Opening Access to Education

The opportunity to lead a rewarding life, fulfil your potential, and contribute to society starts with the opportunity to participate in higher education.

And yet millions around the world are denied this opportunity, and across most OECD countries, access (and graduation) rates between low-income and upper-income students are actually widening. In some of the world’s top-ranked institutions, students from low-income backgrounds now account for just one in twenty enrolments.

Equality of access is a global issue and Trinity has taken a leading role on this since the launch of the Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) in the 1990s – pioneering programmes which have successfully challenged thinking about who can survive and thrive in our best universities.

Since the start of the millennium, over 2,000 students from low income communities have progressed to Trinity, with many demonstrating high academic attainment, particularly in the latter half of their degree course. In 2016, 268 students entered Junior Fresh year through alternative entry routes established by TAP. Strikingly, both the progression and the completion rate for TAP students in 2016/17 was 91%.

Trinity is currently spearheading three on-going innovations which are resulting in a deepening and widening of the Trinity Access Programmes, so that they reach more people, both nationally and internationally.
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The Trinity Access 21 project (TA21), developed in 2014–17 with support from Google, impacts on educational disadvantage and supports post-secondary educational progression by partnering with schools to develop strong ‘college going cultures’ and innovative approaches to teaching and learning through the use of four ‘core practices’: Pathways to College, Mentoring, Leadership through Service and 21C Teaching & Learning. The aim of TA21 is to build capacity within partner schools so that all students are informed and prepared to make post-secondary educational choices which will support them to realise their full educational potential.

In 2014–17, the TA21 project carried out a longitudinal, action research project which has tracked the educational outcomes of 1,100 students in 11 Trinity Access Programme (TAP) linked schools. This evidence base has revealed the positive impact that TA21 has had upon whole school culture - increasing college-going aspirations in students, and supporting the increased use of innovative, project-based teaching practices within the classroom. Based on this evidence, the project is now poised to scale nationally in TA21 Phase 2; expanding its reach and range of partnerships across other communities in the 2017-20 period. This growth phase has been supported by a range of companies and individuals, in partnership with the government, through the Social Innovation Fund Ireland Education Fund.

Spearheaded by TAP in 2014, College Awareness Week (CAW) is now the largest public awareness campaign in Ireland focusing on the benefits of a post-secondary education. With the involvement of 225,000 participants over the last three years, the campaign is a firm fixture in the calendars of formal and informal education providers. In November 2016, there were over 1,200 events logged on the website. These events took place in 26 counties and were delivered by pre-schools, primary, second level schools, adult and community education centres, libraries, and businesses, Further Education and Training Centres and higher education institutions. Trinity took a whole-campus approach to CAW, with over 18 events across campus. The campaign has been supported by philanthropic and state sources for the last three years.

Foundation Year in Lady Margaret Hall
In 2016 Trinity hosted a delegation from Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University to showcase the impact of the Trinity Access Programmes. This has developed into a partnership for a four-year project, adapting the TAP Foundation Course to the context in Oxford University. (The TAP Foundation Course is a one-year academic, social and personal course to prepare students to progress to college. Launched in the late 1990s, it was the catalyst for Trinity to precipitate, with other Irish higher education institutes, the development of a national scheme, operated through the CAO: the Higher Education Access Route (www.accesscollege.ie), which has admitted over 20,000 students nationwide since 2012).

The first course cohort, entering in September 2016, has now completed their Foundation Year in Lady Margaret Hall, and 70% of the group are progressing to Oxford University, with the remaining 30% progressing to other selective higher education institutions. Among the second Foundation Year cohort, which began in September 2017, are some extraordinary young people, including a self-taught young mathematician from Afghanistan, who arrived in the UK five years ago, and a gifted young creative writer from the UK care system.

Success for the Trinity Access Programmes is multi-layered - beginning with the student and extending to systemic change. Each student who progresses through to graduation changes their own story, changes the University's story, and changes the stories told within their own schools and communities. These stories become the next generation's realities. With the help of our partners in education, government, business and philanthropy, Trinity looks forward to helping to create many more such stories, nationally and internationally.