

The University of Dublin

Trinity College

A meeting of the University Council was held on Wednesday 25 November 2009 at 11.15 am in the Board Room.

<i>Present</i>	Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer, Senior Lecturer, Dean of Graduate Studies, Dean of Research, Dean of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr C Laudet, Dr E O'Dell, Dr M Ó Siochrú, Professor J Wickham, Dean of Engineering, Mathematics and Science, Professor J Fitzpatrick, Dr V Kelly, Dr M Lyons, Dr D O'Sullivan, Dr D Brennan, Professor M McCarron, Professor M Radomski, Dr H Mannan, Dr A O'Gara, Professor G Whyte, Ms M Furlong, Mr F Hughes, Mr N Timmon, Ms A Murphy.
<i>Apologies</i>	Provost, Registrar, Senior Tutor, Dean of Health Sciences, Ms D Flynn, Mr A Cooke, Mr A O'Callaghan, Secretary to the Scholars (Mr B Devlin).
<i>In attendance</i>	Librarian, Secretary to the College, Academic Secretary, Interim Chief Operating Officer.

SECTION A

- CL/09-10/048 **Minutes** The Minutes of the meeting of 28 October 2009 were approved and signed.
- CL/09-10/049 **Matters Arising from the Minutes** Responding to a query on research quality metrics (CL/09-10/035), the Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer informed Council that a paper on Academic Freedom would be brought to Council for consideration in the near future. He noted that the Working Group on Academic Freedom, established by Council, had met at the end of the last academic year, but due to time constraints, the Group has not had the opportunity to meet this academic year. A series of meetings is being planned and it is expected that the outcome of these meetings will be brought to Council early in Hilary Term 2010.
- Responding to a query on the status of the report on research quality metrics, the Dean of Research informed Council that the Working Group, established by Board, had met on a number of occasions and a report will be presented to Board at its meeting of the 8th December 2009. The view was expressed that the report should be brought also to Council for further discussion and approval as the matter was of academic importance.
- CL/09-10/050 **Provost's Report** In the absence of the Provost, there was no Provost's Report. The Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer noted, however, that the Strategic Plan 2009-14 would be launched later this afternoon in the new Innovation Academy space in

Foster's Place, and he noted that Council members had already received an invitation to attend the launch.

CL/09-10/051 Grade Inflation in Irish Universities A paper on Grade Inflation in Irish Universities by the Academic Secretary dated November 2009 was circulated. The Vice-Provost introduced this item noting that the Provost expressed concern that unless closely monitored and justified by rising standards, grade inflation could harm Trinity's reputation. The Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer commented that Council at its meeting of the 30th September 2009 (Actum CL/09-10/008) requested the Academic Secretary to prepare a position paper on grade inflation in Irish universities. The Academic Secretary speaking to this item, noted that the Report on Grade Inflation covers the periods 1994-2004 and 2005-2008. The first period was analysed in depth as part of a study by the 'Network for Irish Educational Standards' (NIES) and the second period, prepared by Trinity College, builds on that study. Both studies use the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) published figures on graduate totals and grade results.

Data sourced from the HEA's published figures on graduate totals and grade results were analysed over the years 1994-2004 (excluding 2003 as these figures were not available at the time of the study) and 2005-2008. The focus of the NIES study was on the proportion of First and Second Class Division One (2.1) awards. The data for the 2005-2008 period, prepared by Trinity College, focuses also on the proportion of First Class and Second Class Division One (2.1) awards and on all other grades.

There are considerable variations in the grade results data returned to the HEA by the Universities. University College Dublin (UCD) does not classify, at least in the HEA returns, its 'Arts' award. General Arts in UCD accounts for over 1,000 students representing a very high exclusion rate from the data, and as such distorts the UCD overall findings. The Trinity study on the 2005-2008 period also excludes the UCD Arts graduates.

The proportion of Trinity College students getting a 1st class honours grade rose from 6.8% in 1994 to 13.9% in 2004, representing a 104% increase. The award of 1st class honours grade in National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM) over the same period increased by 640%. The proportion of Trinity College students achieving a 2.1 honours grade rose from 23.2% in 1994 to 52.3% in 2004, representing a 125% increase. In the period 2005-2008 grade results appear slightly more stable.

The Trinity study (2005-2008) analysed the full range of grades awarded by all seven Irish universities in the period 2005-2008. These data suggest that in the 2005-2008 period, the award of First Class Honours grade has on average remained relatively constant in the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), Trinity College, University College Cork, (UCC) and the University of Limerick (UL).

