore, 2012). Furthermore, the 'social history of Travellers remains undocumented under colonialism, as successive British administrators did not distinguish between Travellers and the Irish poor generally' (Hayes, 2006a: 135).

Although Travellers have experienced persecution for centuries (Hayes, 2006a), the 'othering' of Irish Travellers in contemporary society has been linked back to the formation of the Free State (O hAodha, 2011). 'Since Travellers were an "Other" who were perceived to have "fallen out" of this Gaelic society, they ... were not deemed to be particularly important to the project of cultural re-Gaelicization' (Hayes, 2006a: 143). Thus, the rise in 'bourgeois nationalist ideas about homeland, property, hygiene and respectability ... contributed to a radical disavowal of Gypsy and other Traveller cultures and lifestyles' (Mac Laughlin, 1999: 129). As part of the nationalist project, the assimilation of Travellers was justified as 'the righting of past wrongs perpetrated on fellow Irish citizens by colonial oppressors' (Hayes, 2006a: 144).

The drop-out theory was used to justify resettlement and rehabilitation policies during the 1960s. Social, structural and political changes had drastically impacted on the Travellers' way of life. Traditional halting sites were disappearing and being replaced with 'camping sites that [were] generally inadequately serviced with running water, toilets, and refuse collection' (Burke, 2009: 7). Furthermore, labour opportunities decreased as crafts were replaced by cheap, mass-produced, plastic goods causing Travellers to become more dependent on State welfare (Mac Laughlin, 1999). Therefore, it is not surprising that the 'othering' of Travellers within Irish society gave rise to policies of assimilation and rehabilitation (Hayes, 2006b).

The 'othering' of Travellers is underpinned by anti-Traveller racism, which has served to condemn Travellers to the margins of society. Nowadays, Travellers represent just 1% of the population and are among the most marginalised and disadvantaged people in Irish society (DJE, 2017). Travellers have significantly poorer health outcomes than the general population, which worsens over the life course (Watson et al., 2016; All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, 2010). Unemployment rates are nearly six times higher than the national average (Watson et al., 2016) and despite the general improvements in education in Ireland since the 1960s, the majority of Travellers leave school before completing the Junior Certificate.



## 1.3 Adult Education

Most Travellers would be excluded from traditional pathways into higher education on account of early school rejection. While access initiatives that support young Travellers' progression through traditional education pathways are recommended and needed (see MacDevitt, 1998 for an overview of measures to combat early school leavers across the EU), this initiative addresses ways of engaging adult learners. Investment in adult education is not only good for society but also benefits general wellbeing<sup>1</sup> (O'Sullivan et al., 2017). Furthermore, educating adults (parents) also enhances children's educational achievements (O'Sullivan et al., 2017). Therefore, the potential benefits of supporting adult learners can span lifetimes.

Adult education is regarded as a vital component for developing a national framework on lifelong learning (Government of Ireland, 2000). However, despite the increase of engagement in adult education, the number of early school leavers gaining a qualification is limited (Morgan, 1998). Research suggests that low literacy levels significantly hamper early school leavers' ability to re-engage with the education system (Morgan, 1998; Morgan et al., 1997).

The Centre for Adult and Continuing Education at UCC has a long history of bringing 'university to communities that did not have access to third-level education' (Ó Tuama, 2013: 16). Renewing a commitment to second-chance adult learners, ACE is leading 'the university's outreach mission through contributing to the networked university concept' (O Tuama, 2013: 16). Currently, the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education at University College Cork caters for 3,000 part-time students engaging in accredited and non-accredited courses (O'Sullivan et al., 2017).

## 1.4 Leadership in the Community Course

The White Paper on Adult Education (Government of Ireland, 2000: 16) highlighted the significant role community-based women's groups had on reaching 'marginalised women in disadvantaged areas'. The Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN) felt they needed to take a key role in delivering leadership courses for Traveller women. Thus, working in partnership with Access and Participation and Adult & Continuing Education in UCC, the STHN sought to develop a leadership programme that would reflect the needs and interests of the group.

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1. According to O'Sullivan et al (2017: 529), social and economic benefits from investment in adult education include 'reduced welfare and health costs, reductions in crime and the related costs of the criminal justice system'. Furthermore, general wellbeing benefits include enhanced self-esteem, self-confidence and dignity.



Ó Tuama (2016) calls for a reflexive activation model to tackle disadvantage. Reflexive activation is 'one in which the unemployed people actively co-design the proposed resolutions' (Ó Tuama, 2016: 107). Adult education, according to Ó Tuama (2016: 115), exemplifies reflective activation as it 'not only brings students in contact with new knowledge, skills and perceptions, but it also widens their social networks and especially brings them past the neighbourhood boundary'. For adult learners, particularly Travellers who have had previously bad, if not traumatic, experiences within the education system, returning to education can be a daunting experience. Respect, recognition and dignity should be a crucial element of all policies and practices in the education system and even more so for adult learners who have been 'let down' by the education system. According to Ó Tuama,

Reflexive activation is such a model of engagement. The adult learner is at the centre of things both in terms of identifying their own needs and aspirations and being able to contribute to the design of appropriate responses to help them engage positively with their lifelong learning and their role as citizens and participants in the labour force (Ó Tuama, 2016: 117)

Traveller women can be conceptualised as 'triplely vulnerable' (to borrow a term from Atkins, 2015) due to their marginalised status within society, poor allocation of resources due to institutional racism, and rigid gender roles within the community. Vulnerabilities can be further heightened especially if there are specific learning difficulties or mental illness. Thus, a reflexive activation model was used to ensure the development and delivery of the Leadership in the Community course reflected the social, cultural, economic and educational needs of the group.

The Leadership in the Community course was a one-year part-time Level 6 course delivered during the 2019/20 academic year. The course was held on two consecutive mornings a week and students also attended an additional study morning in their local Traveller organisations. The course was divided into four modules: Social Analysis of Community, Principles and Practices of Community Work, History and Theory of Community Development, and Group Work Skills. The chart below gives an overview of the course content, learning outcomes and assessment. The methodology underpinning this evaluation will be outlined in the next chapter.



Figure 2: Module descriptor

	Module Contents	Learning outcomes	Assessment
<b>Group Work Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Theoretical approaches to group work</li> <li>Group facilitation skills</li> <li>Conflict resolution</li> <li>Communication skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify and apply group facilitation skills</li> <li>Demonstrate an understanding of the evolution and dynamics in the group context</li> <li>Exercise effective application of theory to practice in group work facilitation</li> <li>Demonstrate an appreciation of effective communication and listening skills in practice</li> <li>Describe leadership roles and facilitation styles</li> <li>Differentiate between verbal and non-verbal communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 (250 word) learning journal</li> <li>Group presentation</li> <li>Individual poster presentation</li> </ul>
<b>History and Theory of Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Models of community development</li> <li>Sociological perspectives of community</li> <li>Examination of the actors and dynamics within the politics of community</li> <li>Development, principles and practices of community work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Define the models of community development</li> <li>Provide a sociological perspective to the concept of community</li> <li>Identify the agents and actors involved in community development within a national and local content</li> <li>Evaluate the role of global, national and local politics in community development</li> <li>Provide a historical context to the processes and dynamics of community development</li> <li>Identify the principles that inform and underpin community work practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 (250 word) Individual learning journal</li> <li>Group presentation</li> </ul>
<b>Principles and Practice of Community Work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principles and practices of community work</li> <li>The role of the community worker</li> <li>Agency profile</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apply the principles and practices of community work that inform and underpin practice</li> <li>Identify the transferable skills relative to employment in the context of community work</li> <li>Demonstrate an understanding of the multiplicity of roles of the community worker</li> <li>Synthesise theoretical and practical components relative to the role of the community worker</li> <li>Provide a comprehensive profile of the placement agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 x 800-word agency profile</li> <li>Group presentation</li> </ul>
<b>Social Analysis of Community</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contemporary Irish social policy</li> <li>Mechanisms of social inclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the key developments in the social, political, economic and cultural structures in Irish society that</li> <li>shape experience in contemporary Ireland at individual, community, local and national level</li> <li>Identify the impact of discrimination on marginalised groups in Irish society</li> <li>Identify mechanisms to address social exclusion</li> <li>Demonstrate an understanding of how to address discrimination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4 x 250 Individual learning journal</li> <li>Group presentation</li> <li>One role play exercise</li> </ul>

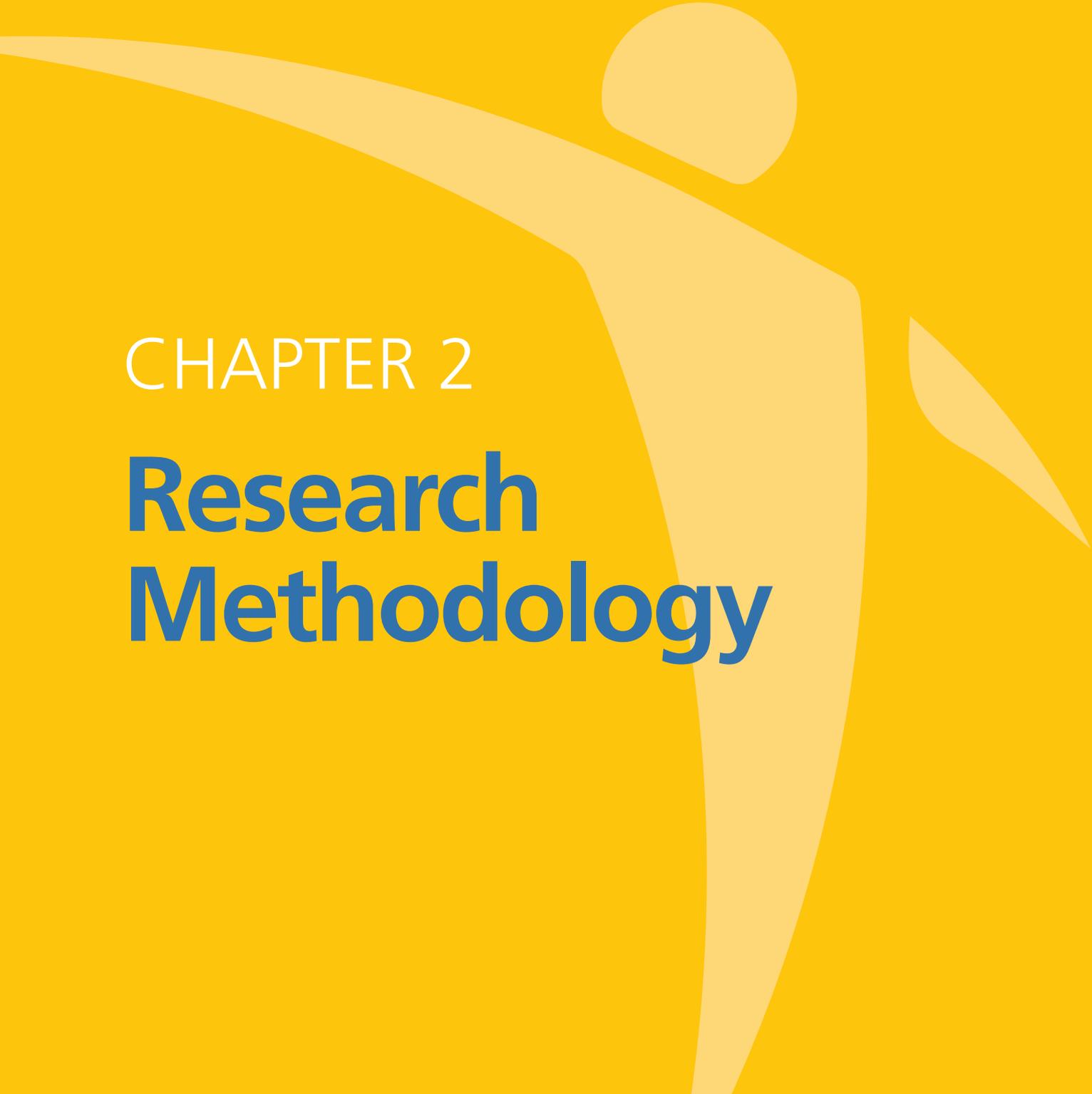


## 1.5 Chapter Summary

This research was carried out under the Travellers in Education work stream of the SOAR Project, which is an inter-institutional collaboration on access initiatives into higher education. Working in partnership with community organisations, the transformational goals of the SOAR Project set out to achieve the following:

- Socially inclusive learning environments to optimise students' experience, learning and attainment
- Transition readiness to empower students to successfully navigate the transition
- Community-embedded mentoring that supports and reinforces access principles
- Enhanced access knowledge and services by identifying evidence-based models of good practice in access services
- Cross-cluster and community collaboration through effective and meaningful engagement

In partnership with the Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN), Access and Participation and Adult Continuing Education (ACE) in University College Cork (UCC), the SOAR Project supported access to higher education for twenty-seven Traveller women by supporting participation in the Level 6 Leadership in the Community course. This research aimed to capture the needs and experiences of the Traveller women participating in the Leadership in the Community course and to examine how higher education institutes can best meet the needs of this cohort of adult learners in the future

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

CHAPTER 2

**Research  
Methodology**



## 2.1 Introduction

This section will outline the methodological framework for the report and will discuss the approaches used to collect and analyse the data. Methodological frameworks encompass all aspects of the research inquiry: agenda, epistemology, ethics and method (Thompson, 1992). This evaluation emerged from the Traveller in Education work stream which works collaboratively with Travellers and Traveller organisations to support them to challenge existing power structures and change their own lives. A praxis-based framework was used in this research to explore the needs and experiences of the Traveller women participating in the course and to examine how higher education institutes can best support this cohort of adult learners in the future.



Taking a praxis-based framework creates opportunities to 'challenge and disrupt entrenched and historical inequalities that are often tied to taken-for-granted practices and assumptions' (Burke and Lumb, 2018: 17). Traditionally, Travellers' engagement in education has been conceptualised using the deficit model, which places the analytic lens on individuals rather than structural inequalities. Using a praxis-based framework enables this research to conceptualise Traveller engagement and experience in higher education in 'relation to the practices and histories of inequality and misrepresentation' (Burke, 2012: 80). Praxis-based frameworks promote cyclical processes which consist of five stages: theorizing, critically questioning, investigating and specifying/reporting before moving back to theorizing (Burke and Lumb, 2018).

*Figure 3: Stages in praxis-based evaluation*

Praxis-based frameworks 'emphasize the importance of critical reflexivity and depth ontology in research and evaluation processes, with attention to complex relations of power and formation of difference' (Burke and Lumb, 2018: 27). All data is filtered through the researchers' own biases and assumptions, and therefore it is integral to the research process to be reflexive about one's own understanding (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989). Thus, this current investigation began by gathering and reviewing the literature



on Travellers and their engagement in the Irish education system. The researcher also undertook Traveller Culture Awareness Training (TCAT) to develop an understanding of Traveller culture as a whole and to ensure culturally appropriate language was used when developing questions for the data collection phase. Finally, feedback was sought from the participants to ensure that the data adequately reflected the participants' intended meaning.

## 2.2 Methods

Travellers have a strong oral culture, and therefore storytelling and narrative-based inquiry methods were used to elicit findings. Rather than focusing on 'what' worked, storytelling research gives us insights into 'why' things work (Stevenson, 2018; Burke 2012). However, consideration should be given to the process of transforming the story into a narrative. According to Stevenson (2018), stories are first-person accounts of events, whereas narratives emerge from the analysis of the stories. Burke notes:

'Hearing' and 'representing' are key concepts for the researcher to examine and interrogate, including how participants are 'heard' ... To exclude such examinations while claiming objectivity is to deny the existence of unequal power relations within the research process, while ignoring the central role of the researcher in shaping the research design, process and relations and in producing the final text (Burke, 2012: 72).

In keeping with the principles of reflexive practice, care was taken during the 'writing-up' phase of the research to ensure the participant 'voice' was accurately represented in the report.

## 2.3 Gaining access to students

This research could not have been done without the trust and support of the STHN project coordinators and the staff at the TVG who were willing to support and facilitate each meeting. The STHN project coordinators were present when the research plan and consent forms were explained, but were not there for the focus groups. Acknowledging that personal experiences, assumptions and beliefs shape the research process (Hooks, 2000; Marcus, 2019; Couch et al., 2014), every attempt was made to decentre the power relation between the researcher and the participants. From the beginning of this research, due care was taken to ensure that the questions and research methods were culturally appropriate and respectful to the participants (Hourigan & Campbell, 2010). Therefore, Traveller Cultural Awareness training was completed along with prior sociological and



anthropological research to ensure awareness of and sensitivity towards Traveller culture (Marcus, 2019).

Focus groups were used to disrupt the power dynamics that can arise between researcher and minority groups by ensuring that the participants were in a supportive environment with their peers. Furthermore, focus groups facilitated open discussion between the group as the researcher plays the 'role as guide and moderator' (Marcus, 2019).

Twelve women on the Leadership in the Community course who ranged in age from their mid-twenties to late fifties agreed to participate in focus groups throughout the year. Ten of the women were from Cork City or County and two of the women were from Kerry. The focus groups took place in the Traveller Visibility Group (TVG) premises on four occasions throughout the year. This location was chosen by the participants as they would already be attending the setting for classes and it was a comfortable 'safe' environment. Initially, it was agreed that the focus groups would take place at the end of a lecture but due to childcare commitments, disruptions to the class and shared travel arrangements, the design of the focus group was changed for the second semester. Agreed dates and times were arranged for the second-semester focus groups by the gatekeepers to accommodate all the participants. An additional one-to-one interview was conducted with one of the participants as she had been involved with the education system in one form or another since the 1960s, which gave her a unique perspective.

Five core principles of ethics as set out by the Social and Ethical Research Committee at University College Cork were adhered to throughout the research process: anonymity, confidentiality, the safety of participants, informed consent, and freedom to withdraw. Furthermore, this research draws on a feminist ethics of care framework to inform ways of responding to and understanding groups (Tronto, 1993; Thompson, 1992). According to Thompson (1992: 16), 'We should be attentive and actively promote well-being of participants and other people involved in the research project. At least in part, we are responsible for each other, our participants, and the knowledge we generate'. Therefore, in the process of 'doing' research, every effort was made to ensure that the research approach was underpinned by a strong ethical obligation to the participants (Rizvi, 2019) and a commitment to social justice (Burke, 2012).

## 2.4 Gaining access to stakeholders

Stakeholders in the Leadership in Education course were also interviewed. These included stakeholders in the Traveller organisations, Adult & Continuing Education (ACE) and Access and Participation in UCC (see Figure 4 for breakdown). Interviews with stakeholders took place in the participants' workplaces, except for two, which were



Stakeholders interviewed	No. of participants
Personnel from the Southern Traveller Health Network	2
Personnel from Adult & Continuing Education	2
Lecturing and Support Staff in the Traveller Organisations	2
Lecturing and Support Staff in the Traveller Organisations	1

*Figure 4: Overview of stakeholders who participated in research*

conducted online due to the travel restrictions of COVID-19. A total of seven interviews with stakeholders took place between November 2019 and March 2020.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The data gathered during the research process was coded and analysed using NVIVO-12, a qualitative data management software programme. Emerging issues were identified and grouped together and key categories are explored in-depth in this report. Key findings were summarised and shared with the participants to ensure that the 'research retained the authenticity of the respondents' thoughts, feelings and perceptions' (Couch et al., 2014: 16).

