

'We have a very middle-class teaching profession here'

It now takes up to six years to qualify as a second-level teacher, and with few financial supports, candidates who don't have independent means are finding it hard to get a foot in the door. Jess Casey, Education Correspondent, reports



The path to becoming a secondary school teacher can be six years, when the two-year master's is added to a primary degree.

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JESS CASEY, EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

"I am constantly worried about being in huge debt after the professional master's in education (PME) and whether I will be able to pay it back. Having to take out such a big loan is financially crippling."

That's how one student described to researchers the financial stress of teacher training.

Dr Mark Prendergast, University College Cork (UCC), and Dr Melanie Ní Dhuinn and Dr Andrew Loxley, Trinity College Dublin, studied how money worries were impacting teacher training.

"Both Melanie and I were co-directing the PME programme in Trinity," Mr Prendergast said.

"It was part of our everyday job, dealing with students who were coming to us who were financially stressed." Students had lots of issues, including having to work long hours and having difficulties affording the course.

"Those were issues that we had to deal with on a daily basis."

Students were not only concerned about their finances, but also requested extensions for submitting coursework.

"They weren't making their deadlines, so their modules weren't being completed on time," Ms Ní Dhuinn said.



Researcher: Dr Melanie Ni Dhuinn.

"Some of them then found themselves in a situation where they were at resit stage, so it was prolonging the length of time it was actually taking a lot of them to get their stuff in, and, ultimately, prolonging the course."

"They were financially stressed at the same time, so it was kind of like a 'fáinne fí', a vicious circle," Ms Ní Dhuinn said.

Money is quantifiable, something that can be measured. "But the student mental-health aspect to this was quite profound as well," Ms Ní Dhuinn said.

There are costs associated with all third-level education, but teacher-training students face a particular set of expenses.

These are particularly high for the professional master's of education (PME), which is required for anyone wishing to teach in a post-primary school.

With fees varying up to €16,000 depending on the college, the two-year PME course was introduced in 2014.

Students are also expected to complete between 100 and 200 hours of teaching, or 20 weeks over the two years.

Students aren't paid for the hours they do as part of their school placement. The vast majority will do extra subbing hours, but there isn't always a guarantee they will be paid.

These placements have hidden costs, with some students required to pay both accommodation costs at their college, and near the school, as well as travel expenses, and the associated costs of printing and sourcing teaching materials and resources.

The researchers surveyed 400 PME students. The teachers who took part had weekly expenses, including accommodation, teaching materials, and transport and accommodation fees, working out at roughly €423.

Like many students do, they worked outside of their studies to cover their bills, which, for most, meant working as substitute teachers.

Many also worked outside of schools, mainly in hospitality.

But when the researchers looked at the group's average weekly income versus their expenditure, students had a weekly deficit of €151 during the two-year programme.

In the pandemic, schools did timetable and pay student teachers who were doing placement for additional classes.

"We know that there was a mechanism there, albeit that it was within an emergency measure, but it did happen and it was a huge financial help to student teachers," Ms Ní Dhuinn said.

"In essence, it's a six-year route to becoming a post-primary teacher," Mr Prendergast said.

"The majority of these are students who have spent four years in college on a specific subject, enrolling for a further two years."

"The majority are coming directly from their undergraduate degree, and have very little savings built up."

"In a way, their profile might be different to other master's students, who might work for a couple of years, build up experience, build up their finances, and then come back." Six of the PME students were living in hostels.



Reasearcher: Mark Prendergast.

"We couldn't delve into that further, so we don't know if it was just while they were on the college element or while they were on school placement," Mr Prendergast said.

"But to think of someone having to live in a hostel and get up every morning and go into school and teach: That was the finding that shocked me most; we weren't expecting it."

The missing cohort

The financially stressed student teachers are the visible face of the high costs associated with the master's. The invisible faces are those who cannot even enrol, and may have been lost to the profession, irrespective of their ability.

"There is a serious lack of diversity in the profession," Ms Ní Dhuinn said. "It's not just socio-economic-type diversity or gender or racial diversity: It's across the board."

"At postgraduate level, there's little to nothing in terms of financial support. So, if you come from any kind of disadvantaged or minority background, the likelihood is that there will be some intersectionality there, and the money end of it tends to cut in. There's really very little available for them. For those who do make it in, the level of attrition can then be quite high."

"It's probably the single-biggest implication," Ms Ní Dhuinn said. "We have a very middle-class teaching profession here as a result, relative to other jurisdictions. There are diversity issues everywhere, but they seem to be particularly bad here, and not just socio-economically."

Dr Rory McDaid is a lecturer in education, and the co-ordinator of the Migrant Teacher Project, part of the Marino Institute of Education, which supports immigrant, internationally educated teachers to enter the workforce here.

He said there can be substantial financial costs associated with becoming a teacher, which act as a barrier for people from non-traditional backgrounds.

