Policy on the Broad Curriculum

Overview

The existing educational objectives of the Moderatorship, as set out in the Calendar, are:

1 All moderatorship degree programmes entail a broad base of knowledge of both a general and particular nature, and the intellectual skills that must be mastered are broadly similar in all areas. All moderatorship degree programmes seek to impart the following:

(a) a strong broad base of knowledge that introduces the student to all the main aspects of the discipline or disciplines concerned, and to relevant aspects of closely related disciplines;

(b) advanced expertise in the major subject that provides the students with a thorough understanding of the basic principles and methodology of the discipline and of the means by which the frontiers of the discipline can be expanded and new knowledge discovered;

(c) a range of intellectual skills that develop as fully as possible the complete range of mental abilities, i.e. the enlargement and proficiency of mind that has long been a fundamental goal of university education.

These skills may be divided into two categories:

(i) Thinking skills
   These include:
   A - the capacity to make sense of what one learns, to analyse and sort data and solve problems,
   B - extend what one has learned, to generate new ideas and concepts, to apply what one has learned to new contexts,
   C - to deal with knowledge in a critical way, to develop the capacity to evaluate information and ideas.

(ii) Communication skills
   These involve the capacity to organise information and arguments and conclusions, and to present them in a clear and well-reasoned manner.

The educational objectives of the Moderatorship make a clear distinction between expertise in a specific subject and more general thinking and communication skills. This can be seen as an analytical distinction between a “specialist” and a “broad”
curriculum. At the same time it must be recognised that many of the objectives of the broad curriculum are typically vindicated as a result of how the specialist curriculum is implemented rather than as stand-alone elements in their own right.

Departments and Faculties are largely responsible for the development of specialist curricula in their own areas of expertise – indeed this is one of their fundamental roles. This document elaborates policy on the broad curriculum, and on the interaction between broad and specialist curricula. Policy on the broad curriculum is a matter for the wider University community. The interaction between broad and specialist curricula is a very important element in the interaction between the University as a whole and its individual faculties and departments.

This interaction is of particular importance in securing the broad curricular objectives of the University’s undergraduate programmes. Students are in practice admitted to follow particular degree programmes and there is continuous pressure towards increasing specialisation of these programmes. There is also pressure to add elements to the broad curriculum, dealing with matters such as information technology and language skills. These pressures can combine to cause an overloading of the curriculum since new courses are added far more easily than existing courses are dropped. This overload must be confronted as a crucial issue in curriculum policy.

It is important to recognise that the College community faces many constraints in fulfilling the educational objectives of the Moderatorship. These include adverse staff:student ratios, the exigencies of the timetable and logistic matters such as the availability of lecture rooms, computers or computer rooms. The skills and abilities of the matriculating students admitted to the University also act as constraints upon the broad curriculum. This raises the issues of the University’s admission requirements and of its role in influencing second level curricula.

It is also very important to note that a number of the educational objectives of the Moderatorship have long been promoted in the existing curricula to be found in many parts of the College. Many graduates of Trinity College thus already possess many of the desired attributes. What is needed, therefore, is to recognise and to build upon our current strengths and upon the existing contributions of many departments to the University’s broad curriculum. This suggests that the best way to proceed is not in any sense to attempt to impose a particular curriculum from above. Rather, what is needed is to set a clear and coherent University policy for the broad curriculum and to put in place a review process that encourages the vindication of this policy in all disciplines.

In doing this, it should be recognised that curriculum objectives may conflict with other objectives of the University, such as facilitating staff in fulfilling their research objectives by maximising flexibility in teaching loads or minimising the burden of assessment.

Finally, while this policy on the curriculum derives from the educational objectives in the Moderatorship, as set out in the Calendar, these objectives should apply to all undergraduate degree programmes offered by the University.

**General Principles of the Broad Curriculum**
In order to realise the educational objectives of the Moderatorship, we in the University community should all have a very clear image in our minds of how we would like to see a graduate of the University of Dublin. This should be an image of a person who is inquisitive, analytical, reflective, creative, adaptable, widely read and ethically responsible, with an independent mind and an international outlook. Trinity graduates should also be articulate, literate and numerate at a level of sophistication that allows them to deploy their abilities to maximum advantage in later life.

Many aspects of College life play a part in a student’s development of these qualities – only one of which is the academic curriculum. The importance of extra-curricular activities should thus be kept firmly in mind when determining the appropriate academic workloads of undergraduate students. College should also consider ways of giving recognition to significant and well-documented extra-curricular activities.

Another crucial point to note is that many important aspects of curriculum policy can be fulfilled by how a class or course is taught, rather than by the substantive course content. Thus objectives such as literacy, articulacy and numeracy can be furthered by ensuring that all students make regular oral presentations to their classmates, produce regular pieces of discursive writing and deal with material that is presented in numerical form. Those responsible for the curriculum should also be alert to the possibility of capitalising on the emergence of transferable skills. These may develop, for example, when students engaged in the oral element of a language course improve their general articulacy.

