

Trinity College Dublin: A Short History

Trinity College Dublin was created by royal charter in 1592, at which point Dublin Corporation provided a suitable site, the former Priory of All Hallows. Its foundation came at a time when many universities were being established across western Europe in the belief that they would give prestige to the state in which they were located and that their graduates, clergy for the most part, would perform a vital service as civil administrators. By the 1590s England had two long-established universities, each with an expanding group of colleges, and Scotland four. The idea of a university college for Ireland emerged at a time when the English state was strengthening its control over the kingdom and when Dublin was beginning to function as a capital city. The group of citizens, lay and clerical, who were main promoters of the scheme believed that the establishment of a university was an essential step in bringing Ireland into the mainstream of European learning and in strengthening the Protestant Reformation within the country.

The organisational design of the new institution was influenced by Oxford, Cambridge and continental precursors, but from the beginning it was an autonomous corporation governed by 'provost and fellows', committed to teaching and to scholarship, the first and (as it turned out) only college of the degree-awarding University of Dublin. The College site, lying some distance east of the small walled city, was far larger than the small community of fellows and students required, and the first brick buildings of the 1590s occupied only a small part of what is now Front Square. But from the beginning the College's library was a priority, and the energy with which early Trinity scholars (notably Luke Challoner and James Ussher) assembled the initial collections of books marked Trinity out from other sixteenth-century foundations. Many of its early graduates, well grounded in philosophy and theology, proceeded to clerical ordination in the state church, the Anglican Church of Ireland.

During the next fifty years the community grew: endowments, including landed estates, were secured, new fellowships founded, a curriculum devised and statutes determining internal governance were framed. The international reputation of Ussher, one of its first alumni, helped place the College on the European map. But its existence was gravely threatened at two points in the seventeenth century, first when central government collapsed in the wake of the 1641 rising, followed by the temporary eclipse of the Church of Ireland in the wake of Cromwell's victories; secondly, with the roller-coaster events of 1689-91, when Tyrconnell's short-lived Catholic government closed the university, expelled the fellows and students, and converted the buildings into a Jacobite barracks. The library however was spared.

Despite such dramatic interruptions, the College had become a much more substantial institution by the end of the seventeenth century. Many of the early buildings had recently been replaced, and a number of the fellows, notably William Molyneux and St. George Ashe were centrally involved in the Dublin Philosophical Society, a small body that was closely in touch with the 'new learning' in London.

The following century was an era of political stability in Ireland, thanks to the firm monopoly on political power held by the land-owning and largely Church of Ireland upper class, and the College was in material terms a great beneficiary from this state of affairs: its landed income grew very substantially in the course of the century and it enjoyed the recurring patronage of the Irish parliament across College Green, evident in the scale and quality of its new buildings. The first structure dating from this era was a massive new library (1712-32), initiated while George Berkeley was librarian; its size, far greater than then required, reflected long-sighted enlightenment ambitions, and it was followed by a string of other classical buildings on the western half of the campus: the Printing House (1733-4), the West Front (1752-9), the Dining Hall (c.1760-65), and the Provost's House (1759-61). During the second half of the century Parliament Square slowly emerged, shaped by the Public Theatre (1777-86) and the new Chapel (1787-98), which were designed from afar by George III's architect, Sir William Chambers. The

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great building drive was completed in the early nineteenth century by the residential quadrangles of Botany Bay and New Square.

These buildings reflected a seriousness of purpose absent from English universities of that era. The fellows were generally hard-worked, both as teachers and administrators; the general curriculum was adapted, albeit slowly, and most of the outstanding Irish politicians and writers of the eighteenth century (Swift, Burke, Goldsmith, Grattan, Fitzgibbon, Tone) were Trinity graduates, the influence of their university discernible in their writings and speeches.

Since the early days, the power of College provosts to re-shape the university had been very considerable: most of them were ordained clergy, but two eighteenth-century laymen who held the office stand out: Francis Andrews (1758-74), whose chief monument is the sumptuous Provost's House, but who also encouraged science with his endowment of a chair of astronomy and an observatory; and his successor, John Hely-Hutchinson (1774-94), who was an enlightened lawyer but an adversarial public figure: he oversaw the foundation of chairs of modern languages and widened the composition of the student body; Catholics were permitted to enter and take degrees from 1793. Not for the last time, political controversy in the world outside came to be powerfully reflected among the student body in the lead-up to the 1798 rebellion, in which ex-students were involved on both sides, most famously Wolfe Tone.