"The move to a two-year PME has been very welcome for many reasons, but it does have a significant impact on people," Mr McDaid said.

Students leaving college with a four-year undergraduate degree, and likely student loans, required to complete another two years of a post-grad in order to start work and getting just three or four hours a week will likely "vote with their feet and think 'not for me'," Mr McDaid said.

"Six years is a long time to invest in a career, and it does have an impact, especially when people are renting, as well."

Migrant teachers make up a tiny fraction of the professional workforce here. Are finances a barrier?

"It's very hard to get an absolute picture," Mr McDaid said. "They are such a complex body of people. There is not one migrant teacher."

"Absolutely, for some, there are financial barriers. For others, it's much more about their qualifications not matching what is possible here."

For example, an English-language teacher from Argentina will be qualified to teach from primary school into secondary school, a system we don't have here.

Some migrant teachers may have trained specifically in special education, another system that doesn't translate directly into the set-up here.

"But, yes, there are certainly financial impediments," Mr McDaid said. "Some of them are about sourcing the documentation required for registration with the Teaching Council."

"It might be the cost of having to do particular courses. Any primary teacher who qualified outside of the State will have to fulfil the Irish-language requirement, and that can be quite expensive." There isn't an average cost for this.

"The journey is different for different people, in terms of how much they will have to pay for different grinds, or different courses. They will have to spend time in the Gaeltacht. It's not just the cost of doing it, it's the cost of not working while they are doing it." The biggest financial barrier isn't one that people necessarily have to pay out on, Mr McDaid said.

Those who come through the Irish education system know that the rite of passage to getting a job in a secondary school involves subbing, taking days here and there to get their foot in the door, in the hopes they will get lucky in a couple of years and get a permanent contract.

"That is how people get into post-primary teaching here, if they are not in a subject that is in high demand, like a maths teacher might be more lucky, or a physics teacher," Mr McDaid said

"If I am a migrant with two kids, and a stable job, who has moved here for economics, who is a qualified teacher, but has those caring responsibilities and maybe is sending money home as well, it's a big gamble to stop working to take a few hours subbing in a school in the hopes I may get in later on. That gamble proves too big."

“That’s a really tricky one to fix, and a really tricky one even to write up,” Mr McDaid said. “How do you get around it? What are the solutions to it? It’s more systemic, about how we actually employ teachers in schools rather than on piecemeal hours and part-time work. We need to make full-time positions available.”

"We're finding that more and more. Even as people get registered and are available for work, taking the chance, if they have stable work, to get back into the profession is a big barrier."

And while there are big barriers in terms of finances, it’s not just that. "We are finding people who are very well qualified who are just not getting interviews."

The Migrant Teacher Project has been focusing on the need to get migrant teachers to spend time in schools here to develop links with an Irish principal or deputy principal to act as a reference for them.

"It's one thing to open the door, it's also about staying in," Mr McDaid said. "The retention rates generally are lower for ethnic minorities, and progression rates into management are lower, too." Barriers aren't solely financial, as there are also massive systematic and cultural obstacles that make the profession tricky to enter if you are anyway outside the fold.

"There are barriers when it comes to cost, absolutely, but the problem with saying that that's the issue is that if that was fixed, that's not going to substantially change the lack of migrant teachers in the system, because there are so many other barriers," Mr McDaid said.

It's a sentiment shared by Dr Gareth Burns and Dr Jerry O’Neill, of Turn To Teaching, a programme at Maynooth University working to diversify access to careers in education.

It offers a one-year university preparation course for people who have an interest in teaching as a career.

A key component of this course is creating a space for students to think critically about their own experiences and ask; Who is a teacher, and what makes a good teacher?

"There are a lot of conversations around, 'What is a teacher?', 'Who is it?', 'What do you think of when you think of a secondary or a primary school teacher?'," Mr O'Neill said.

The cost of obtaining a postgraduate degree in teaching is quite substantial, Mr Burns said. "We have been advocating around increasing those supports in relation to SUSI." Research in Galway showed that the year before the post-graduate PME moved from an 18-month to a two-year course, there was an increase in applicants from underrepresented backgrounds.

"They saw it as a 'last-chance saloon'," Mr Burns said. "When the new programme settled down, there was a decrease in applicants coming from those groups and an increase in applicants coming from the higher socio-economic grouping." Money means time. "[It gives people] time to invest in their education and gives them space and time. That is a kind of power, you know, and it does enable people to move through the system."

But finances are not the only barrier.

"I think it's that intertwine: There's obviously financial and economic spaces, there are structural issues around access to the profession, and not just in, but through and beyond," Mr Burns said.

"Then, there are these more subtle cultural spaces, which is what we are intimating about, where we're opening up these honest and open conversations for people, irrespective of backgrounds, to really think about who a teacher is, what makes a good teacher, which brings into the conversation assumptions that we all carry."