Considering the award of Second Class, Division 1 grade, there is no discernible sectoral trend: in the case of Trinity there has been an increase from 44% to 50% in the 2005-2008 period, in Dublin City University (DCU) there is an increase from 42% to 54%, and in UCC a decrease from 53% to 51%. Considering the award of 2.2 honours grade there is on average no significant increase or decrease in the case of UCD, NUIG, TCD, UCC, and UL. The pattern in NUIM and DCU is slightly more erratic. There is, however, a significant decrease in the award of a pass degree grade in Trinity College, from 14% in 2005/06 to 5% (180%) in 2007/08.

In considering grade inflation at third level, it is important to assess trends at second level. The proportion of candidates achieving 500+ points has increased steadily from 3.8% in 1995 to 8.5% in 2009, representing an increase of 124%. The increase,

however, from 2005 (8%) to 2009 (8.5%) is a more modest 6.25%. The proportion of candidates achieving points in the 400-499 increased from 15.5% in 1995 to 21.5% in 2009, representing an increase of 38.7%. The increase, however, from 2005 (20.9%) to 2009 (21.5%) is 2.9%.

Overall the figures suggest that the increase in grade inflation has reached a plateau with small variations only across the different point-bands since 2005. It is worth noting, however, that grade inflation has been in the higher bands (400+ and 500+) over the period 1995-2009.

The Academic Secretary commented that use of 'inflation' to describe the increase in the award of a first class honours degree is probably too pejorative as the increase could be explained by many factors including increased student participation, greater assessment transparency, greater focus on learning outcomes, greater student and parental expectations, and lower standards. The proliferation of Master level degrees with admission requirements of a 2.1 honours grade in the primary degree is also likely to be a significant factor in grade inflation at this level.

Council welcomed the Report on Grade Inflation in Irish Universities and the following comments were made. While on the surface the statistics would give rise for concern about grade inflation, it is important to understand global developments in education. External Examiners for Trinity's examinations repeatedly comment on the high standards and on the relatively low number of 1st class degrees awarded relative to, for example, similar courses in UK universities. Trinity College is not only competing nationally but also internationally and as such it is vital that students and graduates of the University are not disadvantaged in the labour marketplace or in accessing postgraduate opportunities in other prestigious universities worldwide. Given the high academic achievements and ability of students entering undergraduate courses in Trinity College, it is surprising that relative to other Irish universities, that the University of Dublin awards fewer 1st class degrees. Council felt that on the whole the award of a 1st class degree to 15% of graduates did not represent grade inflation. It was further felt that the increase of the award of the Second Class, Division 1, did merit some consideration. Discussing this matter, Council believed that this degree classification was more problematic, especially as students who barely scrape into this classification are classed the same as students at the higher end of a 2.1. While it was not deemed necessary to change the degree classification structure, it was argued that presenting grade point average (GPA) scores would distinguish the best students within the different degree classifications.

In response to queries, the Academic Secretary noted that grade inflation was a concern in the UK, and she reported the introduction of a pilot scheme in the UK to replace the degree classification system. The Scheme known as HEAR (Higher Education Achievement Report) is a new method of recording students' achievements providing details of students' marks as well as noting non-academic achievements. She commented on the different practices in place in respect of GPA scores, noting that the use of GPA scores would provide greater differentiation and would distinguish students' achievements within an honours degree award. It does not necessarily solve the problem of grade inflation or of measuring comparative standards across the sector. In response to a query, she confirmed that there is also concern in the US about grade inflation, despite the widespread use of GPA in the US.

In conclusion, Council recommended that the Undergraduate Studies Committee investigate the introduction of grade point average scores as part of the existing degree classification system and to make recommendations to Council on this matter at a future date.

Incorporating any amendments approved at subsequent Council meetings

CL/09-10/052 **eStrategy - Student Administration System** A vision document dated 6th November 2009 was circulated. The Academic Secretary introduced this item and made a powerpoint presentation to Council defining the vision for a new student administration system (SAS). She commented that the SAS was part of a larger eStrategy programme that included a new financial system and an update to the existing staff system. The vision document is the outcome of a very comprehensive analysis of existing academic administration practices and processes. She defined the guiding principles of a new SAS as:

- having a single source of high-quality student information;
- processes and systems being aligned and standardised;
- processes and services being designed around the needs of students, staff and the university;
- having improved access to information, increased self-service and access to online services;
- providing improved decision-making and management information;
- taking a student lifecycle approach to requirements and processes.