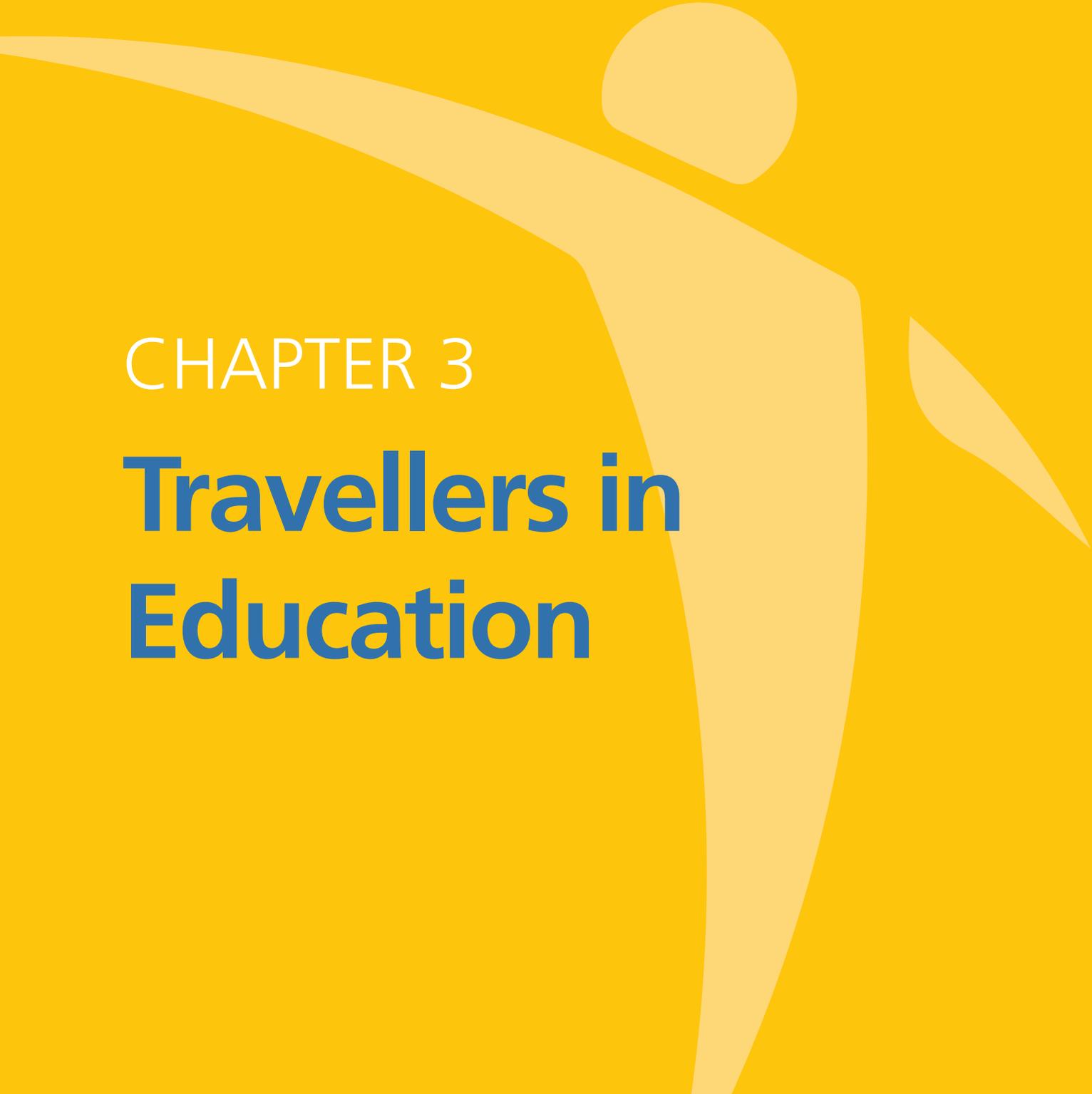
## 2.5 Chapter Summary

This section of the report has outlined the methodological framework for the evaluation on the Leadership in the Community course that was developed and delivered in partnership between Access and Participation and Adult & Continuing Education UCC, and the Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN). Twelve women on the course participated in the research, which took place at two stages during the course: Two sets of focus groups were carried out in the first semester of the course and another two were carried out in the second. Furthermore, seven interviews were conducted with stakeholders connected to the course. The data collection phase of this research took place between November 2019 and March 2020. Due to COVID-19, some interviews and correspondence took place virtually. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim.



Figure 5: Steps taken during evaluation



A large, stylized silhouette of a human figure in a dynamic, reaching pose, rendered in a light yellow color against a solid 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 represented by a simple circle.

CHAPTER 3

# Travellers in Education



## 3.1 Introduction

Historically, the field of education has perpetuated disadvantage for Travellers through practices of segregation, (self-) exclusion and disempowerment (see Boyle et al., 2018 for an overview of Irish State policy on Travellers). Travellers are largely absent from the senior cycle in post-primary school (Hamilton et al., 2012; Boyle et al., 2018) and almost invisible in higher education (CSO, 2016). The lack of legitimate forms of cultural and academic capital (Bourdieu, 1989) negatively impacts on Travellers' 'navigational capacity' (Appadurai, 2004) to transition to higher education. This section of the report will address the national policies related to Traveller education.

Hart (2013: 13) states, 'Understanding education policy is crucial because policies give voice to government interpretations of the way educational institutions may be used as instruments of the state'. As this section of the report will highlight, education policies and practices directed at Travellers have, by and large, perpetuated disadvantage and social exclusion.

## 3.2 Historical overview of Educational Policies

From the 1960s onwards, Traveller educational policy has been informed by assimilationist ideas and practices, which was a paradigm within which Travellers were to be 'helped' (Donahue, McVeigh & Ward, 2005: 24) and their norms and customs 'corrected' (Crowley, 1999: 247). The Commission of Itinerancy Report (CI) (Government of Ireland, 1963) was the first major report to be underpinned by a philosophy of charity and assimilation (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010).

The settlement of Travellers was presented as necessary for the social, economic and moral well-being of the nation as well as being in their best interest (Helleiner, 2000). In addition to nomadism, low literacy skills, poor living conditions, lack of educational attainment and perceived lack of social conventions were deemed incompatible with the education of Traveller children (Boyle et al., 2018). One suggested 'solution to the itinerant problem ... [was] based on the belief that separation of parents and children would result in the children growing up outside the itinerant life, and that thus in one generation the itinerants as a class would disappear' (Government of Ireland, 1963: 69). Although rejected, such suggestions highlight the 'tenuous status of Travellers' parental rights' (Helleiner, 2000: 201).

In an attempt to integrate Travellers into society, the CI report devised a differentiated, gendered and generational curriculum (Boyle et al., 2018; Helleiner, 2000) to address the 'special needs of [Traveller] children' (Government of Ireland, 1963: 68).



In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic it should provide regular manual training, e.g., woodwork and elementary metalwork for boys, and knitting, needlework, simple cookery and domestic training for girls. Hygiene should be an important feature of the course for both boys and girls. (Government of Ireland, 1963: 68)

Personal cleanliness and hygiene were particularly concerning to the CI, which 'fed into the stereotyping of Travellers as being dirty' (Boyle et al., 2018: 10). Parental and children's rights were set aside in favour of perceived needs as the washing and changing of children's clothes became common practice in schools across the country (Boyle et al., 2018).

The Educational Facilities for Children of Itinerants Report (EFCI), published in 1970, reinforced the Government aim of integration and assimilation, recommending segregated classes or schools (Department of Education, 1970). Building on a deficit model, Traveller children were constructed as 'disadvantaged and deprived' (Boyle et al., 2018: 89). Traveller children were educated in segregated schools or, where numbers were too low, in remedial classes or classes 'for educationally retarded which could also serve the needs of itinerant children requiring special assistance' (Department of Education, 1970: 273).

The EFCI report continued to inform education provisions for Travellers for two decades. Over this period, five segregated Traveller schools were established across the country and mainstream primary schools were encouraged to set up separate classes. In 1981, the Department of Education and Science began partly funding voluntary organisations to establish pre-schools for younger children as well as Junior Training Centres for Travellers over the age of twelve (Department of Education and Science, 2002a and 2002b). Although the rhetoric of integration was at the heart of this policy, 'separate provision[s] became the norm for Traveller children' (Boyle et al., 2018: 87).

In addition to segregated educational spaces, Traveller children also received a differentiated curriculum (Boyle et al., 2018). Following on the recommendations set out in the CI report, the EFCI supported the 'installation of the equipment necessary for the teaching of home management and of extended personal washing facilities, including showers' (Department of Education, 1970: 7). Schooling became a site for socialising Traveller children into middle-class norms with little regard for their education, which was reflected 'by continued poor educational outcomes for Traveller children in the decades following this report' (Boyle et al., 2018: 92).

According to Nunan (1993), the Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers (VTST), introduced as a pilot scheme in Galway in 1980, was one of the first initiatives to forge a positive relationship between Traveller families and schools. In 1983, the Report of the Travelling People Review Body (RB) recommended the nationwide roll-out of the VTST scheme. Appointed by the Department of Education, the visiting teacher's brief exceeded that of teaching.



In addition to her teaching work, she [*sic*] co-operates with other teachers who have travellers in their classes; visiting the families whose children are not attending school regularly; organise help with homework for the children and facilitates in every way possible maximum school attendance (Government of Ireland, 1983: 73).

The RB report recognised non-attendance as the ‘biggest single obstacle in the whole field of education for Travellers’ (Government of Ireland, 1983: 73). In addition to the Visiting Teachers, the RB report identified a number of other initiatives for increasing Travellers’ attendance and participation in education, which included,

- The development of a State-run pre-school for Traveller children to counteract their ‘social deprivation’ (Government of Ireland, 1983: 68)
- Where necessary, the provision of special schools or special classes exclusively for Travellers
- The continuing provision of washing facilities and equipment in schools and pre-schools
- The employment of more childcare assistants as well as additional teachers
- The provision of an adequate transport system to ensure school attendance
- The increase in the number of appointed Visiting Teachers, especially in urban areas
- The provision of mobile teachers for transient families
- The provision of special education and vocational facilities for Travellers between 12–15 years of age
- The provision of Traveller Cultural training for teachers

In contrast to earlier policies, the RB recognised Travellers as having a distinct identity and as O’Connell (1997: 3) notes, ‘[c]oncepts such as absorption, settlement, assimilation and rehabilitation were no longer acceptable and were rejected in the report’. Furthermore, the term ‘itinerant’ was replaced with ‘Traveller’ and integration rather than assimilation became the goal (O’Connell, 2002: 4-5). However, the cultural differences between Travellers and the settled community that were identified in the RB were considered ‘a focus of individual choice rather than collective rights’ (Crowley, 1999: 247). It was not until The Report on the Task Force on the Travelling Community (TF), 1995, that Traveller cultural identity was recognised<sup>1</sup> and ‘defined in terms of cultural rights, rather than being seen merely as a poverty issue’ (Boyle et al., 2018 99).

There is a clear shift from a deficit model of education to a rights-based model in the TF report as it acknowledged that institutional discrimination rather than individual differences had restricted Travellers’ access to education. The TF report sought to explore ways to empower Travellers to ‘participate and contribute to decisions affecting their lifestyle and environment’ (Government of Ireland, 1995: 10). An impressive 341 recommendations were made in the report with nearly half (167) related to education. Rather than regarding Traveller culture as incompatible with school engagement and progression, the TF report identified six principles that should underpin future provisions:

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1. Irish Travellers’ ethnicity was formally recognised by the Irish State in March 2017



Equality of opportunity, anti-discrimination, interculturalism, affirmative action, parental involvement, and integration (Hegarty, 2013).

On the surface, the TF report signalled changes in national policy on Travellers, which was based around 'mutual understanding and respect' (Government of Ireland, 1995: 10). Although the policy did not go as far as recognising Traveller ethnicity, it did recommend that 'the distinct culture and identity of the Traveller community be recognised and taken into account' (Government of Ireland, 1995: 12). Nomadism, which had previously been regarded with disdain, was now regarded as a 'significant feature of the Traveller way of life', which could be catered for in relation to the current education system (Government of Ireland, 1995: 165). Acknowledging that the school system was designed for the settled community, the TF report recommended a number of ways that nomadism could be accommodated in the existing system.

- A book exchange programme that would reduce the financial burden on families that move school
- Flexible enrolment dates to reduce the number of Traveller children missing out on school due to moving from one area to another
- The expansion of visiting teachers across the country to support parents to make initial contact with schools
- The assignment of the visiting teacher to a family for the duration of the child's education
- Exploring the use of distance learning approaches piloted in some European countries

While many of the recommendations in the TF report address issues relating to early years, primary and secondary school sectors, access to third level is also mentioned, making the TF the first policy document which considered Traveller access to higher education. The report identifies poor performance in primary and secondary school as the main barrier to accessing higher education but does recommend that grants should be made available to reduce the financial burden for those who are progressing to higher education.

