Feasibility Study in Admissions
Important General Information

1. The new admissions route being tested in the feasibility study will only begin in the next academic year (2013/14), for students wanting to enter Trinity College Dublin in September 2014. It will not affect students who are applying through the CAO this year.

2. The new admissions route will only apply to students applying for any of the three courses that are part of the study: History (TR003), Law (TR004), and Ancient and Medieval History and Culture (TR028). It will not affect students applying for any other courses in Trinity College Dublin. Nor will it apply for any two subject combinations involving any of these subjects.

3. Students applying for any of the three courses involved in the study will apply in the normal way through the CAO, where they will be invited to provide supplementary information as part of the new admissions route.

4. This supplementary information will be made completely anonymous before being sent for evaluation. All applicants will be provided with a randomly generated number, the school name will be allocated a random code, and all identifying information will be redacted.

5. The majority of places on the three courses will be filled in the normal way, through CAO points. 10 places have been set aside for History, 10 for Law, and 5 for Ancient and Medieval History and Culture, and these will be filled once all the other places have been allocated through the use of CAO points. The new admissions route will also be used for any students with equal points who are tied at the minimum points level, meaning there will no random selection in 2013/14 on any of these three courses.

6. When applying through the CAO for any of these three courses, students will be given the option of opting out of the study. In this case, they will be eligible for all the places that will be filled using CAO points alone. Applicants taking part in the study will be eligible for both sets of places.

7. Students applying for two or more of the courses in the study will only have to submit the supplementary information once.
Context and Overview

The feasibility study is an attempt to inform broader educational change by providing options to assist in the development of national policy. The study is an attempt to see whether, on a small scale and in a strictly controlled way, it might be possible to admit students using a range of assessments (including the Leaving Certificate), with the results published and shared throughout the sector.

It recognises the importance of having a Leaving Certificate examination that is fit-for-purpose and supports the reforms that are currently underway at second-level to ensure a more positive educational experience. It also recognises and values the great work and commitment of the teachers at primary and second-level throughout Ireland. The new admissions route detailed here seeks to complement the role of the Leaving Certificate and the teaching community, by working with the Central Applications Office (CAO) to examine whether some approaches which have succeeded internationally might also work in an Irish context.

The feasibility study was included as part of the ‘Communication from the IUA Council... [on the] Reform of Selection and Entry to University in the Context of National Educational Policy’, presented to the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn, in August 2012. The details of the new admissions route have been shared with the other Irish universities, through the IUA, and with the institutes of technology, through the IOTI, and there will be regular updates on its progress.

The study recognises the strengths of the Leaving Certificate as an examination, and that is why the Leaving Certificate results will account for two of the three modalities being used in the new admissions route.

However it also recognises that over the past three decades various criticisms have been made of the current ‘points system’ used for admitting students to third-level in Ireland. It is claimed that it is fair and transparent, but while it is certainly transparent there are legitimate concerns about its fairness. Unlike best practice internationally, it is a formulaic system which relies on only a single scale to admit students. In addition, at present it is possible to accumulate a high points total through rote-learning rather than through the
independent and critical thinking skills that are needed to succeed at third-level. Therefore CAO points can exaggerate students’ basic academic and intellectual capacity in a system that advantages those who are already advantaged. In addition, it contributes to a culture where it is seen as ‘wasting your points’ if students choose courses they love rather than ones they have the points for. The philosophy behind this feasibility study was outlined by the Provost, Dr. Prendergast, who suggested that it is time to escape from ‘the narrow-gate of a formulaic admissions system’ towards something that helps identify academic ability and potential, and where students choose the course that best suits their interests and abilities in the right academic environment.\(^1\) This study is therefore an attempt to see if elements which are used successfully in an international context might work in an Irish context.

**Objective of the Feasibility Study**

The objective of the feasibility study is to see whether it might be possible to develop a new national admissions system that can provide a better mechanism to identify and admit applicants who are enthusiastic and passionate about learning, motivated and suitable for their chosen courses, and with the academic ability and potential to be inspired by everything that third-level has to offer. The admissions scheme tested in this study will adopt a holistic approach, using a range of materials to make an assessment about the academic ability and potential of each applicant, attempting to match the right person to the right course.

