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Initiatives for the Social Inclusion of "Non-Traditional" Library Users - The University of Limerick Experience"

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Abstract:

This paper describes a number of education and literacy initiatives currently underway at the University of Limerick and as initiated within the University of Limerick library to reach out to two small minorities in Ireland – Irish Travellers and the Roma Gypsies - who have traditionally been socially marginalised from "mainstream" education. Both groups exhibit a long tradition of their social marginalisation from the "mainstream" population and they score high on all indices of unemployment, poor health and child mortality. Since 2003, the University of Limerick has been in receipt of HEA (Higher Education Authority) funding for the Traveller/Roma Initiative Programme. This paper describes a range of innovative information access and literacy initiatives as implemented within UL Library and describes the setting-up of the Traveller-Roma Access Resource Centre.

Traveller and Roma Initiatives at the University of Limerick

Since 2003, the University of Limerick has been in receipt of HEA (Higher Education Authority) funding for the Traveller Initiative Programme. This initiative has been run through the Library and Information Services Division, the Department of History, the

Department of Business and the Irish World Music Centre. UL has shown great vision and initiative in leading the way in the study of Ireland's oldest minority group, a group of people who make up less than one per cent of the Irish population and about whose history, little is known. Irish Travellers number approximately 28,000 people in the Republic of Ireland and 1500 in Northern Ireland. There are also large Irish Traveller communities in Britain and North America. Their family structure, nomadism, employment patterns and language are all distinctive and have ensured their survival as a minority group on the margins of Irish mainstream society for generations. This paper describes a range of innovative information access and literacy initiatives as implemented within UL Library and describes the setting-up of the Traveller-Roma Access Resource Centre. This Centre located within UL Library includes a wide range of material relating to the history/culture of Travellers and Roma and includes books, prints, audio, multimedia, video and music materials. Information relating to information literacy and childrens literacy material has also been bought for the Centre which will serve the needs of both "settled" and Traveller students who attend the University of Limerick and use the Library here. The HEA Initiative has also funded the furnishing of this Centre. Funding from these Initiatives has also resulted in the publication of two books about the cultural history of the Travellers – details of which are available at:
<http://www.ul.ie/~library/publications.html>

The Indigenous Population of Non-Traditional Users that We Are Trying to Reach – What is Known About Irish Travellers

Irish Travellers are an indigenous minority or ethnic group who make up less than 1% of the population in Ireland. They number approximately 28,000 people in the Republic of Ireland and 1500 in Northern Ireland. There are also large Irish Traveller communities in Britain and North America. Their family structure, nomadism, employment patterns and language are all distinctive and have ensured their survival as a minority group on the margins of Irish mainstream society for generations. There is little information or research available on the question of Traveller origins and a range of theories have been put forward by scholars including the possibility that they are the descendants of travelling bards who were joined by families who "took to the road" because of eviction, war, famine and the social upheaval that was a consequence of colonisation. Some suggest that their culture may have originated in the 1600s with the break-up of the traditional feudal society that was prevalent in Gaelic Ireland then. It is no coincidence that many historical sources mention the appearance of Irish Travellers along with a range of other indigenous nomadic groups (including the Norwegian Resande and Swedish Tattare) at a similar historical juncture in European history which saw the splintering of the feudal way of life, the enclosure of land and the burgeoning of a very large migrant and nomadic population in many countries.

Travellers are synonymous with self-employment, occupational flexibility and nomadism. In the nineteenth century tinsmithing was a trade that was particularly associated with Travellers. This gave rise to the sobriquet "tinker" which is now often used only in a derogatory sense. Tinsmithing was only one trade that was synonymous with Travellers however. They are also horse-dealers and recyclers and are synonymous today with activities such as market trading, scrap collection, tarmacking, the resale of secondhand goods, tree-topping and landscaping. Historically, Travellers have been largely invisible among the Irish poor but their language, known as Cant or Gammon, shows evidence of bardic influences, indicating that some of their ancestors may have belonged to bardic families that played in a central role in Gaelic culture prior to the imposition of colonisation. The

fact that Travellers is how the group refers to themselves is indicative of the importance of travelling or nomadism in Traveller culture.

The New and "Immigrant" Population of Non-Traditional Users that We Are Trying to Reach – What is Known About the Roma Gypsies