While a number of positive developments did occur following the publication of the TF report<sup>2</sup>, the first progress report expressed concern about the 'lack of progress generally on the recommendation ... in the area of education ... [and] notes that very little progress has been made on the integration of intercultural education into the education system as a whole' (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2000: 17).

In the interim between the First (2000) and Second Progress report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community (2005), a number of significant publications occurred that

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2. These included: The Education Act (1998) which set out to work in partnership with parents, schools and State to provide an inclusive education for all; the Education (Welfare) Bill, 1999 and the subsequent publication of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 which set up a service to monitor attendance and support student retention; and the establishment of the National Education Psychological Service which works with teachers, parents and children to address the students' educational needs.



related to issues concerning Traveller education<sup>3</sup>. In 2002, the Department of Education and Skills published a set of guidelines on Traveller education in both primary and secondary school. These guidelines acknowledged that Traveller education required a whole-school approach rather than being contained within a singular subject. Taking an interculturalism approach, secondary schools were encouraged to facilitate children's knowledge 'about the language, customs and cultural practices of one's own society and other societies' (Department of Education and Science, 2002b: 22). In 2002, nearly twenty years after the Report of the Traveller People Review Body (RB report), the primary and secondary schools were once again asked to develop a culturally appropriate curriculum (Hegarty, 2013).

The Pre-school for Travellers: National Evaluation Report (NE report), 2003, also addressed the issue of interculturalism in the curriculum and recommended that pre-schools worked in partnership with parents to develop policies that were sensitive to Traveller culture. Although this report points towards a more inclusive paradigm, no Traveller parent representatives were involved in the steering committee (Boyle et al., 2018). In 2005, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment published Guidelines on Interculturalism for primary schools, with a view to recognising and celebrating diversity within society and promoting equity and human rights. Similar guidelines were published for post-primary schools in 2006. The Intercultural Guidelines for both primary and post-primary aims include to:

- Support the aims of the curriculum to reflect growing cultural and ethnic diversity
- Address the curricular needs that arise in the context of growing diversity
- Facilitate the creation of inclusive schools and classrooms
- Raise awareness about issues that arise from linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity in Ireland
- Provide an overview of assessment in the intercultural context

The Second Progress Report of the Committee to Monitor and Co-ordinate the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Task Force on the Travelling Community (2005) acknowledged a number of policy developments in relation to Traveller education but recognised that considerably more work was needed to meet the Department of Education and Science (DES) aim of full participation (DJELR, 2005: 28).

Significant national changes had also occurred between the publication of the Task Force report (1995) and the Second Progress Report (2005), which brought ethnic and cultural diversity to the forefront of national policy (Boyle et al., 2018). The economic boom fuelled by foreign investment during the mid-90s to the late 2000s 'created a new context for the struggle by Travellers for cultural recognition' (Boyle et al., 2018: 36). During these national changes and policy developments, the Traveller Education Strategy (TES), 2006, emerged. Through a principle of inclusion, the TES recommended,

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3. Guidelines for primary and secondary schools (2002); Pre-school for Travellers: National Evaluation Report (2003); Guidelines on Intercultural Education (2005) and Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland: The Case of Travellers (2005)



... that all educational provision for Travellers be integrated, in a phased manner, in an enhanced mainstream provision that will result in an inclusive model of educational provision. It is paramount that future education services, therefore, are not provided in a manner that creates new segregation within mainstream provisions (Department of Education and Science, 2006: 10).

In contrast to earlier policies, the TES (2006) moved from 'focusing on individual change to systemic or institutional change' (Boyle et al., 2018: 37). Some of the objectives of the TES (2006) report included;

- Supporting Traveller parents to 'get to know' the education system to enable them to further support their children
- Young Traveller children should have access to quality early childhood education
- Schools should have high expectation for the educational outcomes of Travellers and support parents to take an active part in school life
- All Travellers should complete the Junior Cycle in post-primary school and at least 50% should complete Senior Cycle
- Teachers receive training and development in the area of equity and diversity
- Primary, post-primary, adult and further education should be fully inclusive and respectful towards Traveller identity and culture
- Higher education institutes should actively facilitate and encourage Travellers to enrol and successfully engage in courses of their choice

The economic downturn in 2008 had a significant impact on the implementation of the goals set out in the TES (2006). According to Pavee Point (2013), during the post-Celtic Tiger years, there was an estimated 86% reduction to targeted educational spending for Travellers (cited in Boyle et al., 2018), which was 'disproportionate compared to financial cutbacks of other mainstream educational cuts' (ITM, 2011). Due to funding withdrawal, Traveller pre-schools closed in 2011 and all 42 Visiting Teachers were withdrawn as well as Resource Teachers for Travellers. Another significant development during this period was the national phasing out of Traveller Training Centres.

The TEACH report (2010) was commissioned by the National Association of Travellers' Centres (NATC) in response to the phasing out of the Traveller Training Centres. A total of 50 Travellers from four different locations were interviewed for the TEACH report, along with 46 community stakeholders. This report identified six obstacles to Travellers' engagement and progression into the workforce: Prejudice, Welfare Dependency, Nomadism, Gender, Feuding, and Traveller Family Values.

The experience and expectation of prejudice negatively impact on educational progression for Travellers. Travellers experience prejudice in every aspect of their educational journey. However, this experience appears to become more pronounced in post-primary school (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010), contributing to low progression rates<sup>4</sup>. Hourigan and

4. Only 8% of Travellers complete secondary school compared to 73% from the 'settled' community. Furthermore, only 1% of Travellers have college degrees (Boyle et al, 2018).



Campbell (2010) suggest that although the Department of Education and Science (DES) supports progress in rhetoric, the reality is that progression is impossible due to the high level of discrimination and prejudice experienced by those who attempt to progress.

The second issue impeding Travellers' progress, according to Hourigan and Campbell (2010), is the level of welfare dependency within the Traveller community. According to Helleiner (2000), the dependency generated by the welfare system limits progression aspirations towards the labour market (cited in Hourigan and Campbell, 2010). This reductionist discourse contributes to the stereotype of Travellers as 'backward, lazy, thieving and above all ... non-productive members of the nation' (Garner, 2009: 50) and ignores the systemic discrimination and exclusion from mainstream society. High rates of unemployment and welfare dependency among Travellers are frequently perceived as stemming from 'backward' customs and practices rather than discrimination practices in employment-related areas of recruitment, training and promotion.

The pathologizing of Travellers' nomadic lifestyles 'represents a clash between [Traveller] culture and the settled model of "progression" as established by Dept. of Education' (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010: 38). Nomad lifestyle is not the only Traveller custom to come into conflict with the Irish State's model of progression. The construction of gender roles and prestige associated with marriage bonds and ties within Traveller culture conflict with the value and norms of the settled community. In the Traveller community, marriage signals a chance for progression in-so-far as it is recognised as a rite of passage into adulthood and elevated social and economic status (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010). Thus, while education offers symbolic capital for progression within the settled community, marriage offers the same assurance for Travellers. The early age of marriage within the Traveller community conflicts with 'settled' cultural norms and serves as a barrier to educational progression. For Traveller women, progression within education can 'endanger their prospects of making a good marriage' (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010: 40). Similarly, progressing in education compromises constructs of masculinity for Traveller men as it involves 'being part of the authority structures of the settled community' (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010: 41).

For both men and women in the Traveller community, the family is of the utmost importance, and educational programmes with their 'settled' models of time management conflict with family obligations (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010). The TEACH report also identified feuding or more accurately, fear of conflict between other families, as a major barrier to engaging in education. Traditionally, Traveller men would display their fighting skills at summer fairs and would challenge other men to the art of 'stick-fighting' (Hayes, 2006a). Additionally, fighting acted as a ritualized substitution for a statutory legal system 'that was largely inaccessible to ... nomadic people' (Breathnach, 2006: 14). Although these practices and customs have largely disappeared, the notion of Travellers as disorderly and 'uncivilized' persists (Hayes, 2006a: 155).

Despite the TES (2006) principle of inclusion, the TEACH report found that the majority of Travellers engaged in Training Centres were unlikely to integrate into mainstream adult education settings. Therefore, recommendations were made for the development



of dedicated Traveller education spaces within mainstream VEC centres, 'whose primary goal is to facilitate the broad integration of Travellers into Irish society' (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010: 101). Recognising that some Travellers may not want to enter mainstream education or the workplace, this report recommended facilitating integration rather than forced assimilation (Hourigan and Campbell, 2010).

Integration policies and practices tend to focus on transforming Travellers into the dominant culture rather than challenging existing structural inequalities. Findings and recommendations from the TES (2006) informed the development of the Intercultural Education Strategy (IES) 2010 - 2015, which recognised diversity within Irish society but focused predominantly on migrants' experiences of the education system. The following outlines the commonality between the main goals of the IES and the TES (2006).

- Adopt a whole-school approach to creating an intercultural learning environment
- Build teachers' capacity to develop an intercultural learning environment
- Promote partnership between school, student, parents and communities

While research has found that teachers are supportive of the need to develop inclusive practices within the school environment, they are 'uncertain over how best to proceed' (Devine, 2005: 65). Furthermore, Bryan and Bracken (2011: 111) found that 'tokenistic gestures can have a range of unfortunate and unintended consequences, including reinforcing ethnic minority students' pre-existing sense of otherness'. Parker-Jenkins and Masterson (2013: 489) found that cuts to funding drastically hamper 'support for policy on developing cultural diversity and professional development'. In July 2018, The Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill was introduced into the Houses of the Oireachtas. This Act will 'provide for recognised schools to promote ... knowledge and understanding of the culture and history of the Traveller community' (Government Publications, 2018: 4). While this development is still relatively recent, it is a step towards developing clear learning resources for the classroom that celebrate diversity, and provides a platform to address anti-Traveller racism.

The development of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) in 2017 builds on pre-existing national and international policies on interculturalism and sets out two main goals to improve educational outcomes for Travellers. These goals relate to the following:

- Improved access, participation and outcomes in education to enable Travellers and Roma to achieve the same outcomes as the rest of the population
- Positive inclusion of Traveller and Roma culture across the curriculum

Since the publication of NTRIS, the Roma Civil Monitor Project has produced three reports which highlight continued unequal education outcomes between Travellers and the settled community. Although no reliable data is available, anecdotal evidence suggests that a disproportionate number of Travellers are placed on reduced timetables at second level which negatively impacts on their engagement and long-term retention (Pavee Point, 2018). The NTRIS report calls for a full investigation into this, but with no clear budget allocation or funding transparency, it is not clear what impact NTRIS will have (Pavee Point, 2018).



## 3.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter has given an overview of the policies and practices related to Traveller education since the 1960s. As shown, education policies and practices have perpetuated disadvantage for Travellers' access and participation. Despite recent moves towards interculturalism, Traveller culture remains invisible within the curriculum, which impacts on Travellers' sense of belonging within the system. Figure 6 below gives a timeline of the educational policies that have affected Travellers' engagement in the education system since the 1960s.

