The fox knows many little things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.

At the start of the year I identified ‘one big thing’ as my priority issue for the year– the challenge of defining, articulating and finding policies to support the concept of the Trinity Education in the undergraduate curriculum.

As part of this work the Assistant Academic Secretary and I undertook to visit all 24 Schools, to hear examples of best practice, identify barriers to innovation and teaching excellence, and get a better sense of what goes on in the delivery of our undergraduate programmes across College. To date 23 Schools have been visited. Some of these meetings were with the entire School Executive, including student representatives, some were with the School Teaching and Learning Committee, and some were with a smaller group of key stakeholders. It was clear from these visits that there is an extraordinary range of innovative teaching and learning practices currently being deployed across the three faculties, and often times the College is not aware of them at a centralised level. It was also clear that some programmes were more innovative that others, and that there were a number of barriers and obstacles to delivering on the educational mission of the College.

This work on the Trinity Education built-on work I had been involved in last year, including the three Forums on Assessments held in May 2012. It also built explicitly on the excellent work done by one of my predecessors, Professor Sheila Greene, whose working group produced a strategy to promote and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in Trinity in 2003.¹ The policy had been developed because of ‘the perceived imbalance between teaching and research’ which had developed over a number of years in Trinity.² Professor Greene visited the Undergraduate Studies Committee on 21 February 2012 to discuss the work of her group, and the report (which in theory, if not in practice, has served as the

College’s teaching and learning strategy since 2003). We discussed the parts which had been implemented, the parts which had not been and the reasons why, and it was noted that while ‘there is much exemplary material contained in the 2003 Report and the Policy on the Broad Curriculum’ much ‘work remains in relation to the full implementation of relevant recommendations’.  

The failure of College to implement fully the recommendations of the 2003 strategy can be attributed to a number of factors. Certainly some of the recommendations were a decade ahead of their time. For example, it recommended as a key principle:

‘The College should explicitly recognise that it is a learning organisation and therefore that all staff and students are part of a community of learners.’

A new report from the OECD has as one of its key recommendations that:

‘Higher education institutions ought to cast themselves as learning organisations in order to embrace quality teaching.’

The stated commitment that all undergraduate programmes should have a research dissertation element (Objective 6.1) also reinforced the strong, research-led focus in the curriculum that should be one of the distinctive features of a Trinity Education. However this objective was never realised.

Reflecting not only on the failure to implement the 2003 recommendations in their entirety, but also on the way the document has effectively been ignored for the past decade, its existence unknown to all but the most intrepid of web searcher, I realised that for any new document to be successful it must have buy-in from the entire College community. Rather than being a document high on aspiration, but short on action, it must reflect the shared educational values of the College, and must put in place policies which could not be ignored. Therefore instead of producing a teaching and learning strategy, a short document of six pages in length (to follow international best practice) which could be produced quickly, and ignored at length, I decided to take a different approach.

The intention is to produce a document which can be discussed at various committees (including an initial discussion at Council), and then be debated by the entire College community, staff and students, before being brought back to Council for approval. The following timeframe is proposed. Following a discussion at this committee, I will bring a revised report and recommendations to Council on 15 May, so that the framework for engaging with the bigger issues can be put in place before the start of the new academic year. More substantial recommendations will require a longer lead-in time for

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3 See UGS/11-12/044 in Undergraduate Studies Committee Minutes of 21 February 2012 (www.tcd.ie/vpcao/council/assets/pdf/USCminutes210212.pdf).
implementation. The final document will be brought to Council in January 2014, so that all recommendations can be worked on in time for the start of the 2014/15 academic year.

The following document represents a first draft of this initial (interim) report. There are three parts. The first part is an attempt to summarise the Trinity Education in 500 words, setting-out what is special and distinctive about the undergraduate curriculum at Trinity. This represents the ‘high aspirations’ of the strategy, and is the public articulation of what is distinctive about a Trinity Education. The second part provides some wider context, and situates the document within the educational history of Trinity, not only the 2003 document but also much earlier policies. This is important to reinforce the idea that this is not a ‘new’ document rejecting the excellent work being done in Trinity and thus undermining our current educational provision, but something that builds upon centuries of excellence in delivering upon the educational mission of the College. This section also situates the strategy within some wider theories of teaching and learning. The third part provides some immediate recommendations to enable a framework to be put in place to ensure the Trinity Education can be delivered across all programmes at the undergraduate level. These are specific policies needed to ensure the high aspirations are delivered upon. The draft document also links with the Dean of Graduate Studies’ report on Online Education, as well as a document the Dean of Research is developing on Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

I welcome your comments and feedback on both this draft and the wider strategy, and the start of a wider debate about the Trinity Education.

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Senior Lecturer/Dean of Undergraduate Studies
The Trinity Education

PART I

Key Summary

The Trinity Education is the promise of an exceptional educational experience centred on a research-inspired curriculum, where all undergraduate students are encouraged to reach their full potential and develop the essential skills necessary for lifelong learning.

