

TOBAR: One Project's Role in Supporting Traveller Communities to and through Initial Teacher Education

Addressing Irish Traveller representation in the teaching profession

This article presents an overview of TOBAR, a shared project between Marino Institute of Education and Trinity College Dublin that supports Irish Travellers to and through initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. TOBAR was a response to the Higher Education Authority's PATH 1 initiative, aiming to begin to address the lack of Irish Traveller representation in ITE and the teaching profession.



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Introduction

Dating back to the 12th century, the Traveller community in Ireland were described as follows: 'the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and by others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland' (Giraldus & Dimock, 1867).

Irish Travellers were officially recognised by the Irish State as an indigenous ethnic minority in March 2017. The census of 2022 indicates there are approximately 32,949 members of the community in the Republic of Ireland (CSO, 2022). Despite their long-standing historical presence in Ireland, the Traveller community faces inequality, discrimination, and marginalisation in society. In education, barriers are visible from early childhood through to further and higher education (Colum & Collins, 2021).

PATH initiative

In response to the challenges and barriers faced by underserved and underrepresented groups in education, the Irish government, in collaboration with key stakeholders, created targeted initiatives aimed at widening participation in further and higher education.

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) initiative, a fund established by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2017 and overseen by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), set out to address challenges and provide higher education opportunities for all. PATH 1, strand 1, centred on supporting students from underrepresented groups in accessing initial teacher education (ITE), in partnership with higher education institutes across the country.¹

To date, from 2018 to 2023, TOBAR has supported six members from the Traveller community in becoming primary teachers and one as a post-primary teacher.

An example of PATH 1, strand 1, is the TOBAR project at Marino Institute of Education (MIE, 2024). It focuses on bespoke academic, personal, and financial supports for members of the Traveller community who wish to become primary and post-primary teachers, with an emphasis on developing trusting and lasting relationships with the Traveller community (Colum & Collins, 2021; Colum & Brennan, 2022; Uí Choistealbha & Colum, 2022; Burns et al., 2023).

To date, from 2018 to 2023, TOBAR has supported six members from the Traveller community in becoming primary teachers and one as a post-primary teacher. The current phase of TOBAR (2021–2025) is a partnership between MIE and Trinity College Dublin (TCD). It continues to support students to and through primary and post-primary ITE and includes a PhD scholarship for a candidate from the Traveller community. Initiatives such as TOBAR begin to address some of the challenges the community faces in accessing education.

TOBAR

TOBAR emphasises the importance of including voices from the Traveller community in furthering project goals. Promotion and outreach, engagement with parents and students, and collaborating with Traveller advocacy groups are central aspects of the project. Time is spent visiting schools and workshoping with students in upper primary and post-primary settings. These workshops are informal, allowing students to ask specific questions about pursuing careers in teaching.

Traveller students tend to feel 'very much on their own' (McGinley, 2024, p.80), so current TOBAR students participate in school visits, speaking with pupils from the community. This encourages primary and post-primary pupils to see themselves as future student teachers. Another important aspect of the work is mentoring current students in MIE and TCD. Working closely with students

helps the TOBAR team see college life from their perspective and to provide individual supports to enhance their overall experience.

TOBAR understands that trust is essential in the relationships between families and third level (Colum & Collins, 2021). Collaboration with Traveller colleagues, community members, and advocacy groups reinforces the project's efforts to align with the community's priorities. Regular community feedback ensures that the project remains responsive to evolving needs. TOBAR students are welcomed to speak at public events about their experiences with the project, amplifying Traveller perspectives.

Widening participation

TOBAR begins to address gaps in the representation of Irish Travellers in ITE programmes and in the teaching profession. Its success to date highlights how targeted support is essential for lessening the distance from third-level education often felt by the community (ibid.). TOBAR can be perceived as a model for promoting equity and diversity in education and in the teaching workforce, and it is demonstrating that barriers to education can be dismantled, thus widening participation for underrepresented groups in further and higher education settings.

TOBAR students are welcomed to speak at public events about their experiences with the project, amplifying Traveller perspectives.

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Endnotes

¹ The centres of teaching excellence that participate in PATH 1, strand 1, are Dublin City University, Maynooth University, National Institute of Studies in Education, University of Galway/St Angela’s College, University College Cork, Marino Institute of Education/Trinity College Dublin, and University College Dublin/National College of Art and Design (HEA, 2024, p.16).

New UL doctoral graduate aims to make an impact on ‘global energy challenges’



Inspired by his community’s energy crisis, a University of Limerick graduate has become the pride of his hometown in Pakistan as he becomes the first person from the community to earn a PhD.

Muhammad Muddasar, originally from a small rural village in the Jhang District in Pakistan, graduated with a Doctorate in Sustainable Materials from UL’s Faculty of Science and Engineering and has made history as he becomes the first ever person from his village to earn a doctorate.

Growing up, Muhammad’s daily family life was disrupted by regular power shortages. Motivated by his circumstances, he vowed to find solutions to energy problems from an early age.