Figure 6: Timeline of policies related to Traveller education

Timeline of policies and practices related to Traveller education	
1952	Questionnaire on Tinkers
1963	Commission of Itinerancy Report
1970	Educational Facilities for Children of Itinerants Report
1980	Visiting Teacher Service for Travellers Pilot Scheme
1983	Report of the Travelling People Review Body
1995	The Report on the Task Force on the Travelling Community
1998	The Education Act
1999	Education (Welfare) Bill
2000	Education (Welfare) Act
2000	First Progress Report on the Task Force on the Travelling Community
2002	Guidelines for Traveller Education in Primary Schools
2002	Guidelines for Traveller Education in Second Level Schools
2003	Pre-school for Travellers National Evaluation Report
2005	Guidelines on Intercultural Education
2005	Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland: The Case of Travellers
2005	Second Progress Report on the Task Force on the Travelling Community
2006	Traveller Education Strategy
2008	National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–2013
2010	TEACH Report: Traveller Education and Adults
2010	Intercultural Education Strategy, 2010–2015
2011	Closure of Traveller Pre-schools Withdrawal of all 42 Visiting Teachers as well as Resource Teachers for Travellers Phasing out of Traveller Training Centres
2015	National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015–2019
2017	National Traveller and Roma Strategy, 2017

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

CHAPTER 4

# Research Findings



## 4.1 Introduction

Travellers are almost invisible in higher education. According to data from the CSO (2016), only 1% of Travellers progress to higher education. Before addressing the findings of this research, this report will 'make visible' the education experience of two of the Traveller women on the Leadership in the Community course. The following two case studies highlight the significant impact school experience has on Travellers' access, engagement and sense of belonging within the education system and gives a glimpse of the women's determination and perseverance. This first case study is from the oldest student on the Leadership in the Community course. This personal story captures some of the barriers and institutional racism that Traveller women have endured since the 1960s. The second case study is from a young mother who had a much more positive experience of the education system growing up but recognised that cuts to Traveller education over that last decade are having a negative impact on Travellers' engagement, especially in post-primary school.

### **Minceirs Beoirs Toiree [Traveller Women Talk] – A Personal story**

#### **Case Study 1**

Growing up, I was the eldest girl in the family and therefore, I had to take on a lot of the caring responsibilities of the younger children when we were at school. At the time, we were attending a Traveller-only school. My family lived in tents at the side of the road, so my parents were glad to see us go to school as we got fed and washed. My parents were surviving to keep their children warm and fed, education was not in their minds. For them, school wasn't about learning, it was a dry, safe place for us. I dreaded when the nuns would take us away to be washed. It was humiliating having to strip down in front of strangers and other children from the class. As the oldest girl in the family, it was my responsibility to protect the others but making sure they got fed and ate their dinner. If they were getting washed, I'd make sure I was there and dressed them.

After my confirmation, I left school to help my mother. It was the thing that was done at the time. But I still loved learning, so I went into the Training Centre when I was 13. It was there that I learned to read, and I have been learning ever since. Ten years ago, I went back and did my Leaving Certificate Applied. At the time, I didn't know what the Leaving Cert Applied was, but I knew it was a step forward. Education has always been important to me.

When my own children were young, we lived in a trailer at the side of the road before moving to a halting site in Mahon. I promised, I'd never allowed my children to be taken out of class and washed. I refused to let the teachers even



take the school uniforms off the children to wash them. I went to the school and told them to leave the uniforms with me and I would wash them. So, I'd go down to a stream and I'd wash the uniform and I'd hang them up in the trailer to dry.

It makes me so angry to hear people say that Travellers don't value education. Growing up, we would sit by the fire each morning before going to school to warm our toes after the cold nights in the tent. My own daughter lives in a trailer and she needs to wake her children early each morning so they can use the toilet outside and brush their little teeth in cold water before walking to school. No one knows what their circumstances are or what they are coming from. For a lot of Traveller families, meeting basic needs is the priority but that doesn't mean they don't value education.

All eight of my children did their Junior Certificate and at the time, no Traveller in Mahon was staying in school or doing their Junior Cert. That was my goal, to get my children to do their Junior Cert. Four of my children stayed in school and did their Leaving Certificate.

Where I work, the co-ordinator would ask every term if we would like to do a diploma and it was very frightening for us. So, we went down to UCC a couple of times and we sat in on a lecture. It was very intimidating because I didn't think I would ever be as fast as the other people there who were all taking down notes and I was just sitting down listening. When this Leadership course was designed for Travellers, a group of Traveller women, I knew I would be able for it because it was designed to help us.

The first week I was very nervous. There were all these young people around UCC and a few of us were middle-aged women. Even though we were a group of Traveller women together, I felt everyone was looking at us. Everyone was telling us; we were part of UCC now, but I never felt we were. I don't feel like a UCC student. When I am telling people about the course, I say I am doing a Leadership course in TVG. I never say I am doing a Leadership course in UCC. TVG is part of the Traveller community, it connects us all and brings us closer together.

We wouldn't have been able to do this course without the supports we are getting from UCC, TVG and STHN. The additional study supports push us to do more ourselves. Everyone has been very supportive, and they are all addressing our needs as they arise. I will be 60 years old next year and I have never stopped learning. My children know they will never get me to stay at home 24 hours a day. I will either be working or doing a course. My mother was 76 year of age before she could write her own name so learning never stops.



## Case Study 2

I grew up in Mallow, Co. Cork. There were six children in my family, and I was the second eldest. I loved going to school when I was in primary school and I also had a positive experience of my time in secondary school. When I finished school, I studied Childcare studies with the City and Guilds Partnership Programme and earned a qualification in childcare studies. I worked in a childcare centre for a number of years and I loved it.

When I heard about the Leadership in the Community course, I applied straight away because I wanted to up-skill and expand my knowledge in Community Development. Traveller women experience a lot of barriers to higher education due to childcare, access to transport and literacy issues. There are some people on this course who left school at a very early age, so we all have different levels, but we'd never leave anyone behind. We are all in this together and support one another. My family is also very supportive. My daughter even mentioned in her school that she was proud of me for doing the course.

I have a 14-year-old daughter and she will be doing her Junior Certificate next year. In recent years, I have seen some of my family members and my daughter being mistreated by the education system especially with reduced timetables for Traveller children in secondary schools. Recently, I had to go into the school as my daughter was put on a reduced timetable without my knowledge. I was told I should bring someone with me, but I felt that this course had given me the confidence to deal with this issue myself. I went straight to the principal and voiced my concerns. I told her that I was doing a course in UCC and that when I dropped my daughter off in the morning, she was under their supervision and she was not allowed off school grounds until school was over. And within two weeks, her timetable was back to normal.

From doing this course, I have learned about new ideas and a lot more information about rights to education and the supports available to access education. I feel that that this course has given me the support and empowerment to tackle issues such as discrimination. Next year, I am going to move on to the Diploma in Community Leadership. I would love to see more lectures on UCC campus so I can feel part of the university. Once I graduate, my ideal job would be supporting families from disadvantaged backgrounds access education.



As the case studies illustrate, Traveller women are not a homogenous group and educational experiences differ depending on age and location. Addressing the experience of early education is vital for supporting Travellers access, participation and progression within higher education. Currently, there is a global trend to increase access to higher education for under-represented groups (Hart, 2013). In Ireland, the National Action Plan for Equity of Access 2015 – 2019 identified Travellers as a specific target group, with the aim to increase access and participation nearly three-fold. However, research has found that resource or funding initiatives alone do not take into account affective narratives (Ahmed, 2014) and the way that impacts on capabilities (Nussbaum, 2005)

The data collected from this research highlights a number of factors that cause significant concern for Travellers accessing higher education. These factors include previous school experience, structural inequalities, concerns for safety, racism and discrimination, low literacy levels, gender roles and childcare responsibilities, and lack of recognition of Traveller culture. The reflective activation model that underpins the partnership between Access and Participation and Adult & Continuing Education (ACE) UCC, and the Southern Traveller Health Network (STHN) supported reflective and reflexive action. This chapter gives an overview of the collaborative approach taken by UCC and the Traveller Organisations to developing a model of best practice. Finally, this chapter will discuss the impact the Leadership in the Community course had on the Traveller women.

## 4.2 Early experience of school

The stories of Travellers' experiences in school are harrowing, especially the stories from those who grew up during the era of the Commission of Itinerancy Report. For these women, the humiliating experience of being washed at school has stayed with them throughout their lives. As one woman recalls,

*It helped our parents because we came from tents on the side of the road in the morning and we just went to get fed and washed. But it didn't help the people... And I was definitely one of the ones it didn't help, I used to cringe inside the bath with two other 12 year olds ... We were made do it, we were physically made go into the bathroom and having strangers ... nuns washing ya (Quote from focus group)*

The perception of Travellers as 'dirty' was not only used as 'a marker of "otherness" but also as the grounds for action' (Bhopal and Myers, 2008: 73). Schools were used to 'promote [Travellers'] absorption into the general community' (Government of Ireland, 1963: 11) by assimilating children into the settled way of life (Fanning, 2015). The segregation of Travellers within the school system served to broaden the social distance between Travellers and the settled community.



Teachers' engagement with Travellers significantly impacted on their sense of belonging in school (Bhopal, 2011). Many of the women shared stories of how they were segregated from the rest of the class due to teachers' low expectation of their ability and capability. *'I was told in school that I would never go anywhere, that I'd never make nothing of my life'* recalled one participant. It was apparent from the discussion that the women felt like they did not belong within the school community or were *'like a fish out of water'* as one woman claimed.

Feeling out of place or not belonging within the education system contributed to the women leaving the system during the early stages of secondary school. One woman stated, *'I went back after my confirmation and I went into 1<sup>st</sup> year and I stayed in 1<sup>st</sup> year for about 3 weeks. It's not that I didn't like [school], it's just that [I] didn't fit in'* (Quote from focus group). According to Biggart et al. (2013), Traveller children have a significantly lower sense of belonging to the school community than other ethnic groups and feel most excluded.

Although reasons for Travellers' heightened sense of exclusion are likely 'multifaceted and complex', prejudice and racism play a part (Biggart et al., 2013: 189). Research by Bhopal (2004; 2011) and Rose and Shevlin (2004) found that Travellers' experiences of racism, bullying and exclusion by peers contributed to their sense of difference from the settled community. The following example was shared during a focus group and demonstrates the damaging impact of name-calling.