The undergraduate curriculum was a prescribed general course, embracing classics, mathematics, a limited exposure to science and some philosophical texts. This began to change from the 1830s when it became possible to specialise for degrees with honours, or moderatorships, in mathematics, in ethics and logic, and in classics. In 1851 a moderatorship in experimental science was added (embracing physics, chemistry and mineralogy at first, and later geology, zoology and botany, which in 1871 was split into two moderatorships, natural and experimental science). And new humanities disciplines emerged as moderatorship subjects at the same time – in history and modern literature.

The professional schools were also transformed in the course of the nineteenth century: divinity had been taught since the foundation of the College, but this was now systematised. The Law School was reorganised, and medical teaching placed on a much stronger footing, helped by the emergence early in the century of a group of medical teachers who gained international eminence (notably James Macartney, Robert Graves and William Stokes), practitioners who divided their time between clinical teaching and the lecture theatre. The Engineering School was established in 1842 and was one of the first of its kind in the English-speaking world. Student numbers overall increased in the post-Waterloo generation, and the vibrancy of the institution is evident from the variety of associations and clubs in the city that were dominated by the university. The *Dublin University Magazine* (1833-82) became one of the most widely circulating monthly reviews in Ireland or Britain, conservative in its politics, highly original in its literary coverage and on occasions quite subversive, not unlike its original College sponsors.

Between 1830 and 1900 twenty new professorial chairs were founded, and individual scholarship flourished as never before: in mathematics and science William Rowan Hamilton, the Lloyds, George Salmon, George Fitzgerald and John Joly spent most of their working careers based in the College, and in the humanities it was the classicists who led the field in terms of international celebrity.

The expansion of the College's teaching activity during the nineteenth century was evident in the changing campus landscape, most strikingly with the Museum Building (1853-7), designed to accommodate civil engineers and geologists. By the late nineteenth century the College had gone some way to fill the ancient site with an ensemble of academic buildings and recreational facilities, museums and terraces of student residences. And new buildings to the east of the College Park reflected the increasing importance of science and medicine in College priorities. However purpose-built science laboratories came late; it was thanks primarily to the philanthropy of the Guinness family that some really fine architecture began to grace the East End when the Physics and Botany buildings appeared c.1903-06.

Behind its high iron railings the Victorian university had become something of a self-contained community, out of sympathy with the increasingly nationalist city and focused on an expanding

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British empire for opportunities for its graduates. During the sixty-year war of attrition between British governments and the Catholic hierarchy over higher education policy in Ireland, Trinity struggled to accommodate itself to what was a changing Ireland. Between 1873 and 1908 a variety of schemes were proposed that would have made the College a member of a federated Irish (or Dublin) university; these were strenuously and effectively resisted as threats to its independence. As part of this, the College gradually re-positioned itself to become a non-denominational institution: in 1873 all religious tests (except those connected with the Divinity School) were abolished. However despite this, the fractious struggle to retain the College's separate identity meant that when the battle over Irish higher education was finally resolved in 1908 with the creation of the federal National University, it left a difficult legacy for the defenders of the older institution.

Power within the College was slowly changing too. The creation in 1874 of the University Council, a body representative of non-fellow professors, gave control over the shaping of courses and appointments to the teaching departments, and in 1911 membership of the College Board itself was somewhat widened. But power remained with the senior fellows until the provostship of Albert McConnell (1951-74), who managed to widen the collegiate governance of the College and initiate major administrative reform. More momentously, women students became part of the College: admitted for the first time in 1904, within a decade they amounted to 16 per cent of the student body. But it was not until 1958 that the first female professor sat on the Board, and 1972 before female students could reside within the campus (a women's hall of residence had however been established in 1908). In 1986 women accounted for more than half of the full-time student body, and have retained that ascendancy ever since. In 2021 Trinity elected its first female provost, Linda Doyle.

