

# WHY DO A MASTER'S? UNDERSTANDING THE MOTIVATIONS OF MASTER'S STUDENTS IN IRELAND, NORTH AND SOUTH

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## Abstract

This research considers the role of Master's study in the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers in Ireland, North and South. Countries with the highest pupil assessment outcomes emphasise the importance of teachers having Master's degrees and effective CPD for teachers has been widely acknowledged as a key characteristic of mature systems of teacher education. There has also been a developing focus on the concept of teachers as researchers which clearly places an onus upon teachers to reframe and reconceptualise their work; in this sense, it can be seen how the Master's qualification can have increasing relevance.

Despite attempts to better understand and standardise the general definition of Master's qualifications there is still much variation in terms of its value in relation to the professional status, identity and practice of teachers. In addition, whilst there is some evidence to suggest that teacher confidence can benefit from Master's study, there is limited research on the extent to which Master's work can influence professional identity and subsequent practice.

This research aims to address some of these questions by generating a profile of teachers studying for Master's degrees in Education across the island of Ireland. The research aims to clarify issues around motivation and the influence that having a Master's degree might have on the participants' professional identity and practice. Working within a qualitative, interpretative design and using a mixed methods approach employing survey and focus groups, primary survey data were collected from cohorts of students studying for Master's in Education in all universities across Ireland in the time period 2017 – 2022. This first round of data collection will be presented here.

The research may help inform programme design and also have the potential to influence policy-makers in terms of developing coherency around the professional development of teachers, beyond the initial stage.

**Keywords:** *Master's study, continuing professional development.*

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of teachers has been long-recognised as central not only to the educational and personal development of children, but also to societal wellbeing and economic growth (OECD, 2018). It therefore follows that careful consideration needs to be given to the processes of professional learning to ensure the highest quality teachers are in place to meet these aspirations. Effective Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers has been widely acknowledged as a key characteristic of mature systems of teacher education (Scheerens, 2010). Stronach (2010:10) suggests that it is integral to a hegemonic 'hypernarrative' which associates teacher quality with pupil outcomes and national economic wellbeing and competitiveness. Kennedy (2015) highlights the fact that countries with the highest pupil assessment outcomes emphasise the importance of teachers having Master's degrees which, by implication, has led to a discourse recommending Master's degrees for teachers in other jurisdictions.

Allied to this, the importance for teachers developing research competence in order to raise the credibility of the profession (BERA, 2014), build collective capacity for improvement (Mincu, 2014) and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in schools (Cochran-Smith and Zeichner, 2006) has also been recognised in most international contexts. The need for research competence clearly places the onus upon teachers to reframe and reconceptualise their work from being a straightforward practical activity, to one which demands complex, theoretical knowledge and understanding which must then be applied to the problems of practice in context.

It is against this background, focussing on effective, high quality, research-based CPD for teachers, that we consider the role of the Master's qualification for teachers in Ireland, North and South. The research, supported by seed funding from the International Professional Development Association (IPDA), aims to generate a profile of teachers who are studying for, or who have achieved a Master's degree in Education across the island. By so doing, we aim to develop greater understanding of their motivation for study and the challenges and opportunities they experience. In addition, we aim to better understand the extent to which the Master's qualification influences their sense of professional identity and ultimately, their professional practice as teachers.

## **2. Literature review**

There is considerable research in relation to non-accredited CPD for teachers (Ponte, et al. 2004), with some suggesting that teachers favour school-based CPD to a greater degree than other accredited forms of provision including Master's (Pedder et al. 2008). By contrast, there is very limited evidence regarding the impact of the Master's on the professional development of teachers generally, or on the extent to which Master's work can influence professional identity and subsequent practice. Similarly, evidence which suggests that teacher confidence can benefit through engagement at this level is equally very scant (Castle, et al. 2012).

Some attempts have been made to standardise the general definition of Masters qualifications (Bologna Declaration 1999; QAA, 2014) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has suggested that Master's degrees can be categorised into three groups: research; specialised/advanced study; professional/practice (QAA, 2020:3). Despite this, there is still much variation in terms of understanding the Master's qualification in terms of its value and purpose in relation to the professional status, identity and practice of teachers.