*... none of us had a very good experience of the education system. Like we would have experienced a lot of racism like. I remember my first experience where maybe being in like 1st class, I had a settled girl tell me she couldn't play with me, she wasn't to play with dirty knackers. And, from then on, I just knew that I was different, and I knew that I was looked at as inferior.* (Quote from focus group)

Terms like 'knacker' are what Ahmed (2014: 46 italics in original) refers to as *'sticky words'*, which 'assign the other with meaning in an economy of difference' (Ahmed, 2014: 59). Expressions of hate through verbal violence can have real or immediate effects and as the woman quoted above notes, *'I knew that I was looked at as inferior'*. Through hate-filled remarks, Travellers are depicted as the *stranger* and constructed as unfamiliar, unrecognisable and potentially dangerous (Ahmed, 2000; Bhopal, 2008; Ombagi, 2016). According to Ahmed (2000), strangers are not necessarily outside geographical or geopolitical boundaries, yet their difference becomes a marker of otherness. Expressions of racial hatred involve attaching a series of difference and displacement signifiers to others; 'a process we can describe as "the making of unlikeness"' (Ahmed, 2014: 55).

According to Ahmed (2014), the stranger figure is imagined as a threat to the stability of the nation and therefore becomes an object of fear, hate and disgust. Because hate is intimately connected to love (i.e. love of the nation), the host of the hate speech becomes



reimagined as the *'real victim'* (Ahmed, 2014: 43 italics in original). Thus, Travellers are not only at the receiving end of hate attacks, but they are reimagined as the perpetrator of the attack in the first place, as illustrated in the following story.

*I was in a class by myself, and you have to listen to the jokes about Travellers, you're looked at funny, how bad it is was in primary but when you go into secondary, there's a big, big change. I remember one time and this girl would have been half bullied herself, she was telling a Traveller joke that there was an earthquake somewhere, Dublin sent replacement food, Kerry sent replacement clothes and Cork sent replacement knackers ... Cork had so many knackers that you could be moved on just like that. But I approached her about it, I wouldn't be aggressive, I would be placid enough. I approached her and said what was that about? She started crying and I was told I was going to be expelled because she felt so upset. Did I realise how upset she felt? (Quote from focus group)*

As the example demonstrates, many teachers are ill-prepared to recognise and address issues relating to prejudice and racism (Bloomer and Hamilton, 2014). Research has found that experiences of racism cut across all areas of Traveller children's lives (Kilkelly et al., 2004). Therefore, fears around safety shape Travellers' engagement with the education system (Bhopal, 2004). As Travellers progress further in the education system, the fear of leaving the safety net of the community becomes a concern. As one woman stated, *'if I was in UCC and was just in a group with settled people, I wouldn't call to their homes or ring them'* (Quote from focus group). Therefore, approaches to engage Travellers and other marginalised communities in higher education need to start with cultural recognition.

Although Travellers' ethnic status was formally recognised in 2017, many Travellers are *'unwilling to declare their ethnic identity to schools for fear of being excluded or discriminated against'* (Bhopal and Myers, 2009b: 300). As Ahmed (2014: 57) points out, *'The hated body becomes hated, not just for the one who hates, but for the one who is hated'*. There is no accurate data on the numbers of Travellers who have gone through the education system without revealing their ethnic status, but the following story suggests that Travellers are aware of the *'other'* status from a very young age and some attempt to conceal their identity for fear of being labelled or stigmatised.

*But still, children are ashamed. I think my little boy is very very kind of paranoid. Recently, he had a holy communion mass and was like, "I don't think you need to go", and I was kinda wondering what was the story. So, I quizzed him about it and I didn't go directly, I kinda beat around the bush with him and I got the impression that some of the children in his class didn't know he was a Traveller and he was afraid in case we were seen and they realised he was a Traveller. I talked to his teacher about it and she said she was going to, if my little boy wanted to, she was going to acknowledge in class that he was a Traveller and she was going to let him*



*talk about the good because a lot of the things you see about Travellers are bad*  
(Quote from focus group)

Stigma, according to Goffman (1963: 3), is a discrediting attribute that marks the person as dangerous, incomplete or 'tainted'. The misrecognition of Traveller culture is all too apparent and the affects and effects of hate circulate in and around the body (Ahmed, 2014). According to the participants, acknowledging the past harms done to Travellers is the first step in healing the present.

*... I think things were done bad before. And I'd like them [the government] to say, we did fail ye, we didn't acknowledge when ye were being targeted because ye're Travellers, we didn't acknowledge your culture, this is why things went so badly but we will fix it. It's fixable if they acknowledge it* (Quote from focus group)

## 4.3 Capability and progression

It is interesting to note that when the women on the Leadership in the Community course were asked why they left school early, they cited not fitting in or the accumulated effects of teachers' low expectation. Numerous examples were shared that illustrated the inadequacies of the education system that motivated early school rejection.

*At one stage I was taken out of maths to go into a special class with Travellers and we were given percussion instruments that didn't make noise. Now I still can't see how that would help anyone out. Percussion instruments, so you shook um and they didn't make noise, so you shook um and you made silent music* (Quote from focus group)

*[In resource class] we were all given out pieces of paper and this is your menu, now order off the menu, so we thought we were being brought for lunch or something. But she told us when we were finished all about our manners and basically, it was an [etiquette] lesson like, put our elbows on the table and forks and knives. We didn't go to school to be taught table manners, that's something you take from home* (Quote from focus group)

In contrast, many of the stakeholders pointed out that gender roles within Traveller culture placed significant constraints on Traveller women's educational progression. Within Traveller culture, there are significant gender-based inequalities and constraints placed on girls and women (Helleiner, 2000: 163). Marriage is considered an important marker of progression from childhood to adulthood (Hourigan and Campbell, 2000) and traditionally, a prerequisite for 'economic survival' (Helleiner, 2000: 45). Early marriage may



be a contributing factor in Traveller girls' early school leaving but does not fully capture the gendered constraints of accessing higher education as adult learners.

Traveller women carry the burden of the majority of the domestic responsibilities and care work, which may impact on their capability to access higher education. Capabilities, according to Nussbaum (2011: 20), are 'not just abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment'. Expanding individuals' capabilities are intrinsically linked to respect and dignity: 'It is focused on choice or freedom, holding that the crucial good societies should be promoting for their people is a set of opportunities, or substantial freedoms, which people then may or may not exercise in action' (Nussbaum, 2011: 18).

Nussbaum (2005: 114) argues that 'unjust background conditions deforms people's choices and even their wishes for their own lives'. The enduring inequalities resulting from maldistribution of resources, social exclusion and disempowerment have restricted Travellers' capabilities for accessing higher education. Pathways for access to higher education must be 'grounded in the consent of the people' (Nussbaum, 2011: 112). The reflective activation approach (Ó Tuama, 2016) that underpinned the partnership approach for this initiative, ensured that Traveller women were actively involved in co-designing the structure and delivery of the course.

Over the last twenty years, the Access and Participation offices in UCC have developed a constructive working relationship with Traveller organisations supporting engagement in education. This history of trust facilitated the timely development of the Leadership in the Community course. As a senior stakeholder in UCC summarised '*there were good relationships and people knew each other, so that helped when we came together ... we were all moving in the same direction*' (Quote from interview). However, all stakeholders recognised that interest, ability and commitment alone would not increase the capabilities of the women to access the course without financial support.

*The timing was right, there was a group of women engaged with the STHN, the leaders recognised their potential and were eager to provide opportunities for the women to further their education. Many of the women had undertaken short-term courses, but they had no substantial qualifications. When [the Traveller organisation stakeholders] approached me to discuss this, I was confident that this was something that UCC could support, I engaged with [Officials at Adult Continuing Education] to progress the idea of a programme targeted at Traveller Women. The timing coincided with Access and Participation securing funding for the SOAR Project, and PATH 3 funding made it possible for UCC to cover the cost of the programme for the first year. (Quote from stakeholder in UCC).*



In addition to removing the financial barriers to accessing the course, the Traveller organisations recognised the gender-based division of labour within the family which hinders women's ability to access higher education. A maintenance grant was provided to each of the women to give value to their time. According to Helleiner (2000: 224), the 'training allowance' that was provided by the Training Centres in the past provided Traveller women 'with a degree of independence from the domination of fathers and husbands'. For many of the Traveller women on the course, gaining family support, particularly from husbands, was essential. As one woman stated, *'The husbands would have been a bit cagey about why you are doing [the course]'*. Providing a maintenance grant gives the women leverage to pursue interests outside of their expected role. The Traveller organisation recognised that the maintenance allowance had the potential to remove constraints and increase autonomy.

*The role of Traveller women and the role of settled women is different. And the stresses and strains and what they're expected to do are huge within the family. Like if I go to something, I'm not asked at home, why are you going? What are you going to get out of this? Traveller women are, like even just before we finished up, one of the women was saying to me, "my dad asks me, why are you going down to TVG to a study group? For God's sake, what are you getting out of it?". Like where is this going to go for you? There isn't that sense of support for the women sometimes to go on and do courses. So, if they're able to say, well do you know what, I go down and I can bring back €20, that's important. So, [the maintenance allowance] is about valuing their time and saying, we do value that you're here (Interview with stakeholder in Traveller organisation).*

Gaining family and community support is vital to Traveller women's participation in higher education. As one woman stated, *'I think it has to come from home, with support from children and family because if you don't have that, you'll say forget it. If no one gives you confidence, you won't do it'* (Quote from focus group). Burke (2017: 436) warns that expressions of low self-esteem should not be 'detached from histories of gendered, classed and racialized misrecognition'. In contrast to popular belief that education is not valued in Traveller culture, this research found that experiences of shame and misrecognition can immobilise progression in education.

Ahmed (2014: 103) describes the lived experience of shame as an 'intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself'. Previous experience of social exclusion, maldistribution of resources and disempowerment in the education system due to cultural misrecognition, combined with factors associated with early school leaving, contribute to the experience of shame. According to Ahmed (2014), the experience of shame is attributed to one's own actions rather than structural inequalities. Thus, shame is hidden and internalised in the individual, who fears being exposed.



Low literacy skills are one of the factors associated with early school leaving (Morgan, 1998). Although there is no national statistical data on literacy and numeracy levels for Travellers, the Survey of Traveller Education Provision (Department of Education and Science, 2006) found that 67.4% of Traveller children score below the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile in English reading. Low literacy skills can be a tremendous source of shame (Parikh et al., 1996) and can reside in the person throughout their lifetime, as the following story illustrates.

*And even the elderly, they always kind of say, "You know I'm sorry I never learnt how to read and write". And it's very sad and very embarrassing also when they go to the Post Office and they're asked to sign their name, now it's a computer but like all they can do is an X. You know it's very downgrading for them because they know that people behind them can sense that (Quote from focus group)*

According to Burke (2017: 436), third-level institutions use learning supports as a means of building students' confidence without problematising the 'complex power relations produced within such interactions of "support"'. Due to the strong Traveller voice in the Leadership in the Community project, positive interactions were placed at the heart of developing and delivering the course. The following steps were taken to disrupt power relations that can decentre the learner's needs.