It will be operated in partnership with the Central Applications Office (CAO) and all applications will be made completely **anonymous** before evaluation, to ensure the process is free from any external influences. All details of the new admissions route will be published as well as information on how the applications will be assessed, to ensure maximum transparency and to minimise pressure on students.

\(^1\) ‘It’s time to escape from a narrow college admissions system’, *The Irish Times*, 15 May 2012.
Courses involved in the study

The new admissions route will operate in the next two academic years (2013/14 and 2014/15) and will be used to admit students on three Trinity College Dublin courses – ten places in History (TR003), ten places in Law (TR004), and five places in Ancient and Medieval History and Culture (TR028).

The New Admissions Route

The majority of places on each course will be filled in the traditional way using CAO points alone. Applicants to the three courses involved in the study will have the option of using the new admissions route, and submitting the supplementary materials (in which case they will be eligible for all of the regular places on the course filled in the traditional way, as well as the places set aside for the study), or opting out of the study, in which case they will remain eligible for the majority of the places allocated in the traditional way.

The three modalities which will be used to assess applicants in the study are as follows:

(a) Leaving Certificate results.
(b) Relative Performance Rank (RPR) – the performance of the applicant relative to other applicants from their school. This scale looks at the rank of the applicant compared to every other applicant from their school who has applied to any course, in any college, through the CAO.
(c) Personal and Contextual Data – provided via supplementary materials submitted by the applicant.

Names of applicants, any identifying information, and the names of schools attended, will be made completely anonymous before being evaluated by the review panels.

How the Feasibility Study was Developed

1. The feasibility study follows international best practice in using a number of different modalities to assess applicants. It follows on from the recommendations of the ‘Fair
admissions to higher education’ report which was prepared for the UK government in 2004. Professor Steven Schwartz, the chair of the working group which prepared that report and now Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, delivered the keynote address at the international conference on admissions held in Trinity on 18 May 2012 and suggested that ‘The best approach is not to use a single indicator or score [such as the Leaving Certificate]. It is better to use a comprehensive set of predictors in the hope that the weaknesses of one might be compensated by the strengths of another’.3

2. An examination of the world’s leading universities shows that they use a number of different modalities to admit students. Many look at personal statements as well as various kinds of contextual data, alongside academic results, before making any decisions. In some of these the Relative Performance Rank (RPR) is a critical factor. This feasibility study has been influenced by a number of these approaches, and is an attempt to see whether such approaches could work in an Irish context.

What Trinity is Looking For

1. Academic ability is the key consideration in any assessment. Trinity is looking for students with the academic ability to thrive in the rigorous intellectual environment it provides, and so will attempt to identify students with the ability and potential to excel academically in their chosen course. The minimum consideration is that the student should be able to successfully complete the degree programme, but Trinity will be looking for much more than that. That said, Trinity recognises that academic ability and potential is not always captured in a CAO points total. As a result, Leaving Certificate results will be assessed alongside a range of other supplementary material in a holistic, anonymous evaluation of each applicant.

2. A key consideration in the assessment will be the Relative Performance Rank (RPR) of the applicant, namely the performance of the applicant relative to other students in that school. This information will be provided by the CAO.

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3 The full video of the conference can be found online at: www.tcd.ie/undergraduate-studies.
3. The supplementary material supporting each application will consist of: (i) information requested in the Trinity Application Form (TAF); (ii) a statement from the applicant’s secondary school confirming the names of the school or schools the applicant has attended. The TAF will include information on educational background and achievements, and personal statements and essays.

4. Every applicant will be considered individually in an holistic assessment using all the information available to us:
   - Leaving Certificate (or equivalent) results;
   - the context in which the academic results were achieved;
   - the personal statement and other information provided in the Trinity Assessment Form.

5. We are interested in: what subjects the applicants are studying for the Leaving Certificate, and at what level; the educational background of the applicant, and class rank within that school; contextual data that provides an insight into the material submitted; and co- and extracurricular activities the student is involved in. Ultimately, all admissions decisions are based on academic criteria, and while excellence in an extra-curricular activity will never compensate for lower academic potential, it will help provide a sense of the applicant’s talents, accomplishments and interests.