An additional complication relates to national discourses on education. In the UK for example, there has been an increasing 'problematization' of teacher education focussing on the extent to which it is perceived to support the desired outcomes of academic and economic development. This has prompted increased prescription and a focus on 'evidence-based 'best' practice' (Helgetun and Menter, 2020) and a discourse on teacher learning as a process of 'training' with a strong emphasis on the achievement of 'professional standards' (DE, 2010). By contrast, across Ireland, teaching is viewed as an intellectual and values-based profession, based on a reflective and reflexive approach to professional learning and development; a discourse which has been well established by the respective teaching councils (GTCNI, 2007; The Teaching Council, 2016). Whilst some writers (Graham-Matheson, 2010) have raised the question as to whether Master's is simply about gaining credentials as 'evidence' of a drive to improve outcomes for others, there is a general recognition in Ireland that quality CPD provision is necessary in order to enhance the status of teaching as a profession, enrich the quality of the educational experiences of pupils in schools and support better overall academic achievement (Sahlberg, et al. Kirk, 2014; The Teaching Council, 2016).

With these perspectives in mind, this paper presents the first round of data collected in a larger study and considers the profile of teachers across Ireland engaged in master's study and their motivation for doing so.

## **3. Methods**

Given that the research focusses on individual experience, a qualitative, interpretative design using mixed methods was developed. Initially, a desktop search was conducted to discover Master's in Education programmes offered across all the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Ireland resulting in four being identified in NI and eight in RoI. Following this, a survey was circulated to all Master's students across the institutions. This was distributed via personal communications with programme leaders and through institutional and personal social media accounts. Three overarching categories were established: 'Beginning' Masters (those beginning the programme); 'Established Masters' (those in, or approaching the dissertation stage; and 'Graduate Masters' (those in the first 3 years post-graduation). The survey was initially subjected to descriptive analysis and then inferential analysis (De Vaus, 2002) to establish a range of associations between variables.

## **4. Findings**

The findings reported here relate to the first stage of data collection for the overall project and outline the respondent profile, along with their reported motivation for undertaking Master's study. A total of 94 responded to the survey: 47 from NI; and 47 from RoI. Forty-nine were current Master's students and 45 had graduated since 2017.

#### 4.1. Profile

Table 1 provides an overview of the overall age and gender profile of the participants and their jurisdiction.

Table 1. Overview of age and gender profile of participants by jurisdiction.

Gender	Age										Totals
	20-29		30-39		40-49		50-59		60 or over		
Female	12		18		31		7		1		69
Male	7		11		5		2		0		25
Other	0		0		0		0		0		0
No answer	0		0		0		0		0		0
Totals	19		29		36		9		1		94
Jurisdiction	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	RoI	NI	
	5	14	15	14	20	16	6	3	1	0	94

Overall, the number of male respondents was 25 (26.6%) and the number of females was 69 (73.4%). Of these, the largest number, 36 (38.3%) fell into the 40-49 age group. However, when taken collectively, more than half of the respondents, 48 (51.1%) were within the 20-39 group. Interestingly, it seemed that more younger teachers (20-39) had embarked upon master's study in NI than in RoI.

The vast majority (77.6%) were working in either primary or secondary education, with just slightly more primary teachers ( $n=38$ ; 40.4% as opposed to  $n=35$ ; 37.2%) taking Master's degrees. Other categories included: Early Childhood (4.3%); Further Education (3.2%); and Special Education (7.4%). A further 7.4% designated themselves in 'Other' which included International Schools, Youth Ministry, Educational Outreach Services and Managing Authorities.

In terms of starting a Master's degree, Table 2 shows that 22.4% started between 0-7 years post-qualification with 29.8% between 8-15 years and 28.7% between 16-23 years. Of these, 73.4% were female ( $n=69$ ) as compared to 26.5% ( $n=25$ ) male. Cross tabulation also shows that 10.6% ( $n=47$ ) of RoI teachers began their studies within 7 years of qualification, compared to 34% ( $n=47$ ) of NI teachers. Teachers from RoI were more likely to begin their studies during the 8 – 23 years post qualification (63.8%) compared to 53% of the NI teachers undertaking studies during those years.

With regard to stage of study, 10.6% were in the 'Beginning' category; 41.4% in the 'Continuing'; and 57.4% in the 'Graduate' category. From the participants who responded, there were more teachers in the 'Beginning' and 'Continuing' categories in NI whereas more who had completed the programme responded from RoI. As can be seen from Table 3, 73.4% across all categories were female ( $n=69$ ).

Table 2. Years qualified by gender.

