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The Cost of Becoming a Qualified Teacher in Ireland

I cannot teach anybody anything; I can only make them think.

- Socrates

That may sound a bit flowery or trendy. But that is exactly how I feel, as a working-class man, about education and the educating of young people. Some of the people who are the most suitable to be teachers and educators of young people are the ones who are being excluded from the teaching profession because of the outrageous exclusionary costs that are heaped upon their shoulders.

The exorbitant cost of becoming a qualified teacher, recognised by the Teaching Council, in Ireland is multifaceted. There is the initial cost of your primary degree, which must carry at least 180 ECT credits, which is your prerequisite to even get an interview to be allowed onto a PME course. Then there is the financial cost as regards fees for tuition over the course of 2 years for a PME (Professional Master of Education) which ranges between approximately €10,000 to €15,000. There is also a multitude of other associated costs such as rent, food, fuel, clothing, stationary, materials, etc. To be able to understand what it is like to become a qualified post primary school teacher in modern Ireland we need to delve a little deeper.

Traditionally the teaching profession was staffed, predominantly, by the rural and urban middle classes but as we have moved on from the 1980s and into the 21st century the demographic as regards enrolment in teacher qualification training has changed for the better. But what has NOT changed for the better is the exclusionary nature of the financial burden as regards teacher qualification. I would say, with evidence, it has gotten far worse. For details of fees alone please see table 1 below. All fees information is current as of 2021 and a list of the sources are contained within the references section of this document.

Professional Masters of Education (PME) Tuition Fees in 2021							
	Application Fee €	Year 1 Fees € (EU Citizen)	Year 2 Fees € (EU Citizen)	Year 1 Fees € (Non EU Citizen)	Year 2 Fees € (Non EU Citizen)	Total Cost of Fees € (EU Citizen)	Total Cost of Fees € (Non EU Citizen)
Hibernia College	95	7500	7500	7500	7500	15095	15095
University College Dublin	100	6740	6740	20,500	20,500	13580	41,100
Trinity College Dublin	50	6895	6895	10,659	10,659	13840	21,368
Dublin City University	80	5000	5500	9000	9173	10580	18253
National University of Ireland Maynooth	100	6150	4950	14,000	14,000	11200	28,100
National University of Ireland Galway	100	5616	5616	15,876	15,876	11332	31,852
University College Cork	100	6130	4930	16,080	16,080	11160	32,260
University of Limerick	35	5422	5318	9140	8962	10775	18137

Table 1 Total Cost of Fees For EU Citizens & Non-EU Citizens as of 2021 (Items in red are TBC)

Are there any student grants or other financial supports for trainee teachers ?

As can be clearly seen, from the table above, the cost of the fees alone are extraordinary and thus prohibit many ordinary working people from joining a profession that badly needs representation from working class people. Unlike other undergraduate or post graduate degree courses where you may qualify for a fees grant or a maintenance grant from SUSI, there are no such financial supports in place for teacher training & qualification courses. Because of the ongoing staffing and recruitment crisis within the teaching profession Simon Harris, as the current minister for further and higher education, research, innovation and science, has made a big deal out of providing a pathetic €1 million of funding in the form of a “Student Assistance Fund”. This is nowhere near the funding required to support student teachers. It is a drop in the ocean compared to what is required. There are also tax relief options to accredited courses from accredited colleges under “Section 473A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997”. This means you can claim a percentage of your tax back after you have already paid the fees. The below example is taken from the Hibernia College website . This would work in the following way.

*“From September 2017, subject to compliance with Revenue regulations, students who Are eligible will be able to claim **approximately €800 per year** in tax relief over the two Years of the course, thereby reducing the actual cost of the course to €15,000 - €1,600 = € 13,400”*

1st February 2021

Yes, it is something that alleviates the huge cost of qualification, but it is still extremely expensive. What is NEVER discussed is properly funded free education and free teacher qualification. We are now experiencing the greatest teacher staffing and recruitment crisis in the history of the state, yet the ruling political party’s refuse point blank to even talk about a policy of free education. Third level education became free in 1996 under the Fianna Fáil/Labour government. Free third level education was introduced by the then Labour Party minister of education Niamh Bhreathnach.

However, that progressive step forward was brought to an end 14 years later in 2010 under another rotten Fianna Fáil government. The then Fianna Fáil minister of education, Batt O’Keefe, would abolish free third level education. But ironically things were to get even worse when the then Labour Party minister of education, in 2011, Ruairi “Ho Chi” Quinn, did a U-turn regarding the increase in third level fees on the 31st of May 2011. He did this despite his signing of a pledge with the USI in February 2011, prior to the general election. Ruairi Quinn gave the reason for his treachery as “*new facts coming to light*”.

But that is what you do in a general election, it seems. You lie to get elected. Well, that is what Pat Rabbitte said anyway. As can be imagined this elitist policy decision was enthusiastically cheered on by IBEC, the boss’s union. IBEC claimed that their reasons for supporting the re-introduction of third level fees was

because world class education could not be funded solely through the state and that it must be the responsibility of students to fund their own education. In reality, it was a deliberate policy to limit the amount of working-class people accessing third level education. The bosses need those uneducated workers to slave away in their factories for minimum wage while their sons and daughters enjoy unlimited access to the highest levels of education.

How much does third level education cost in other European countries ?

Germany

Germany is world renowned for the quality of its education system and its universities. They have a fully state funded education system where there are no tuition fees, and in most incidences no international tuition fees. There is a small charge called a “semester fee” or an “administrative fee”. This admin fee ranges from between €150 to €250 per semester. It is not a completely free education system, but it is light years ahead of what we have in Ireland.

