

Diversity and the Teaching Profession

Migrant teachers' perspectives and expertise will benefit our education system for many years to come



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Introduction

In August 2021, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) reported that the population of Ireland tipped over 5 million at the end of April 2021. It was the highest recorded population since the 1851 census and the first time it had surpassed 5 million since the aftermath of the Famine. This milestone was reached by a combination of net migration and natural increase.

Six million people left Ireland between 1841 and 1900. By 1901, Ireland's population had been cut in half, to just 4.4 million. Further mass emigration followed in the 1950s and 1980s. Yet despite this long history of emigration, there continues to be a slow official response to immigration. According to the CSO, 87.1% of the people who now live in Ireland are Irish nationals; the remaining 12.9% are non-Irish nationals.

Migration is part of who and what we are

Migration, whether forced or chosen, is part of the world in which we live. Most recently we witnessed harrowing scenes from Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, while inflatable rafts drifting from North Africa towards Europe are unfortunately commonplace. It is estimated that more than 300 million international migrants are currently on the move.

Despite the horrors to which we are becoming dangerously desensitised, most migrants leave their home countries for reasons of work. We cannot deny that millions have been driven from their homes by conflict, violence, and climate change, but labour mobility is increasing both across Europe and globally. This is matched by mobility in the teaching profession and is as true for Ireland as anywhere else.

Absolute numbers are not currently available, but data gathered by the Migrant Teacher Project at Marino Institute of Education indicates there are at least 2,000 people in Ireland who have identified themselves as migrant teachers – that

is, they believe they have qualified-teacher status from the country where they received their qualifications, are now living in Ireland, and want to join the teaching profession here.

It is reasonable to assume there are many more migrant teachers who have not yet engaged with the project or are unaware of the work we do. But in a time of teacher shortage, it is worth drawing attention to this rich and diverse group of teachers in Ireland who are not contributing, in the way they want to, to the country they now call home.

Diversity in the teaching profession

There are 65,815 teachers in Ireland: 28,474 primary and 37,341 post-primary. This represents an increase of around 13% in the last seven years. There are over a million children in school – 567,772 in primary, 362,899 in post-primary, and 108,188 in preschool – and about 1.3 million students if higher education is included. About 10% of these are from ethnic minorities.

Despite the demographic change in Irish classrooms and lecture halls, the teaching profession remains fairly homogenous and dominated by WHISCs: White, Heterosexual, Irish-born, Settled Catholics (a useful acronym developed by Marshall Tracy in his MPhil dissertation at Trinity College Dublin more than 20 years ago). Later research by Elaine Keane and Manuela Heinz of NUI Galway in 2015 indicates that this homogeneity is not changing through Initial Teacher Education (ITE), despite the changes in Irish society.

Walking around the campus of any teacher-education institute today would support this and would seem to confirm the suspicion that migrant teachers are not entering the system quickly enough and that students from ethnic minorities are not entering the teaching profession either. It could be argued, then, that minority ethnic children do not see teachers who look like themselves in Irish schools, and by extension they do not have the role models to inspire them into the profession.

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Recognising international qualifications

Under EU Directive 2005/36/EC, teachers who have fully qualified outside of Ireland are eligible to apply for registration with the Teaching Council. The Council will register teachers, whether from within or outside the EU, who have already obtained qualified teacher status – that is, that they are fully qualified at primary or post-primary level in the country in which they completed their ITE qualification, and have completed any period of statutory post-qualification induction or probation.

The Teaching Council will request documentation: transcripts, module descriptors, course handbooks, and so on, along with official letters from the relevant teacher registration body, competent authority, or Ministry of Education, confirming recognition as a fully qualified teacher in the particular State or country. The Council will then assess the qualifications to see if they are in line with standards in the Irish system. If they are, the

teacher will be registered. More often than not, however, the Council may identify conditions or qualification shortfalls to be addressed.

For example, overseas-qualified primary school teachers are required to reach a certain standard in the Irish language, while both primary and post-primary teachers are required to complete an exam in the history and structure of the Irish education system before being fully registered. When registered this way, with such conditions, a teacher is then given time, usually three years, to address any shortfalls identified. During this time, it is possible for the teacher to work as a teacher in a recognised school.

Barriers to entry

Despite this seemingly straightforward process, many migrant teachers identify barriers to entry into the Irish teaching workforce. Despite efforts by the Teaching Council, many perceive the registration process as one of the most challenging barriers. This is not helped by negative discourse around registration, which can discourage migrant teachers from even engaging with it in the first place. But when the process is unpacked a little, what are identified as 'barriers' created by the Teaching Council are more nuanced and can be more about a mismatch between qualifications held and qualifications required, rather than an institutional refusal to accept certain qualifications.

Another issue is around what can seem like endless back and forth between the applicant and the Teaching Council, with request after request for more documentation. Again, when unpacked, it is often not fully clear to applicants that they must have all their documents gathered and translated before commencing the process. If an application is made with only some of the required documentation, the Council will make further requests, and this can seriously slow things down.