The Roma (Gypsies) who are a 'new' immigrant community to Ireland number at least twelve million people and are located in many countries worldwide. They are one of the largest immigrant groups currently in Ireland. The success of UL's work on disadvantaged and "non-traditional" groups has led to external recognition and was cited as one of the reasons why UL scored very highly as a University in the last Sunday Times review of Irish Universities. It is part of the Government's remit for education to reach out to groups who have been traditionally disadvantaged. Like the Irish Traveller community the Roma, with whom Irish Travellers share a similar (previously nomadic) history and many similar cultural tenets, are acknowledged to score high on all indices of disadvantage in the areas of health, employment and education. Limerick has one of the largest Traveller and Roma populations in the Irish Republic, many of whom live in areas of high unemployment and social disadvantage. It is acknowledged that the break-up of the former Eastern bloc and ethnic tensions in the Balkans have contributed to increased persecution of Roma in these countries, a factor which has encouraged their migration in greater numbers into Western Europe. The Roma are an ethnic minority distinguished by Rom blood and the Romani, or Romanes language. The Roma or Romani people have been known by many names including Gypsies (or Gipsies), Tsigani, Tzigane, Cigano, Zigeuner, and others. Most Roma have always referred to themselves by their tribal names, or as Rom or Roma, meaning "Man" or "People." The Roma have included many different groups of people from the very beginning, and have absorbed outsiders into their culture throughout their history. Because they arrived in Europe from the East, the first Europeans assumed that they came from Turkey, Nubia, Egypt, or any number of vaguely acknowledged non-European places, and they were called, among other things, Egyptians or 'Gyptians, which is where the word "Gypsy" originates from. There are four Rom "tribes", or nations (natsiya), of Roma: the Kalderash, the Machavaya, the Lovari, and the Churari. Other groups include the Romanichal, the Gitanoes (Calé), the Sinti, the Rudari, the Manush, the Boyash, the Ungaritzza, the Luri, the Bashaldé, the Romungro, and the Xoraxai. There have been several great migrations, or diaspora, in Romani history. The first was the initial dispersal from India about a thousand years ago. Some scholars suggest there may have been several migrations from India. No one knows for certain why the original Roma began their great wandering from India to Europe and beyond, but they have dispersed worldwide, despite persecution and oppression through the centuries. The second great migration, known as the Aresajipe, was from southwest Asia into Europe in the 14th century. In Europe, Roma were either kept in slavery in the Balkans (in territory that is today Romania), or else were able to move on into the rest of the continent, reaching every northern and western country by about 1500. In the course of time, as a result of having interacted with various European populations, and being fragmented into widely-separated groups, Roma have emerged as a collection of distinct ethnic groups within the larger whole. The third great migration of Roma was from Europe to the Americas in the 19th and early 20th centuries after the abolition of Romani slavery in Europe in 1856-1864. Some scholars contend there is a great migration occurring today since the fall of the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe. The Romani language is of Indo-Aryan origin and has many spoken dialects, but the root language is ancient Punjabi, or Hindi. The spoken Romani language is varied, but all dialects contain some common words in use by all Roma. There have been many large-scale, state-sponsored persecutions or pogroms, against the Roma throughout European history. The Nazi terror of World

War II is the most infamous and is responsible for the deaths of up to 1.5 million Roma in the Porrajmos (Holocaust). The recent collapse of the communist governments of Eastern Europe have rekindled anti-Roma sentiment in Eastern and Western Europe. Violent attacks against Romani immigrants and refugees have been permitted to occur with little or no restraint from government authorities. The Romani people remain one of the least integrated and most persecuted peoples in Europe. Almost everywhere, their fundamental civil rights are threatened. Racist violence targeting Roma is on the rise after the fall of Communism. Discrimination against Roma in employment, education, health care, administrative and other services is observed in most societies and hate speech against them deepens the negative anti-Roma stereotypes which are typical of European public opinion.

Traveller/Roma Resource Collection

UL library was successful in accessing funding from the HEA to create a Traveller/Roma centre within the library which is due to be officially launched in May, 2005. This Collection is the first Collection in Ireland relating to the history of the Travellers and the Roma. It includes a wide range of material relating to the history/culture of Travellers and Roma and includes books, prints, audio, multimedia, video and music materials as well as furniture and computer equipment. Financial backing for this venture has been provided by John Heneghan, Kemmy Business School who is the Coordinator of the HEA Traveller Access Initiative at UL. Dr. Bernadette Whelan of the UL History Department has also been involved in the purchase of scholarly resources for this Collection. The Collection is intended as a resource for both Traveller/Roma students and UL students generally. In addition to historical/cultural material the Collection also includes children's material and literacy material which is available to the Traveller students who are attending UL and their families. Details of the Collection can be accessed on the UL Library's web pages at: <http://www.ul.ie/~library/travellers/> or by contacting the Project Manager, Mícheál Ó hAodha at 061-202668 or micheal.ohaodha@ul.ie

The educational and cultural remit of this Collection are as follows:

Continual development and acquisition of resources such as videos, books and journals to form as comprehensive a collection as possible of material relating to the history and culture of both the Irish Traveller and the Roma (Gypsy) communities. This Collection would help to enhance the educational experience of Travellers and create a supportive environment for them within the University.

Acquire resources of particular relevance to Traveller/Gypsy education, literacy skills, the education of children in the home, special needs etc.

Acquire "popular reading" material for children so that the Collection can be an educational and literacy tool for Traveller women and their children.

Ensure the acquisition of research material that is "culturally-sensitive" to the particular needs of the Traveller/Gypsy community by consulting with Travellers/Gypsies on the acquisition of various materials.

Expand the Collections to build its breadth and range of formats (books, cds, dvds in areas such as Migration Studies, Ethnicity Studies, Roma, Fairground Travellers, Circus Community etc.

Assist Travellers in the use of the library facilities – organise small groups of Travellers to visit the library on a regular basis so that they might become familiar

with the environment of the library and aware of the many research facilities on offer there.