Sweden

The vast majority of universities in Sweden are public and free. Bachelor’s degrees, masters degrees, are free for any EU/EEA or Swiss citizen. PhD courses are free for anyone who wishes to undertake them, irrespective of the student’s country of origin.

Denmark

Denmark has a similar education system to Sweden and other European peer countries with free access to third level education. Students from anywhere within the EU/EEA and Switzerland are entitled to take advantage of this system. However, for international students it is prohibitively expensive. They are expected to pay between €6,000 to €16,000 per year, which makes tuition fees quite a substantial cost compared to other countries.

Norway

Educational tuition is free at all public universities in Norway, which gives students the opportunity to earn their degrees at world renowned prestigious institutions such as the University of Oslo, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and the University of Bergen. However, Norway has an extremely high cost of living that would hinder some poorer students.

Finland

Third level education in Finland, whether it be the technical colleges or prestigious universities, is free for students who come from the European Union. However, back in 2017 international undergraduate students coming from outside of the EU/EEA/Switzerland who wish to earn degrees through the English language will have to pay a minimum of €1,500 per year. Although, some universities charge more depending on the programme and degree level.

France

Technically speaking, third level fees do not exist in France, however they are just a fraction of what is charged in most countries. The fees imposed amount to approximately €170 per year at under-graduate level for EU/EEA/Swiss students. But from the 2019/2020 academic year onwards non EU/EEA/Swiss students will have to begin paying much more, with fees increasing to €2,770 per year for a Bachelor’s degree.

Is there a shortage of teachers in Ireland?

Short answer – YES!

There has been a serious shortage of teachers for a number of years in Ireland and this has been recently exacerbated by the COVID-19 Crisis. This problem has been growing, in my opinion, since 2010 when the idiots in the Fianna Fail/ Green Party Government decided that it was a sensible policy decision to introduce a new entrant scale for newly qualified teachers which would put them on a lower pay scale than teachers who were doing the same job but just having qualified one year earlier. This was an outrageous attack on our public services which was meekly accepted by the TUI.

Only the ASTI put in any kind of real fight against this despicable policy. This led to an outflow of teachers from the profession in Ireland to seek better paid work abroad.

Coupled with this was the controversial (I say disastrous) move away from the one year Hdip teacher qualification towards the two year PME in 2014. This, the government said, was in line with international standards on teacher qualification following the Finnish model of teacher qualification.

That is all well and good but the elephant in the room here is cost. The scrapping of free fees in 2010 burdened people embarking on their bachelor's degrees with huge costs when they were facing a very expensive two year mandatory PME. Then they had a reduced new teacher entrant salary scale to look forward to.

Successive government ministers knew all about the increasing shortage in supply of teachers as far back as 2011/2012. The Sahlberg report highlighted these glaring facts when the report was published in 2012. Neither the Irish Government or the Teaching Council issued a response for over a year. In 2013 Ruairi Quinn asked the Teaching Council to issue a report to advise him and his department on the growing teacher shortage crisis. This calamity dragged on for another five years. Nowhere in that reports finding was there ANY discussion of the major issues - The cost of the PME, the length of time to qualify, the two tier salary scale, and the lack of permanency post qualification.

The teacher recruitment and retention problem is a national one but these problems are seen with greater regularity in urban centres such as Dublin. And this is due in no small part to the outrageous skyrocketing rents in Dublin. Norma Foley and the department of education as well as the Teaching Council will have you believe that they are efficiently addressing the crisis and that they have it all in hand. That is absolute nonsense and is not representative of reality.

A recent report by 'Principal and Deputy Principals Association' of Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) showed some absolutely shocking statistics. This survey was carried out in 109 secondary schools in Ireland between September and October 2021. Some of the key points are highlighted below:

- 98% of schools experienced teacher recruitment difficulties in the previous six months.
- 66% of schools experienced teacher retention difficulties in the previous six months.
- 75% of schools advertised positions in the previous six months for which no teacher applied.
- 72% have unfilled vacancies due to recruitment and retention difficulties.
- 75% said that recruitment and retention difficulties have become more severe since COVID-19 was first detected in Ireland.

Conclusion

This is an expansive subject on which to talk about and we could quite easily explore in much greater detail the various points that were raised here. From the history of the teaching profession in Ireland being traditionally a middle class one, to the outrageous financial burden of a minimum of six years of third level study to become qualified. And then the two-tier salary scale and the exorbitant rental costs for young teachers just to have a roof over their heads.

But what I have experienced in teaching on a casual basis for the last three years is that there is no real support from the Teaching Council for those, like myself, who are seeking to become qualified. I have had to work two jobs for the last three years to save up the money that would fund me through two years of full time post graduate study. Full time teaching in a secondary school during the day and then teaching night classes in a private trade school in the evenings.

This has been very stressful for me and for others in this same situation. There are so many people like me who want to be qualified teachers. We have a passion for and a true vocation for teaching. But some people

like me are excluded from the profession because they do not have the financial resources with which to embark on this course of study.

To conclude, I would say this brings us back to the points raised at the start. That the teaching profession still exudes a residue of class privilege. The sons and daughters of middle class and upper middle class professionals will never experience the struggle of some PME students, some of whom are living in hostels while working through their courses.

To end this outrageous exclusionary model for teacher qualification as well as the broader access to third level education for working class people, we need a properly state funded and properly state resourced third level education system that is free at the point of use.

If it is possible in Germany, France, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland then why is it not possible in Ireland ?

It IS Possible. But we MUST see beyond the present political system and towards a Socialist Society where education is not the privilege of the rich and elite.

The RED Network (incorporating Rebel Telly) are a network of radical socialists within the political party People Before Profit, a 32-county people power movement on the island of Ireland.

www.rednetwork.ie