**Elaborating the Broad Curriculum**

While it is not desirable to be too prescriptive in matters of the curriculum, it is necessary to elaborate the basic principles set out above, in order to ensure a common understanding of their general meaning and importance. In addition, it is necessary to set out general principles for achieving the various objectives identified. This will allow the University to identify the resource implications of any serious attempt to implement its policy on the broad curriculum.

**Inquisitiveness and analytical ability**

Inquisitiveness, analytical ability and a general independence of mind are virtues best encouraged by the manner in which material is presented and assessed rather than by the substantive content of courses per se.

- Explicit efforts should be made in course design and assessment to ensure that students are presented with challenges and problems associated with their chosen subjects, rather than with mere bodies of material to be assimilated.

- Explicit efforts should be made to give students enduring analytical and research skills and approaches to problem solving that allow them to
tackle unforeseen challenges in their subjects, rather than merely to master a received wisdom.

- Explicit efforts should be made to avoid spoon-feeding in the presentation of course materials and content, and to encourage the active involvement of students in identifying and using key course resources.
  - Students should thus be encouraged at every opportunity to use the Library, the Internet and other sources of information for independent study and research.

- Explicit efforts should be made to encourage students to look beyond their own fields and explore the possibility of using the teaching and other resources of as wide a range of disciplines as possible.

Creativity and reflectiveness

Creativity and reflectiveness are virtues that are best fostered by the overall intellectual environment in which students find themselves rather than by the substantive content of any particular course.

- Explicit efforts should be made to create an environment in which students are encouraged to take a creative approach to their chosen subjects and to avoid intellectual environments that are inflexible and hostile to creativity.
  - This may well imply an explicit policy on the assessment of work that represents a “creative failure” to the solution of a particular problem as opposed to that which successfully applies a received wisdom.

- Explicit efforts should be made to create an environment in which students are given ample opportunity to reflect upon and synthesise the material that they have already assimilated, rather than to find themselves under continual pressure to assimilate ever more new information.
  - This implies an explicit recognition in each curriculum of the need to provide time for reflection. This further implies the importance of taking explicit account of the danger of curriculum overload.
  - It also implies an explicit recognition that the assessment process should include the opportunity for students to produce works of reflection and synthesis, in addition to work of a more specialist or technical nature.

Adaptability and breadth of reading
All graduates should leave College with an appetite for continuing personal, intellectual and professional self-development. They should not see their university education as merely preparing themselves for a career. Nor should they see the transition from third-level education as the end of their educational development, but rather as the beginning of a life-long process.

- Many of the detailed ways in which these objectives can be pursued are treated under other headings, dealing with particular skills as well as matters such as inquisitiveness, creativity, reflectiveness, analytical ability and ethical responsibility.

- Nonetheless, explicit efforts should be made to ensure that the curriculum as a whole does indeed contribute towards the lifelong intellectual and personal self-sufficiency of our graduates.
  - This implies, among other things, that explicit consideration should be given to offering students the structured opportunity to read and reflect as widely as possible outside their particular areas of specialisation, possibly by the provision of voluntary College-wide courses in certain important areas of the sciences and humanities.

**Ethical responsibility**

Many professional disciplines incorporate education in professional ethics as part of their core curricula. While the University should not set out to impose a particular set of political and social values, it is nonetheless clear that a sense of ethical responsibility, in both academic and professional contexts, is an important quality for all students. The broad curriculum should therefore ensure that all students leave College with a well-developed ability to take responsibility for their own actions and choices.

- This implies that all students should have the explicit opportunity to reflect upon the ethical issues and choices that will confront them both during and after their university careers.

- With respect to the ethical issues confronting students during their life in the University, general regulations already cover plagiarism and other issues of academic and intellectual ethics. Departments and Faculties should give consideration to the consistent and explicit application of these principles in their dealings with students.

**International outlook**

The University has a strong commitment to its role as a truly international institution of the highest standing. Many things help students develop an international approach to their studies and to life in general, but important matters related to the curriculum
include language skills, travel and openness to other cultures. We should also recognise that interaction both with foreign exchange students and with Irish mature students can make our own students more outward looking.

- Many students already take advantage of international exchange programmes, typically with great personal benefit. Curriculum design should take explicit account of the potential benefits of such exchanges, particularly for those students for which these are not currently available.

- Explicit attempts should be made to encourage and capitalise upon more informal opportunities for students to travel and to experience other cultures, for example by taking a year off books and by engaging in vacation travel.

- All undergraduates should have the opportunity to develop useful skills in a language other than their native tongue.
  - This should be implemented by ensuring that all students have the opportunity at some stage during their course (preferably in the Freshman years) to develop skills in a language other than English, either building upon skills they already have or learning a new language ab initio. This may well require additional major resources to be devoted to the provision of language teaching.

**Articulacy**

All students should be provided with educational experiences that foster the development of skills in the effective oral presentation of ideas. These skills should be developed to a level that allows graduates to make sophisticated oral presentations in their areas of expertise.