Make links with the relevant bodies in the University (i.e. the Access Office) and in Limerick city who are already doing outreach work to the Traveller/Roma communities. Groups included in this remit would be the Limerick Traveller Development Group, Doras, Paul Partnership etc. Visit these groups with a view to publicising the Collection and give talks outlining the richness of the material available in the Collection

Assist Travellers in enhancing their awareness of the Traveller Collection and ensure in as far as possible that the Collection serves the needs of both literate and illiterate Travellers.

Ensure that the Collection is a stepping-stone that will facilitate learning and research on the Traveller/Gypsy communities by both Travellers and “settled” people.

Ensure that the Collection remains correctly “housed” in the library so that the Traveller Collection can become a focal point within the Library.

Arrange the sourcing and purchase of all material pertaining to the Traveller Collection. Search bibliographies, make out order forms, monitor expenditure. Ensure that material acquired is bound and catalogued according to the correct bibliographic standards. Arrange for the acquisition of a permanent space in the library – including an exhibition space – where the Collection can be housed.

Tranches of funding allocated in future years may be used to explore the following possibilities:

Continue the updating of the website to promote the Collection and Archive.

Promotion of the Collection outside the University – travel to Traveller development groups, schools, conferences to promote the Collection, the first of its kind in any Irish University.

Promote the Collection within the University amongst Faculty and students.

Investigate the possibilities for the establishment of an archival project whereby a vast collection of archival material (Mícheál’s Collection) including newspaper cuttings, photos, tapes etc. (about 80,000 items in total) pertaining to Travellers and their culture would be made available to researchers on a searchable bibliographic database. This database could be then be searched using such criteria as author, title, research topic, notes field etc.

Investigate the possibilities for a joint catalogue or “virtual” collection with other Universities with specialist collections in this area either within Ireland or abroad.

Enhance links with other similar resource collections and investigate increased possibilities for collaboration – throughout Europe – e.g. In Northern Ireland – i.e. University of Jordanstown; In the UK e.g. University of Liverpool Gypsy Collections and in the Asia - Mudra Institute, Ahmedabad, India and the U.S.

Information on some recent research publications based on the resources of this Collection can be accessed at: <http://www.ul.ie/~library/publications.html>

The University of Limerick Library's Traveller/Roma Collections were also used in a research capacity in a recent documentary film about the language of the Irish Travellers, known as Cant or Gammon – about which little is known. Further information on this film can be accessed at:

<http://www.ul.ie/~library/film.html>

The NOMAD Project

Nomad is a very successful project coordinated by the Irish World Music Centre, University of Limerick. For the past four years Nomad has recorded and promoted many aspects of the Traveller music and singing traditions, produced cds and organised concerts of Traveller culture. For the past number of years the University of Limerick has had a number of Traveller musicians including Johnny Keenan and Pecker Dunne as artists-in-residence. It has also produced cds of such highly-regarded musicians as Pecker Dunne, the Keenan Sisters, Mickey Dunne and recorded concerts of Traveller music with musicians such as the Dunne family, Finbar Furey Teresa O'Reilly, Bridget Casey. Further information at:

http://www.ul.ie/~iwmc/ens_pro/ or by contacting Kirsten Alstaff at Kirsten.alstaff@ul.ie

Encouraging Access in UL Library

The University of Limerick is has gained a particular reputation for its innovative approaches to Access issues for students from “non-traditional” or marginalized backgrounds. In order to facilitate this process of social inclusion the Access Office has introduced a direct entry policy for students from backgrounds that are under-represented at the University. In order to do this it is necessary to complete the UL Access Course. The entry requirements for this course are available by contacting John McDermott (john.mcdermott@ul.ie) or Paula Fitzell (paula.fitzell@ul.ie) at: 061-213104.

Each year the Access office organises regular Information tours at UL Library for secondary school from “disadvantaged” areas of Limerick city in order that these students can become more familiar with the UL campus and feel more comfortable in an educational setting.

Other Projects for the Inclusion of “Non-Traditional” Students at UL Library – Disability Services at the University of Limerick Library

The University of Limerick Library is home to a specialist unit known as Disability Services. This unit employs eight members of staff and is supports the research and developmental needs of those students with disabilities who are currently studying at the University of Limerick. A particular focus is technological development in the area of Disability. Staff at the unit are currently working on a major project incorporating the conversion of text-to-audio for visually-impaired students. Further information on the range of Disability Services at UL can be accessed at: <http://www.ul.ie/~inclusion/> or by telephoning – 061-202346. Derek Spaight (Disability Officer, UL) and Mícheál Ó hAodha, (Librarian Informatics, UL) recently cooperated on a disability awareness audit of the University of Limerick's buildings and campus. Further information on this report from derek.spaight@ul.ie or micheal.ohaodha@ul.ie

Organisations which deliver a recruitment service and provide details on potential employees from among people with disabilities in Ireland and Britain include the following:

www.accessability.ie

www.fas.ie/disability/Vacancies.htm

www.readywillingable.net

<http://www.opportunities.org.uk/>