The First World War marked a general turning point in the College's fortunes, the human cost recognised in the hall of honour (1928), erected in Front Square. The Easter Rising of 1916 had engulfed the College environs, and Trinity was lucky to escape serious physical damage. However wartime inflation and the drastic erosion of its assets threatened the College's peacetime future. In the new Free State that emerged after the War of Independence in 1922, Trinity lacked the benign support of government that it had always enjoyed, and the new national administration, financially weak and recovering from civil war, had more pressing priorities. Therefore, at a time when the newer universities in Britain were growing in strength and prestige, Trinity found itself without the revenues required to advance research and scholarship in what was an increasingly science-centred world.

Student numbers however held up well in the inter-war period, but with very limited philanthropic support and none from the state, Trinity's capacity to develop was severely constrained. Some new disciplines were introduced at little cost, notably degree courses in commerce, economics and politics, and the first night-school diplomas, ranging from art history to public administration, were very successful. But it was only after the end of the Second World War that the university once again sought financial support from government; it was promptly given. That modest agreement in 1947 marks the beginnings of Trinity's transition towards becoming a large state-funded university, although this was not apparent until the 1970s. In the meantime, cramped by continuing church restrictions on Catholic attendance, the College increased its enrollment of students from Britain and the United States at a time when overall numbers were falling below pre-war levels. In some years around 1960, nearly half the student body was coming from outside Ireland (north and south).

The overall student population remained small until the mid-1960s, when the cap was raised by a third to 4,000. At that same point the Irish government became involved in capital investment within the College, sharing the costs of building a new library with the College's fundraisers. In the same period private philanthropy, again led by the Guinness family, and international philanthropic trusts, notably the Wellcome, were dramatically improving the stock of medical and science buildings, and enabling the development of new disciplines such as biochemistry, genetics and preventive medicine.

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The real growth in student numbers began in the 1970s, reflecting the introduction of free second-level education and of third-level student grants, the removal of the Catholic episcopal 'ban' (in 1970), the widening career opportunities for women and a stronger underlying economy in Ireland. Trinity's recruitment field became much more heavily concentrated within the Republic of Ireland, and College policy in the early 1970s was to bring down the non-Irish proportion to 15 per cent. The new 'massification' of higher education took physical form with the construction of a large Arts and Social Sciences Building on the south side of the campus (opened in 1978). This was almost entirely funded by the national exchequer.

The diversification of the curriculum continued in the last quarter of the century, with the mushroom growth of information science and computing, the medical therapies, nursing, and teacher training, the latter developed in conjunction with the three Dublin teacher-training colleges with which Trinity had become associated in the 1970s. The College also became involved in the oversight and accreditation of technical degree courses delivered across Dublin by the Vocational Colleges (until the Dublin Institute of Technology (now Technological University Dublin) was established as an independent degree-awarding body). But a more generic change was the huge expansion of postgraduate activity, both of taught courses and research degrees, many of these closely related to the professions. And by the 1990s post-doctoral researchers, scattered across all disciplines, had become a new segment of the academic community, reflecting the scale and complexity of research teams and the opportunities for research funding at national and European levels.

In the new scheme of things, as the university came to depend on the state it became publicly accountable. Oversight of the universities became the responsibility of the Higher Education Authority, established as a statutory body in 1971, its role and powers being greatly extended by the 1997 Universities Act. The state by the late 1990s had become the principal source of the College's revenues, both through the direct grant and as a consequence of the state's adopting a 'free fees' policy for undergraduate tuition. But despite the ever-increasing involvement of the state in directing higher education, the contribution of the state grant to the College's total income began to decline in the following decade, falling to 27 per cent by 2010 and actually counting for less than the College's research income (much of the latter coming of course from Irish state agencies). Research income from all sources had contributed a mere one million pounds in 1981, whereas in 2009 it peaked at just under 90 million euro.