Mr O'Neill said: "Some of the more high-status degrees, if you like, in general, that require that full-time commitment, presume a kind of young school leaver who's financially secure enough."

"I think a lot of university courses are predicated around that notion of an imagined student that has a certain kind of privilege of time and money."

"Even with the undergraduate [teaching] course, it is very full-time. The B-Ed is a very full-time course, and a lot of students have to work to sustain themselves through college."

"There's a hidden barrier there, there is limited capacity for people to work and do a full-time primary degree. If people do need to work, it has an impact on how people are getting on." A review is under way, which they have been involved in.

"Funding has traditionally been given for full-time courses. There is a real need there, to work for a more diverse student body, for part-time courses. Part-time teacher training really doesn't exist," Mr O'Neill said.

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Primary pupils will not be required to use antigen tests before attending school "There is a real need in a growing sense that part-time work is part of the work in diversifying teacher-training." One of the motivations for people to become a teacher is security, which you almost are not allowed to say. "It's traditionally seen as a good job, a good, secure job."

"It's almost seen as a bit crass to say that. It's important to have an ethical orientation, but it's also okay to say, 'It's a secure job'."

"If you are coming from a community or a context where good jobs are hard to find, it's a worthy thing to aspire to," Mr Burns said. While primary school teaching is still secure, secondary school teaching has shifted, and further education is more precarious again.

"There is work to be done, in terms of equalising the professional pathways for people wherever they would like to end up." Another way to diversify the profession would be to provide alternatives to the Leaving Cert, Mr Burns said.

"A diversification of different routes, moving away just from the Leaving Cert. I think further education could become a space for diverse, different educational experiences, and I think it's an area that is going to grow."

For Mr Prendergast and Ms Ní Dhuinn, there is agreement about the quality of the two-year PME.

"There's huge advantages, which we can see in the quality of, you know, our graduates," Mr Prendergast said. "It's excellent. It's really improved and the

extended school placement is excellent for their experience and there's some brilliant work being done there with the research elements.”

"But we borrowed that policy from Finland and other countries that moved [teacher-training towards master's degrees]. But what we didn't look at: If you look at Finland, becoming a teacher there is completely covered by the government."

"It's a highly selective process, but once students get in, all their costs are covered. So we made the course from 12 to 24 months and doubled the cost." Ways of addressing this could come via a contribution towards students' material costs and costs of school placements. It's also something that SUSI could contribute towards.

There could also be better resourcing of teacher training, providing more lecturers to work with and support students.

Schools that accept students on placement should also get as much credit as possible, Ms Ní Dhuinn said.

"Without them, there would be no placement possible." In other jurisdictions, schools are reimbursed and resourced for providing placement opportunities, but in Ireland, it is on the basis of goodwill.

It is something that the Department of Education should be provided to schools by way of resourcing, Ms Ní Dhuinn said.

"Even a block of time for co-operating teachers to meet student teachers would be a start. Currently, that is all done on teachers' own time and there is no way of ensuring consistent mentoring or support is, therefore, provided to all student teachers, through no fault of the co-operating teachers." While the will and ambition exist to provide top-quality, initial teacher education, both at primary and post-primary, this is not matched by investment or resourcing by the Government, Ms Ní Dhuinn said.

"One of the unintended consequences of this is that lots of student teachers are impacted adversely, both financially and through their mental health, which is undesirable and unhelpful." A spokesman for the Department of Education said a campaign has been ongoing since late 2018 to promote the teaching profession.

"In recent times, the campaign was further developed to successfully raise awareness of diversity and inclusion in the teaching profession." The most recent campaign communicates the need for diversity in the teaching profession and aims to promote teaching to a broader range of students.

The numbers

A spokesman for the Department of Further Education said the €40.4m Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) supports access to initial teacher education, bursaries for students, and regional clusters of higher-education institutions.

In line with the Programme for Government commitment to address the gap in postgraduate grants, from September 2021 the postgraduate fee grant will increase from €2,000 to €3,500.

"This increase will allay some of the costs for postgraduate study and will give greater certainty for students in terms of supports." In addition, the fee-grant income threshold will increase from €31,500 to €54,240 from September 2021.

Postgraduate students who qualify for the special rate of grant under the Student Grant Scheme are eligible for a maintenance grant of up to €5,915, the spokesperson added.

The income threshold for this grant for the 2020/21 academic year is €24,500. Qualifying postgraduate students may also be eligible to have their tuition fees paid up to a maximum fee limit of €6,270.

Under the Student Grant Scheme 2021, a student in receipt of a postgraduate research award where the stipend portion of the award does not exceed €18,500 may apply to SUSI.

How much does the master's cost?

- UCC: €11,060
- DCU: €9,700
- TCD: €12,755

- NUIG: €11,232
- Maynooth: €12,000
- Hibernia: €14,000
- UL: €11,720
- EU student fees