Gender	Number of years qualified									Totals
	0-3	4-7	8-15	16-23	24-30	31-35	36-40	40+	Not qualified teacher	
Female	4	9	17	25	9	2	1	0	2	69
Male	0	8	11	2	2	2	0	0	0	25
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No answer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	4 4.3%	17 18.1%	28 26.8%	27 28.7%	11 11.7%	4 4.3%	1 1.1%	0 0%	2 2.1%	94

Table 3. Stage of degree and gender.

Stage	Gender				Total	
	Female		Male		n	%
	n	%	n	%		
Beginning	8	8.5	2	2.1	10	10.6
Continuing	24	25.5	15	15.9	39	41.4
Graduate	37	39.3	8	8.5	45	47.8
Totals	69	73.4	25	26.5	94	100

#### 4.2. Motivation

Table 4 outlines the motivational reasons for engaging with Master's study. It seemed that the key driving factor for most (88.2%) was to deepen their professional knowledge, followed by a desire to enhance professional status (54.2%). Next came promotion purposes (52.1%). Lowest scoring, was for professional networking (21.2%) with the intention of developing research skills only slightly higher at 24.4%.

Table 4. Stage and motivation.

Stage	For promotion		For professional networking		To deepen professional knowledge		To enhance professional status		To expand professional interests		To develop research skills	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Beginning	5	5.3	1	1	9	9.5	5	5.3	7	7.4	3	3.1
Continuing	21	22.3	9	9.5	34	36.1	24	25.5	8	8.5	6	6.3
Graduate	23	24.4	10	10.6	40	42.5	22	23.4	24	25.5	14	14.8
Totals	49	52.1	20	21.1	83	88.2	51	54.2	39	41.4	23	24.4

With regard to the Master's providing motivation for further study post-qualification, of the 'Continuing' and 'Graduate' groups, 5.3% (*n*5) indicated that they required the Master's degree as a pathway to further studies e.g. Doctoral study. Table 5 shows that 47.8% stated that they would engage in further studies post-Master's with 34% being unsure and 18% stating that they would not.

Table 5. Motivation for further study.

Stage	Yes		No		Unsure		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Beginning	4	4.2	1	1	5	5.3	10	10.6
Continuing	17	18	11	11.7	11	11.7	39	41.4
Graduate	24	25.5	5	5.3	16	17	45	47.8
Totals	45	47.8	17	18	32	34	94	100

## 5. Discussion

Even at this early stage, a range of factors have emerged. Firstly, the data suggests that for teachers, the decision to study for a master's degree is mostly taken between 8 and 23 years post-initial teacher qualification and as such, remains the preserve of middle career teachers. Having said that, it seems that increasingly, younger teachers, particularly in NI are considering taking the Master's as a viable option as part of the normal continuum of professional learning for teachers. Different reasons may be postulated for this but perhaps of most importance is the recognised lack of coherent and consistent CPD for teachers in NI which therefore leaves Master's study as perhaps the only way that teachers can access the provision they feel necessary to support their development (Hagan and Eaton, 2020). The introduction of the Professional Master of Education as an initial teacher education qualification in the RoI may be a factor in the reduced uptake of Master's study by newly qualified teachers in the RoI.

A second key finding suggests that there are significantly more female teachers embarking upon higher study than males. This is interesting when we consider motivational reasons reported by the participants to the survey. The highest category here related to 'deepening professional knowledge', with 'enhancing professional status' coming second and 'promotion' coming third. This seems to align with the general discourse on teaching in Ireland as outlined above. Further analysis of the survey and more in-depth data is required from the focus groups to determine any gender differences related to motivation and it would also be interesting to explore differences with teachers doing Master's degrees in other jurisdictions to consider the influence of discourse.

## 6. Conclusion

This study presents significant benefit in terms of developing a coherency of understanding of the nature of CPD through Master's across the island of Ireland. This is particularly relevant as in NI, the Department of Education is developing a new strategy, '*Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning*' (DENI, 2016) and in RoI, '*Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning*' (Teaching Council, 2016) is also being implemented. Both strategies have significant implications for teacher development at all career stages. As such, the research may be of value to policy-makers in terms of setting appropriate priorities and also to teacher educators as it may help inform the design of suitable and appropriate Master's programmes. Fundamentally, it is also of benefit to teachers considering study at Master's level to help them more fully understand the expectations and challenges of such an endeavour. It is also hoped that this research will have resonance with, and be of immediate interest to policy makers and institutional providers of Master's programmes in other international jurisdictions.

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