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**The Supplementary Assessment**

The Trinity Application Form (TAF) is intended to give Trinity a sense of academic ability and potential. There are no ‘right’ answers, and Trinity is looking for an honest insight into the applicant’s interests and abilities. Although it might be very easy to ask someone else to complete this form, this might ultimately work against the application, because what will be evaluated is not vocabulary or an elaborate presentation of ideas, but a genuine and honest self-reflection. Submitting someone else’s thoughts and ideas could very well prove counterproductive. The TAF will provide some important contextual information and educational background, but it will only form one part of the overall assessment.
Evaluating the Applications

Applicants will be required to provide supplementary information requested in the TAF (see below). This information must be submitted online through the CAO before 1 February 2014. These applications will then be completely anonymised by the CAO, with any identifying information redacted, before being sent on for evaluation. School names will be replaced by randomly allocated numbers, and each student will be assigned a randomly generated number.

The information submitted will be sent to Trinity where it will be examined by professional readers, go for evaluation before an Admissions Review Committee, and all the information, including Leaving Certificate results, will then go before a Final Review Committee consisting of internal and external representatives, where the final decision will be made about the allocation of the places.

The new admissions route will also be used to separate candidates on equal points, in the event of two or more candidates having the same number of points. This means that in 2013/14 there will be no random selection in any of the three courses involved in the study.

Evaluating the Success or Failure of the Feasibility Study

The feasibility study will run for at least two years – for students applying to enter in September 2014 or September 2015, with the first students entering Trinity under the new admissions route in September 2014. The procedures and processes will be evaluated at regular intervals by internal and external experts and will be assessed under the following headings:

1. Operations. Does the ‘machinery’ work smoothly and efficiently – for example, the submission and processing and assessment of applications – and are there any system problems at any stage of the review process?

2. Resources. What are the resource implications involved in running the new admissions route, and is it feasible to continue or expand the scheme?
3. **Matching Students to Courses.** Since an objective of the new admissions route is to assess motivation and suitability for course, alongside academic ability and potential, is there evidence that the students have been successfully matched to the right courses?

4. **Meaningful Results.** Did the three scales produce meaningful results, and are the review panels confident it can assess applications on the basis of all three scales?

5. **Legal Challenges.** Are there any substantive legal challenges, and are the procedures robust enough to withstand them?

6. **Public Trust.** A crucial question: is there sufficient public trust in the scheme?

For further information about the study, or if you have any queries, please email the Dean of Undergraduate Studies at Trinity, Dr. Patrick Geoghegan at senior.lecturer@tcd.ie
ACADEMIC INTERESTS

What programme of study would you like to study at Trinity and why? (50 words)
_________________________________________________________________________

WHY TRINITY?

What in particular about Trinity has influenced your decision to apply (50 words)
_______________________________________________________________________

EDUCATION

Secondary Schools

Most recent secondary school attended____________________________________
Address: ______________________________________________________________

List all other secondary schools you have attended, and dates attended.

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Current Subjects

Please indicate subjects studied, including level.

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\[^4\] Trinity is grateful to The Common Application (www.commonapp.org) for permission to use and adapt its application form template in this study.
WRITING

Please write an essay of 250-500 words on a topic of your choice or on one of the options listed below. This personal essay helps us to become better acquainted with you as a person and student, apart from subjects studied, exam results, and other objective information. It will also demonstrate your ability to express yourself.

1. Using a favourite quotation from an essay or book you have read in the last three years as a starting point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world. Please write the quotation at the beginning of the essay.

2. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work that has had an influence on your decision to study your preferred subject, and explain that influence.

3. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international interest and its importance to you.

4. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced, and its impact on you.

5. Topic of your choice.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Please provide details of special circumstances (illness, death of family member, significant extracurricular involvement etc.) or achievements not reflected in the application.
REQUIRED DECLARATIONS

I certify that all information provided in this admission process is my own work, and that this information will be stored by the university. I understand that I may be subject to a range of possible disciplinary actions, including admission revocation, or expulsion, should the information be false.

I understand that in the Trinity Feasibility Study Trinity will be admitting students using a holistic approach, and accept that any single assessment strand may not prove sufficient for entry.

By signing this form I agree that my secondary school(s) can provide details of my educational history to the CAO confirming my schools and years attended.