The challenges of the 21st century require graduates who are not just trained for their first job, but who have been educated to face an ever-changing world with confidence. No matter what subjects are studied at Trinity, there is a shared philosophy underpinning each curriculum, based around encouraging and enabling every student to become a questioning, independent and critical thinker, through their engagement both inside and outside the classroom. The Trinity Education is deliberately T-shaped (or Trinity-shaped), providing both specialist expertise in the chosen programme of study (the vertical line of the T) and the opportunity to develop a range of more general skills (the horizontal line of the T). Trinity makes a specific commitment that every student, no matter what they study, will have opportunities to develop analytical, presentation and other transferable skills, and engage in both independent and group projects during their undergraduate years. To match these learning outcomes, innovative assessments are designed to ensure that students are challenged creatively and not just through written examinations. Most Trinity undergraduate programmes are four (to five) years in duration, and this enables the delivery of a genuinely research-inspired curriculum, where every single undergraduate in their final year conducts their own independent research project or dissertation, thus equipping them with the deeper level skills required for active learning. This promise of a distinctive research-led educational experience continues through into the postgraduate world, where creativity and originality are actively supported.

As a global university, Trinity attracts students both from around Ireland and from around the world, who are inspired by the distinctive education on offer, and in turn the College sends students to other world-class universities on semester or year-long exchanges. This international dimension, whether home or away, encourages imagination, creativity, and
the development of new perspectives on the world, and provides unique opportunities for personal growth. Trinity believes that this kind of educational experience should be open to all, and is working to reform the current admissions procedures at a national level so that students with the academic ability and potential to benefit the most from a Trinity Education are able to avail of it.

The emphasis at Trinity is on the full academic life cycle, supporting students at all stages from application to entry and all the way to graduation. There is a commitment to ensuring the successful transition of students from second to third-level, and the importance of the first-year experience is recognised and supported.

The successful delivery of the Trinity Education – across all subjects and faculties – is achieved by an explicit commitment to curriculum renewal and review. Each academic unit has its own curriculum unit which ensures that all modules are designed around a set of guiding principles, and that innovative teaching and learning strategies, supported by a range of assessment methods, help develop both specialist expertise in the chosen area of study, and wider transferable skills, such as presentation and teamwork skills. Trinity explicitly defines itself as a learning organisation, forming a community of students and staff engaged in the core mission of education and research. The Trinity-shaped Education builds upon centuries of expertise in the area of teaching and learning, and also looks to the future to meet new opportunities and challenges.

This statement of the philosophy, principles, and policies of the Trinity Education is therefore a twenty-first century articulation of ideas which have evolved since the foundation of the university in 1592, and reinforces College’s commitment to meeting the hopes and expectations of students and society, as well as the requirements of a rapidly changing world. This is the promise of the Trinity Education.
PART II

Introduction

In this document Trinity College Dublin reaffirms its commitment to providing a world-class, research-inspired education for all of its students. Trinity has had a long commitment to fostering continuous improvement in education. Here we reassert that quality teaching is a key strategic objective which will be supported through curriculum renewal and the development of new policies as part of our core mission in education and research. Over the past number of years there has been a considerable emphasis on the importance of third-level research in regenerating the Irish economy, and rightly so. But Trinity recognises that it also provides an invaluable public good through the education of high-quality graduates, equipped with the critical and independent thinking skills that are needed to face the challenges of the 21st century. Therefore we take this opportunity to renew our promise to delivering our core mission in education and research, as we set out our vision for the Trinity educational experience over the next eight years.

At the heart of the philosophy behind this document is an explicit understanding that Trinity is a learning organisation which embraces teaching excellence, and which supports a diverse range of student learning.

Quality Teaching and Learning

We share the definition developed by the OECD, and others, that ‘Quality teaching is the use of pedagogical techniques to produce learning outcomes for students’ and that the ultimate goal of quality teaching policies is ‘to improve the quality of the learning experiences of students’. Teaching and learning cannot, of course, be easily separated, and this therefore requires a holistic approach at the policy level. Developing quality teaching strategies involves several dimensions including ‘the effective design of curriculum and course content, a variety of learning contexts, soliciting and using feedback, and effective assessment of learning outcomes’.

Trinity articulated its educational values and commitments in 2003, and affirmed that all its students, administrative and support staff, and academic staff work together to form a community of learning. This partnership in learning is a core principle of the College, where learning is defined as a process through which understanding is developed and becomes more profound. Ultimately, learning transforms oneself and one’s view of the world. Teaching is a process that supports learning. It involves curriculum design, course management, instruction, assessment and an active commitment to scholarship. Teaching is the creation and sustaining of a social and academic context that promotes effective learning. In Trinity, we aim to create a successful context in which effective and productive learning can take place. Trinity College is a community of learners. And our staff and students are engaged together in the learning experience. One of our main shared goals is to help undergraduate students to emerge from their four years in Trinity with a range of valuable skills and attributes, and to be on the road to development of their full potential as people.

This statement of the philosophy, principles, and policies of the Trinity Education is a twenty-first century articulation of ideas which have evolved since the foundation of the university in 1592, as College worked to meet the needs and expectations of students and society, as well as the requirements of a rapidly changing world.