The Council's recent announcement of a 'new and enhanced MyRegistration portal' is welcome. It is hoped this will bring enhanced services and greater convenience for registered teachers, who will be able to access and manage registration information online rather than a 'download and fill out' arrangement. Hopefully it will improve online submission, with the ability to upload documents with a real-time response. This would reduce the unknown element of what is currently, for many migrant teachers, a blind submission of what they hope are the correct documents.

This being said, the language used on the Teaching Council website does not help: it can be quite technical and specific to an Irish understanding of teacher education. It would be important for the revised portal to take cognisance of that. Confusion certainly arises in distinguishing between transcripts, modular descriptors, and course handbooks, for example. This can be further confounded when the institution that issued the original qualification does not use the same vocabulary.

In an attempt to remove these obstacles, the Migrant Teacher Project is working closely with the Teaching Council to establish a glossary of terms identified as problematic. This will then be publicised by both the Council and the Migrant Teacher Project. The voice of migrant teachers will be important to get this right.

Accessing documentation from outside Ireland

It is unhelpful to assume that accessing documentation from qualifying institutions outside of Ireland is always straightforward. At a basic level, there can be difficulties in contacting the institution or the right person there – central administration blocks with integrated IT are not always commonplace. Some institutions no longer exist or have amalgamated, changed name, changed status, or variations on that theme.

This is a particular though not unique challenge for teachers coming from certain war-torn or conflict countries; it can also be an issue for Eastern European teachers and has been one for some EU citizens. The challenge can be amplified if the teacher qualified some time ago, when record-keeping may have been very different.

In some cases it is simply not possible to obtain the necessary documentation, and the Teaching Council reserves the right to use an affidavit in such circumstances. While this must be reserved as a last resort, it is important that the pathway to the affidavit be made clear to the migrant teacher early in the registration journey, so that they fully understand that if all else fails, they have a further option than to simply give up; unfortunately many do.

Conditional registration

When conditional registration is granted, it is possible for the teacher to teach in a recognised school, as they will have a Teaching Council number and are effectively registered, albeit with qualification shortfalls. They will typically have three years to complete these. Understanding how to complete shortfalls is often less than clear, however, because the Council does not draw a line between the shortfall, the ITE courses in which this shortfall can be found, and the institutes where this can be done. Typically, the shortfall is identified and a list of potential ITE institutions is given. A lot of additional research is then needed, and this can be a daunting prospect for many.

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Céim, the Standards for Initial Teacher Education, sets out the requirements that all programmes of qualification for teaching in Ireland must meet to gain accreditation from the Teaching Council. It is hoped this will streamline the process, so that teachers with qualification shortfalls can more easily navigate this environment. Again, the Migrant Teacher Project is actively involved in discussions on this and intends to develop a user-friendly resource in association with the Teaching Council to help migrant teachers find the courses they need.

Being a teacher in Ireland

Many migrant teachers find it difficult to navigate the many nuances of teacher recruitment: the acronyms, the structure and layout of the job advertisement, the application form versus CV, the autonomous nature of schools, the role that religion might play, and so on. Initial research done by the Migrant Teacher Project indicated, perhaps not too surprisingly, that ‘who you know’ rather than ‘what you know’ may be the final arbiter in deciding who gets a particular job.

The Migrant Teacher Project aims to increase migrant teachers' participation in Irish primary and post-primary schools. The project was established by Marino Institute of Education and co-financed by the European Commission under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2014–2020, through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and by the Department of Education. It provides information, advice, training, and support to migrant teachers who have qualified outside of Ireland, to help them continue their profession in Ireland.

As part of this, we have devised a bridging programme called 'Being a Teacher in Ireland'. This part-time course is separate from the Teaching Council registration process. It is aimed at migrant teachers who have already completed, or nearly completed, registration, and it does not aim to address any particular 'shortfalls' identified for individuals. Instead it gives participants an opportunity to supplement their qualifications with local knowledge and peer supports, and to spend time in an Irish school setting and begin building their own professional networks.

Conclusion

One important goal of diversity is to create a culture where individual differences are respected and all are treated equally and receive the same opportunities for growth and progression. Diversity in our society, our workforce, and the teaching profession makes for a diverse array of talent, perspective, and standpoint. In a recent Forbes survey, more than half of companies with more than \$10bn in annual revenue strongly agreed that diversity helps drive innovation: people with different experiences bring those experiences and perspectives with them.

Migrant teachers present a variety of great opportunities for schools and students in Ireland. As well as their considerable qualifications, they bring a new dimension to classrooms, with a diversity of perspectives and expertise that will benefit our children and our education system for many years to come. Research shows there are huge benefits to having a diverse teaching population – not just for children from minority backgrounds, but for all children, and for all schools.

Through our bridging programme and other activities, the Migrant Teacher Project has worked with hundreds of migrant teachers and schools to help those teachers continue their teaching journey in Ireland. In further developing this work, the project has launched a formal school network. This will support migrant teachers as they seek school experience and employment, and it will support schools as they both support the migrant teachers and challenge the prevailing cultural barriers those teachers experience.

Support and training will be offered to these schools as they become key advocates in the system, promoting the benefits of integrating and including migrant teachers in the Irish teaching workforce. For more information on the Migrant Teacher Project, or to be part of this change leadership, go to: www.mie.ie/en/research/research_projects/migrant_teacher_project/.