There have been two major internal waves of academic reorganisation over the last fifty years: the incorporation in 1968 of all academic departments into six faculty units, headed by deans, and the integration of academic departments into schools in 2004-08, with in turn a reduction in the number of faculties to three. Faculty deans have now come to play a strategic role in the management of the university. These changes since the 1960s facilitated the incorporation of many new teaching departments (including Business Studies, Dentistry, Drama and Film Studies, History of Art, Linguistics, Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering, Pharmacology and Pharmacy, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Psychology, Sociology and Statistics). And the recent programme of academic restructuring facilitated the establishment of five large trans-disciplinary research institutes in areas of particular international strength, one focusing on Adaptive Nanostructures and Nanodevices (CRANN), one on Neuroscience (TCIN), one on International Integration Studies (IIIS), one on research in the Arts and Humanities (the Trinity Long Room Hub), and the Trinity Biomedical Sciences Institute (TBSI).

In the wake of the huge growth in Irish student numbers attending the College, there was a new commitment to internationalisation in recent years and a move back towards the recruitment of international students, initially in the field of medicine, latterly across all disciplines, with a particular focus on Asia. The College was an early supporter of undergraduate exchange programmes (notably the E.U.-supported Erasmus/Socrates scheme), which have been in operation since the 1960s, and it has long been a favoured destination for U.S. visiting students. By 2023-24, 65.1 per cent of the student population came from Ireland, 9.9 per cent from other E.U. countries, 2 per cent from the United Kingdom, 8 per cent from the United States of America, and 15 per cent from other parts of the world; in all, the College's population of 22,120

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registered undergraduate and postgraduate students was drawn from some 130 nationalities (outside of Ireland).

In 1993 the College also began to boost recruitment from within Dublin city by developing a series of access programmes (TAP). The aim was to raise the number of young adults from socio-economic and ethnic groups underrepresented in higher education coming to university. At the same time, new efforts were made to recruit mature students. In 2022-23, 24.1 per cent of entrants to the university were from groups underrepresented in Irish higher education, comprising socio-economically disadvantaged young adult and mature students, and students with a disability.

Another major change in the second half of the twentieth century was in the composition of the academic staff: it became progressively more international. Until the 1930s the great majority had been doubly indigenous, being Irish-born and Dublin University graduates, including many who returned, like Ernest Walton who came back from Cambridge in 1934 and shared the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1951, arising out of his work two decades earlier on splitting the atom. The dominance of indigenous graduates in the academic community had all but disappeared by the 1980s, and the increasingly cosmopolitan character of the College helped drive change in the curriculum, in research, and in the general appetite for innovation across the institution. And there was meanwhile an utter transformation in the scale of the academic community, from the modest group of 125 who had made up the total academic staff in 1950.

In terms of physical development since that time, the College contributed to the small stock of fine modernist architecture in Dublin, beginning with the Boland Library¹ (1965-6), the Arts Building (1977-8), the O'Reilly Institute (1989), the Dental Hospital (1995-8), the Ussher Library (1999-2001) and the Long Room Hub (2008-10). But by 2000 the College had begun to burst out of its campus home, what with a huge expansion of its halls of residence off campus and with Nursing, Drama, and the Social Sciences putting down new roots a short distance away. But the most ambitious construction project in the College's history, the Trinity Biomedical Sciences Institute in Pearse St (2008-11), has become the strongest physical statement of the College's outward movement. The opening of this development, which now houses five academic schools, coincided with the development of the Trinity Academic Medical Centre, an alliance between the university and its two main teaching hospitals, St James's and AMNCH, Tallaght. And west along Pearse St, the Science Gallery was opened in 2008 as part of the new Naughton Institute: within a short time the Gallery became a highly successful centre for 'science outreach' and art-science collaboration, exploiting to the full the potential for creative interaction between college and capital city, until Science Gallery Dublin held its final exhibition in January 2022. Strategic redevelopment along Pearse St continued with the construction of a new Business School, completed in 2019, followed by a major new student residential block, Printing House Square, completed in 2022, built further west along Pearse St on the campus perimeter. And along at the eastern end of Pearse St, the development of Trinity East continues, a project whose vision is to deliver a major global centre for research and innovation.

Through times of turmoil as well as progress, Trinity has been the crucible for change across more than four centuries. Today, as Trinity imagines the world in the 21st century, it seeks to inspire new generations in new ways.

¹Named by the Board as the Berkeley Library in 1978, denamed by the Board in 2023, and renamed by the Board in 2024.