- The Traveller organisations worked with the women for a number of years before the course to build up their confidence
- Southern Traveller Health Network was involved in the hiring of the lecturing staff to ensure the professionals would be a 'good fit'
- The Traveller organisations provided additional study skills for the women in their area. These professionals were already known to the women and were 'trusted'
- Regular focus groups were held to get the women's feedback on their transition, engagement and progression during the course and positive changes were made throughout the course to meet the needs of the learners
- A safe, supportive environment was maintained throughout

## 4.4 Leadership in the Community Course

Establishing a trusting relationship between the Traveller organisation and non-Traveller stakeholders was vital for ensuring access for the Traveller women on this course (see Bhopal and Myers, 2009a). Cultural awareness is a core part of building a successful relationship and implementing initiatives that support capabilities. A working partnership between the University and the Traveller organisation ensured the most culturally appropriate model was established.



Over half of the lecturers on the course were previously known to the women from their engagement with the Traveller organisations, which ensured that the women felt safe enough to seek support when needed.

*... one thing about the tutors, they're very good to clarify something if it's bothering you, or even to make you feel good, they give you more confidence to keep going. Sometimes if I lose myself, they'll always bring you back, that no one is better than anyone, and you can do this. And, I think that's great. (Quote from focus group)*

Feelings of belonging and acceptance were very important to the women on the course. Initially, the women were attending class on UCC campus but within a couple of weeks, the course was moved to the TVG premises in Cork City. A number of factors contributed to the change in location. Parking and location were the biggest issues for the majority of the women. The lack of accessible parking spaces and the location of the campus made it difficult to find parking before class and get back to pick up children afterwards. For the most part, the women spoke positively of their brief experience of attending college on the UCC grounds.

*It was lovely to experience it, it felt good, it made me feel good. The feeling is good when you walk around it, that you can be there too. (Quote from focus group)*

However, some of the women felt uncomfortable and judged by other students at UCC and preferred when the course was moved to TVG. As one participant mentioned, 'I liked it [UCC] once or twice at the start and then you've young ones looking at you, thinking what are you doing here?' Similar to research from O'Sullivan et al. (2017: 8), some of the participants on the Leadership course felt that UCC was a 'foreign place' and not for them. Once it became apparent that UCC was not a viable location for the course, all stakeholders supported the change in location to ensure the environment was conducive to learning.

*You'd love for them to experience the university and the buzz, but when we walk in and we try in their shoes, they're not having that same experience we'd have from it ... feeling intimidated, or perhaps scared or inferior and all of those other things. That's not conducive to a positive learning environment (Quote from interview with stakeholder in UCC)*

However, a number of stakeholders believed that the change in location would negatively impact on the women's sense of belonging in UCC. Even more important than the location, the interactions between the learners on the course ensured the learning environment was safe and supportive. By attending a course with other Traveller women, the participants felt more secure and gained support from one another.



*Everyone in the group helps each other and that makes an awful difference. (Quote from focus group)*

In contrast, some of the participants felt that they would not feel comfortable or supported in a class with non-Travellers.

*... if I was in UCC now, I would probably get embarrassed understanding big words and stuff like that, that's a big problem for me. Like you would have a problem asking what does that mean? (Quote from focus group)*

This sentiment was also echoed by the stakeholders in the Traveller organisation, who emphasised the difficulty faced by Travellers entering mainstream higher education.

*The women would always talk about how they'd go in groups together for a safety point of view. So, for one woman to think they're going to go to UCC or CIT, that's moving out of the safety nets as well because the safety net is there because of the racism experienced, the name-calling, it's really horrible. So, there are all of those reasons. I think those who do are absolutely great achievers, some of them don't even want to go because they know they're stepping away from the group if you like and moving into UCC or CIT on their own. There are massive, massive issues there. (Quote from interview)*

Although the participants felt comfortable attending the course with other Traveller women, most were not against collaborating with other marginalised women in the future. When asked if they thought the course should be opened up to Traveller men, most felt that it would not appeal to their interests. As one participant stated, *'I couldn't see any Traveller man I know wanting to be a leader and facilitate groups'*. Regardless of personal interests, cultural norms dictate that gendered relations tend to be segregated (Helleiner, 2000).

*We had one of the project workers from the TVG ... come down and he brought another two Traveller men down to the STHN, that's when we used to be in Macroom, and it was a disaster. The men were extremely uncomfortable, the women wouldn't talk about anything, it was just a disaster. We spoke to the women afterwards and they said, we just won't, we can't culturally discuss stuff in front of the men (Quote from interview with stakeholder in Traveller organisation)*

#### 4.4.1 Academic support

All stakeholders recognised that low literacy and digital skills would affect the women's academic experience and that there was a need for continuous academic support throughout the course. As one stakeholder mentioned, *'it's not just financial supports that you need if you're part of a marginalised group, there's other supports in there that*



*you could have*'. Therefore, an additional study session was organised within the different Traveller organisations<sup>1</sup> to support the women's engagement and progression. However, many of the women were unaware and unprepared for the additional hours that the course required.

*You feel like you've bitten off more than you can chew, you agree to 3 hours a day for 2 days a week, you're here for 6 hours a day 3 or 4 days a week. (Quote from focus group)*

As mentioned earlier, Travellers who work or study outside of the home are still expected to carry the majority of the childcare responsibilities. The additional hours spent attending support classes and engaging in independent study caused additional stress, especially on those with young children.

*Like yesterday, for instance, I had a presentation today and I had two assignments for this week. So, my little boy had to be collected at half one, so we had to ring for people to collect him to be brought out on time or.. [The support staff in the Traveller organisation] had their own meetings at 11, we had to wait for them to come out of their meetings to help us with our assignments. Then when they came out, I was barely back for half 2 to collect my other boy. Now, this is happening every week. (Quote from focus group)*

*So, we're trying to ring people to collect our children to get our assignments in, we're under pressure. D'you know we're barely back on time to feed um, to wash um, to do their homework. We have to still do everything else then during that day on top of being in the TVG, 3 or 4 days a week d'you know? It's very hard like. A lot of the time it's very stressful (Quote from focus group)*

Travellers are not a homogenous group and therefore, some of the women needed more support than others. While some of the women required literacy support with '*putting words together for them to make sense ..., using commas and full stops. To know when to use a capital letter*' (Quote from focus group), others needed practical support to get their assignments typed and put on Canvas.

*The main thing is, some of us don't have computers at home or don't have access to them (Quote from focus group)*

Addressing the digital divide is essential for empowering Traveller women to engage in higher education and for developing transferable skills that can be used in the workplace. Even with access to computers or laptops, many of the women will continue to rely on the support staff in the Traveller organisation to assist them with completing their assignments.

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1. The Traveller Visibility group provided study sessions for the women from Cork city and Travellers North Cork catered from the women from Kerry and Cork County



In addition to the literacy and digital skills required, the women struggled at the start of the course to gain the academic capital needed to complete assignments. According to Bourdieu (1986), academic capital refers to an awareness of the rules and customs of the institute. In essence, academic capital refers to one's ability to navigate the hidden curriculum, which can be described as 'the implicit demands (as opposed to the explicit obligations of the visible curriculum) that are found in every institution and which students have to find out and respond to in order to survive within it' (Snyder, 1971: 6). Academic capital can be considered a form of collateral learning (Dewey, 2007) where students internalise 'structuring of time, school traditions and beliefs, rules of conduct, assessment procedures, interaction, socialization routines, behaviour incentives and sanctions, teachers' interpretation and delivery of the curriculum and students' characteristics and response to learning' (Semper & Blasco, 2018: 483). As Whitty et al. (2015: 41) point out, success in education depends, in part, on 'knowing the ropes'. For first-generation students, navigating the hidden curriculum can be particularly difficult (Whitty et al., 2015). In addition to supporting the development of academic skills, the study sessions also made explicit the expected demands of the assignments.

*Because at the start there like, we were looking at doing learning journals, and even the most of us were like, "what's a learning journal?". But then we had three different outlooks of it. We had three different pages saying, put this into it, put that into it, and then you have another person say put that into it. But when we went to our study supports, they actually helped us, more letting us know what was what, so it was a lot easier to work with*  
(Quote from focus group)

#### 4.4.2 Empowerment

Many of the women discussed how their participation in the course had a transformative effect on their everyday lives. In the past, the misrecognition of Traveller culture had excluded them from participating fully in society. Travellers were segregated within the education system and their academic progression was not prioritised. Critically reflecting on the structural inequalities that had contributed to their marginalisation had a transformative effect on the women's confidence and their ability to stand up against injustices.

*Everybody has used their learning in their home life and struggles going on for them, so I think it was empowering in some kind of a way* (Quote from focus group)

*Because we don't challenge them on that, and that's something here we've learnt in this course as well, to challenge people. Before if someone said anything about the Travelling community, I would shy back and not say anything* (Quote from focus group)



*And to tell you the truth, the decisions made without us, the Bypass Law ... the Trespass Law, you know it's so important to engage in these things, to know what's going on so that you're involved and participating in it. Before that didn't bother me, but knowing that decisions were being made without us being there makes a big difference now (Quote from focus group)*

Furthermore, many of the women believed their engagement in the course was having a positive effect on their children's engagement in school and their future aspirations.

*I think you bringing back what you have learnt, it helps you with your children then as well. You know if they see you going out in the morning, they're saying if mommy can do it ... why can't I do it? (Quote from focus group)*

*And I think Traveller women have a very big influence on the community. Because you have your children, your nieces, your nephews, your husbands, d'you know? What you learn, you bring back and if it's something very small and subtle, it still creates positive change (Quote from focus group)*

*Even them watching you achieve something, it's building their confidence as well, if she can do it, I can do it too (Quote from focus group)*

*I think it was a good message to send out to our children. Education is this important, that I went back (Quote from focus group)*

## 4.5 Progression

The women expressed their sense of pride in what they had achieved during the year despite all their other commitments. Furthermore, most of the women were early school leavers and had to overcome literacy issues in addition to the course material. They attributed their achievement to the fact that the course was culturally relevant to them and the material that they learned in class positively impacted their day-to-day issues.

*The fact that so many stayed on, I've 3 children and I know women with more stressful lives than me, some with 5 children, 6 children. Someone with a sick parent who made the effort to stay on. That just makes it so clear how much people realised it was so important. And how much we were getting out of it all the time because I don't think if people weren't getting anything out of this, with the last however many months, no one would have stayed on (Quote from focus group)*

Furthermore, the women were looking forward to their families seeing them graduate from college and the majority had expressed an interest in progressing to the next level.



## 4.6 Conclusion

Supporting Travellers' access to higher education requires long-term policy change and commitment. Access and Participation and the Centre for Adult & Continuing Education in UCC recognises the importance of working in partnership with community organisations to deliver courses to under-represented groups in higher education. As O'Sullivan et al. (2017: 535) state, ACE 'is not the solution to inequality but it has the potential to be a key component in giving individuals and communities new voice, confidence and experiences to address the persistence of educational inequality that directly impacts them intergenerationally'.