The Academic Secretary explained that a student lifecycle approach considers course planning and management, recruitment and admissions, registration and course study, assessment and progression, and graduation and alumni management. She highlighted the key issues in respect of each of these approaches and noted, where relevant, the implications for existing academic and administration practices.

Council welcomed the vision document and commented on the importance of any new system being intuitive and easy to navigate. It is vital that staff and students are not wasting time trying to access information. The availability of online self-serve facilities was commonplace today, but it was important that there is adequate human backup to support users. The view was expressed that in order for a new system to deliver benefits some existing academic practices would have to change. This view was countered on the grounds that technology should not dictate academic priorities. Council heard that the implementation of a new SAS was critical and as part of the process of choosing a vendor it would be necessary to define Trinity's requirements. This means reviewing existing academic course regulations and administrative practices. If there are sound pedagogical or administrative reasons for retaining a high level of customisation and variation across the College then these would be presented to the eStrategy Steering Group and, where necessary, to Council for consideration and decision. It was noted that there may be justification in running different systems, but the cost of maintaining different systems may be prohibitive. While flexibility is a key consideration, it is also necessary to have a rules-based structure. The Academic Secretary noted that as a result of the requirement by the Higher Education Authority to return for funding purposes student data based on modules taken and credits awarded, there has been a very high level of change already in course regulations across College. She noted, as an example of where further change is necessary, that the weighting assigned to assessment must correspond with the credit value of the module(s) assessed. These types of changes would have to be implemented regardless of whether or not a new SAS was purchased. The Interim Chief Operating Officer, in response to a query, informed Council that following an expression of interest from suppliers of student administration systems, College has selected three vendors to engage in a competitive dialogue process. He noted the importance of not wasting money trying to find solutions that do not make operational or strategic sense.

The Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer bringing the discussion to a close, stressed the urgency of implementing a new SAS, noting difficulties with the existing bespoke student administration system and the need to find the right balance between processes and systems.

CL/09-10/053 Quality Implementation Plans addressing the recommendations of the School reviews for the School of Histories and Humanities dated 16th November 2009 and the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy dated 6th November 2009 were circulated. The Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences brought Council through the Plans and noted in particular the recommendations that both Schools felt they could not implement principally because their implementation was outside the remit of the Schools. He drew Council's attention to comments on workload balances, high levels of student contact hours, financial uncertainty, peer observation of teaching, and the process for approving course proposals. The Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer commented on the need to have a rigorous course approval process in place to ensure the maintenance of standards and quality.

CL/09-10/054 Any Other Business There was no other business.

SECTION B

CL/09-10/055 Graduate Studies Committee The Council noted and approved the recommendations as set out in the minutes of the Graduate Studies Committee from its meeting of 22 October 2009, which had been circulated.

CL/09-10/056 Student Services Committee The Council noted and approved the recommendations as set out in the minutes of the Student Services Committee from its meeting of 22 October 2009, which had been circulated.

SECTION C

CL/09-10/057 Higher Degrees—Reports of Examiners The Council noted and approved the reports of examiners on candidates for higher degrees, approved by the sub-committee of Board and Council on 28 October 2009 and noted by Board on 11 November 2009, as circulated.

(i) **Professional Higher Degrees by Research Alone**

DChDent Rona Leith; Seamus Sharkey.

(ii) **Higher Degrees by Research Alone**

PhD Inmaculada Arnedillo Sanchez; Anne-Marie Baird; Sally Barlow; Bethan Collins; Floriana Cuccureddu; Evelyn Gallagher; Siobhan Hargis; Diego Honorato; Alexandros Laios; Seamus Sean Tomas Lawless; Treasa Nic Suibhne; Maria Parsons; Andrea Piccin; Olivier Van Parys.

MSc Tanya Fleming; John Thomas Jude Tobin.

CL/09-10/058 Biochemistry and Immunology - Senior Sophister Course Director - Molecular Medicine The Council noted the nomination of Dr V Kelly, 2009-2011.

CL/09-10/059 Graduate Studies business requiring Council approval The Council noted and approved a memorandum from the Dean of Graduate Studies, circulated, dated 16 November 2009.

CL/09-10/060 Student Cases The Council noted and approved the request of the Senior Lecturer for four named undergraduate students to repeat a year of their courses.

SECTION D

In compliance with the Data Protection Acts this information is restricted.

Signed

Date