- This implies an explicit policy that students make regular class presentations, on which they will be assessed.
  - This implies ensuring that the tutorial resources are available to allow an adequate level of small group teaching of all students in most years.
  - It also implies reinforcing existing skills, where necessary, to ensure that all teaching staff are well able to foster and assess the effective oral presentation of ideas by students in their class.

**Literacy**

All students should be provided with learning experiences that foster the development of skills in the effective written presentation of ideas. These skills
should be developed to a level that allows graduates to produce sophisticated written work in their areas of expertise.

- This implies an explicit policy that students write regular discursive pieces in their areas of specialisation, on which they will be assessed.

- It may also involve, for those students who do not already possess such ability, training in the effective uses of information technology (IT) in the written presentation and dissemination of ideas.

  - This implies ensuring that the tutorial resources are available to allow adequate marking and commenting upon written work.

  - It also implies reinforcing existing skills, where necessary, to ensure that all teaching staff are well able to foster and assess the effective written presentation of ideas by every student in their class.

  - It may be necessary to provide resources for writing workshops, perhaps at Faculty level, offering help to those students who need this.

  - It will also be necessary to provide resources, where necessary, for student training in the use of information technology in effective written communication, as well as providing enhanced access to computers, printers and other IT resources.

**Numeracy**

The curriculum should recognise that numeracy, together with literacy and articulacy, gives graduates a capacity for logical and analytical reasoning.

- This implies an explicit policy that students should be able to understand information presented in numerical and statistical form.

- This may involve an explicit policy that students should be involved in assessed coursework in their areas of specialisation that deals with the analysis and interpretation of numerical information.

- It may also involve, for those students who do not already possess such ability, training in the effective uses of information technology (IT) for the effective analysis and interpretation of numerical information.

  - This in turn will have resource implications for enhancing the skills of teaching staff in certain areas, and also for the development of course materials.
- It will also be necessary to provide resources for student training in the use of information technology for the effective analysis and interpretation of numerical information, as well as providing enhanced access to computers, printers and other IT resources.

**Developing the Curriculum as an Integrated Whole**

As has already been noted, many objectives of the broad curriculum are most effectively vindicated by the manner in which a given specialist curriculum is delivered. We should not, therefore, create an artificial distinction between broad and specialist curricula. While the detailed substantive content of specialist curricula will always remain a primary concern for departments and faculties, it is nonetheless important to note that it is essential for specialist curricula to be kept continuously under review. Such curriculum review should explicitly ensure the development and integration of both broad and specialist objectives. As well as dealing with the substance of the curriculum, this also means being alert to the potential dangers of overload and imbalance that can easily arise.

The ongoing process of curriculum review should also recognise that accessibility to education for people with special needs requires that College allow a degree of flexibility within coursework and examinations. Introducing new elements to the curriculum should not undermine the ability of departments to accommodate students with special needs.

**Overload**

Since it is always much easier to add new elements to any curriculum than to delete existing elements, explicit attention should be paid in any curriculum review process to the need to avoid curriculum overload.

- This implies that all responsible for curriculum development should give explicit attention to identifying and justifying a maximum number of contact hours and a total workload for students in each year of each programme of study.

- Maximum loads should take full account of the need for students to read and research widely and reflect upon the fruits of these labours, as well as to devote proper attention both to coursework assignments and to valuable extra-curricular activities.

- More active use should be made of the College tutorial system in assessing the extent of actual and potential curriculum overload.
Balance

Given the dangers of overload and the need to set a maximum number of contact hours for students in each area, explicit attention should be paid in any curriculum review process to protecting the broad curriculum against the often pressing demands of the specialist curriculum for scarce slots on student timetables.

- This implies that key objectives of the broad curriculum be integrated fully into student assessment at all levels, and not be seen as optional extras.

Implementing Curriculum Policy

1. Once Council has approved a policy document on the curriculum, it will be sent to Faculties for consideration.

2. Faculties will then consider the document and define each of the stated curriculum policies in their own terms, setting the general standards of achievement that are expected from their students in key areas.

3. Faculties should then seek systematic student feedback on the extent to which their current curricula meet the policies that have been elaborated.

4. On this basis of student feedback and discussions among the academic staff, Faculties should then indicate the extent to which they consider that these policies are fulfilled within their current curricula. Faculties should also specify the abilities that they expect students to have on admission and develop admissions policies that might better fulfil these expectations.

5. Having identified what needs to be done, Faculties should suggest specific ways of filling any gaps and report back through their Deans to Council.

6. Council, on hearing a report from each Faculty Dean, will then be in a position:

   6.1 to consider the extent to which its curriculum policies are fulfilled within existing degree programmes and admissions requirements;

   6.2 to note suggestions for ways to fulfil these policies more effectively;
6.3 to make further suggestions for improvement should these be deemed necessary;

6.4 to assess the nature and extent of additional resources needed to implement its curriculum policies;

6.5 to monitor the implementation of its curriculum policies, both in relation to existing programmes and to any new degree programme put forward;

6.6 to draft an agreed set of general principles for the curriculum to be included in the Calendar.