This research highlights how manufactured affective narratives impact on Travellers' capabilities to access and participate in higher education. The 'othering' of Travellers in education policy has restricted their opportunity to fully engage with the system. For many of the participants, the legacy of assimilation policies negatively impacted on their opportunity to engage in the education system. As adult learners, the women on this course faced a number of issues associated with early school rejection such as lower literacy and digital skills. In addition, many of the women lacked the academic capital needed to navigate the hidden curriculum and demands of a university course. Ensuring that the necessary supports were in place was vital for the women's engagement and progression. The partnership approach undertaken in the Leadership in the Community initiative ensured that a number of supports and accommodations were made available to the women during the duration of the course. In addition, the reflective activation approach embedded in ACE, UCC and the workstreams of the SOAR project, ensured that issues of concern were addressed quickly and effectively throughout the initiative. The figure below captures the issues and concerns relating to Travellers women's engagement in adult education and the supports and accommodation implemented before or during the course. It also highlights gaps that need to be addressed at a governmental and institutional level.



Figure 7: Addressing inhibitors to higher education

### Identified inhibitors to higher education

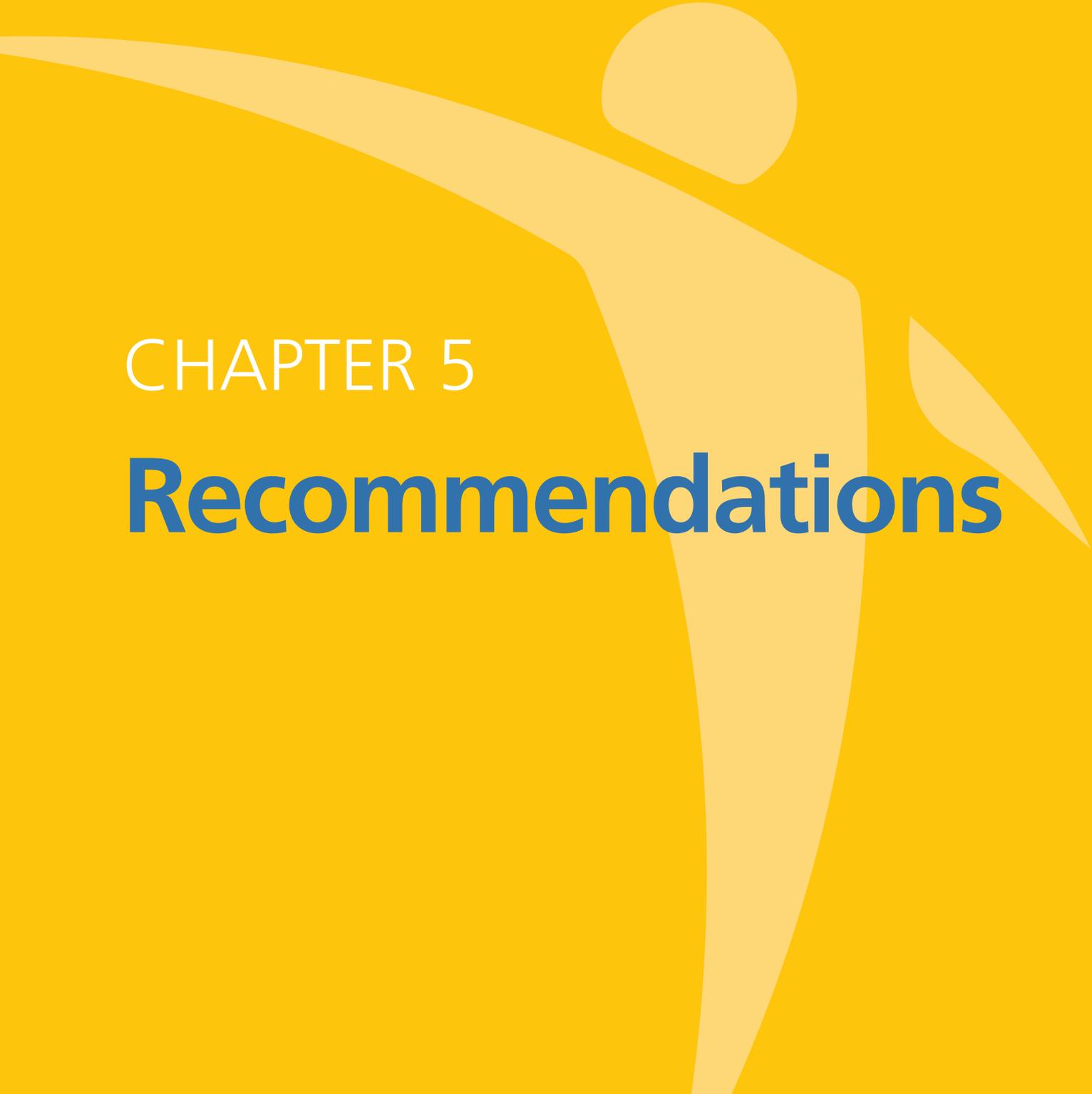
- Previous school experience
- Structural inequalities
- Concerns for safety due to experiences of racism and discrimination
- Literacy and digital skills
- Gender roles and childcare responsibilities
- Financial barriers
- Shame and misrecognition

### What was done

- Building a trusting relationship between Traveller organisations and the University
- Working in partnership to develop and deliver the course
- Providing Traveller Cultural Awareness Training for all staff supporting the initiative
- Providing predevelopment support for the Traveller women on the course
- Removing financial barriers and providing weekly payments to cover costs
- Running the course during school times
- Providing additional study support
- Providing a safe and supportive learning environment
- Having culturally appropriate assessments
- Supporting Student Assistance Fund applications
- Providing a workshop on Assistive Technology

### Issues that need to be addressed

- Adequate State funding needs to be provided for part-time learners to cover fees and maintenance
- IT grants or loans should be available to address the digital divide
- Additional predevelopment programmes are needed to support students 'college 'readiness'
- Ongoing support around students 'literacy and digital skill development is needed, including the use of assistive technology
- Traveller culture should be made visible on campus, including but not exclusively during events such as Equality Week and Traveller Pride

A large, stylized, light yellow silhouette of a human figure in a dynamic, balanced pose, possibly representing a dancer or a person in motion. The figure is positioned on the right side of the page, with its arms and legs extended. The background is a solid, bright yellow color.

CHAPTER 5

# Recommendations



## 5.1 Recommendations for Future Initiatives

The following section will discuss the recommendations that emerged from the focus groups with the Traveller women on the Leadership in the Community course and the interviews with stakeholders from UCC and the Traveller organisations. The research highlighted a number of good practices that should be replicated for future projects in UCC or other HEIs. Furthermore, the participants also identified a number of changes that should be in place to support Traveller women access and participate in adult education. Therefore, the recommendations below build on the models of good practice developed throughout this initiative and present changes that would support Travellers' access and participation in higher education.

### Recommendations for Government

- The Department of Education and Skills (DES) should provide a more sustainable grant system for all part-time students to remove barriers to higher education
- Government agencies should ensure a maintenance grant is provided for part-time learners. Removing the financial cost of participating in the course is essential to ensure Traveller women can access higher education
- As recommended by the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS), the Department of Justice and Equality should adequately fund Traveller organisations to carry out the additional workload required to support students' access and participation in higher education
- For the long-term sustainability of this initiative, the invisible work undertaken by the Traveller organisations needs to be recognised and resourced by State agencies
- Continuous financial support for the cohort of Traveller women on the Level 6/7 Leadership in the Community course to ensure they have the option of progressing further in higher education

### Recommendations for HEIs

- HEIs should recognise, acknowledge and look at ways of responding to the deep-rooted structural racism Travellers experience in the Irish education system and strive to make the wider campus more inclusive and supportive of Travellers' progression in higher education. Traveller culture should be visible on campus, including but not exclusively during events such as Equality Week and Traveller Pride
- HEIs should continue to work in partnership with Traveller organisations in developing and delivering initiatives to increase access and participation for Travellers. This model of community collaboration should not be confined to adult learners but replicated throughout the college
- HEIs and Traveller organisations should work in partnership to provide pre-entry programmes to support college 'readiness'



- Any course targeting Traveller women should be aware of their family obligation. For instance, classes should be scheduled during school times. Students should also be given enough time to drop-off and collect children
- Digital skill development should be incorporated into the programme learning outcomes of the course to support student engagement and enhance employability
- A system should be made available to allow students to obtain a laptop. This would support engagement and development of digital skills
- Ongoing support around the use of assistive technology should also be available. At all stages, empowering student learning should be at the heart of any intervention
- Continual reviews should be carried out by the HEI provider in partnership with Traveller organisations to gather feedback from the students and to implement change where appropriate
- Students should be made aware of funding grants and financial assistance available to them, and specific support is needed to enable and support students to access such funding
- HEIs should organise family events on the campus to help break down attitudinal barriers to education held by the Traveller community

### **Recommendations for Traveller Organisations**

- Traveller organisations should provide digital skill training as a predevelopment course to ensure students have the necessary digital skills to fully engage in higher education
- Traveller organisations should continue to provide additional study groups for students. Due to factors associated with early school leaving, providing additional academic support or tutorials is vital for breaking down barriers and supporting students to engage in higher education
- In partnership with the HEIs, Traveller organisations should make training available to the programme team to provide clear guidelines on delivering modules, assessment requirements, marking and supporting academic skill development
- Traveller organisations should provide Traveller Cultural Awareness Training for all programme team members. This should be financed by the HEIs
- Traveller organisations should employ graduates from the Level 6 Leadership in the Community course as mentors on the pre-entry programme to support future students on the Level 6 Leadership in the Community course



## 5.2 Key Learning for Access Practitioners

Gathering qualitative data on the impact of initiatives provides a unique insight into *why* certain initiatives work. This research identifies a number of principles of good practice that contributed to the success of this initiative.

- A needs analysis, conducted with key stakeholders in the community, should be used to inform the planning of all access initiatives
- An evaluation plan, informed by consultation with participants and stakeholders around culturally appropriate research methods, should be built into all access initiatives
- A model of good practice involving gathering feedback from participants on a staged basis is vital if challenges to progression are to be identified and addressed in a timely fashion
- A Cultural Awareness Analysis conducted with key stakeholders in communities should inform the development of a Traveller Cultural Awareness Inclusion and Training Plan to underpin all initiatives supporting Traveller access and participation in higher education

## 5.3 Concluding Remarks

This research aimed to capture the needs and experiences of the Traveller women participating in the initiative and to examine how higher education institutes can best meet the needs of this cohort of adult learners in the future. A clear set of recommendations has emerged from the research that should support further initiatives within the SOAR project and other HEIs. This research highlights the importance of developing strong partnerships between HEIs and Traveller organisations to ensure that Travellers' 'voice' is at the heart of developing and delivering Traveller-specific initiatives in higher education. Working in partnership is vital for ensuring the relevant and appropriate supports are made available throughout the educational journey.



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