Historical Context

Recent research has shown that over the past fifty years there has been a rise in the demand for graduates with strong non-routine cognitive and interpersonal skills. As an OECD report in 2012 demonstrated, ‘Graduates are entering a world of employment that is characterised by greater uncertainty, speed, risk complexity and interdisciplinary working’. The role of higher education teaching is changing, but it has always been this way.

In the nineteenth century Richard MacDonnell (Provost of Trinity from 1851 to 1867) set out a number of key principles to underpin the educational experience at Trinity College Dublin, recognising that ‘the lessons of experience’ offered a way of deciding which of ‘the rules and

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the usages which form the mechanism of our institution’ should be reformed. Answering those who claimed there was rashness in changing what has been thus sanctioned by time’, he affirmed that ‘that very period of time is the ground of the argument’.  

In the late-twentieth century Thomas Mitchell (Provost of Trinity from 1991 to 2001) declared that ‘the primary goal of undergraduate education is development of the mind, and of the mental skills of speech and communication, of reasoning and analysis, of creativity and imagination and of moral discernment.’ Developing these principles, he noted that ‘these do not come from studies randomly assembled or from narrowly focused specialist training. They require a broad study of core areas of human knowledge, which must be backed by an active approach to learning, by problem-solving, by the Socratic challenge to use reason to test and question and explore’.  

In the twenty-first century Trinity reaffirms that ‘all undergraduate education, whether the major focus of study is English literature, history, law or dentistry, must be governed by these considerations, and that the undergraduate experience across the range of disciplines must incorporate exposure to the seminal areas of learning and to rigorous forms of intellectual stimulation and challenge’. In this way Trinity continues in its historic mission to stimulate the minds of our students, to educate professionals, scholars, and thinkers, and will fulfil its sacred responsibility to society, ‘to foster creativity and progress, informed by appreciation of the different domains of learning, of the many facets of human achievement, and of the many-sided needs of a developed society’.

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Supporting Quality Teaching

Trinity recognises that supporting quality teaching requires a multi-level endeavour and will support it at three inter-dependent levels, as recommended in the 2012 report on *Fostering Quality Teaching in Higher Education*. These are at the:

- **Institution-wide level:** including projects such as policy design, and support to organisation and internal quality assurance systems.
- **Programme level:** comprising actions to measure and enhance the design, content and delivery of the programmes within a department and school.
- **Individual level:** including initiatives that help teachers achieve their mission, encouraging them to innovate and to support improvements to student learning and adopt a learner-oriented focus.\(^\text{11}\)

We also recognise that support at the programme level is the key area, as this allows improvement in quality teaching at the discipline level and across the institution.

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\(^{11}\) Hénard and Roseveare, ‘Fostering Quality Teaching in Higher Education’, p. 7.
PART III

Recommendations

1. Every programme should have some kind of Curriculum and Innovation strand to support curriculum design, renewal, innovation, assessment and pedagogy for all of the courses delivered by a School or Department. A key objective of these units will be to ensure each course delivers on the promises of the Trinity Education, by placing the emphasis on the links between modules at the programme level rather than on individual offerings. Every course should be able to demonstrate how the design of the curriculum and assessments has enabled graduates to achieve both the specialist and general skills that are part of the Trinity Education. These strands could work as subgroups of the School’s Teaching and Learning Committee to ensure the successful delivery of the following recommendations.

2. Building on this work, each programme will be asked to articulate by January 2014 how each curriculum will:
   (a) Support the first-year experience for all its students and assist in the successful transition from second to third-level.
   (b) Use innovative curriculum design and assessments, especially at the Freshman level, to help develop group/teamwork, presentation, and other transferable skills.
   (c) Ensure a successful research-inspired approach, especially at the Sophister level.

It is envisaged that every new course proposal will have to explicitly address how it embodies the Trinity Education principles and philosophy, and existing courses will be subject to review under the same headings every three years.

3. A key part of the Trinity Education philosophy is that every undergraduate should conduct their own independent research project or dissertation in the final-year, and that this should not just be an option for those who are considered suitable for the challenge. The target is that by 2015/16 every single undergraduate will be part of a programme where an independent project or dissertation is an integral part of
the final year. There are a number of obstacles to achieving this target, including resources and recognising and rewarding the effort involved in supervising this work, but recognition of this principle is central to the whole Trinity Education philosophy.

4. **Feedback** at both a module and a programme level is essential to assess whether the key principles of the Trinity Education philosophy are being delivered across a programme, and not just in individual modules. Successful feedback should also **feed-forward** into other modules, and students should always be informed of how their feedback has been influential whether at a module or a programme level.

5. The Trinity Education philosophy recognises the importance of learning outside of the classroom, and the central role played by **extra- and co-curricular activities**. Programmes should ensure, as much as is practical, that timetables are designed around the students interests, and not staff preferences, and timetabling clashes which affect student participation outside the classroom should be investigated by the School’s Teaching and Learning Committee in search of a resolution.

6. Every graduate should receive a **broader transcript** which should include academic results, evidence of the development and assessment of the wider attributes, as well as involvement in extra and co-curricular activities. For this to be meaningful, every undergraduate must have the opportunity to develop these wider attributes, as well as the specialist expertise on the programme.

7. The creation of a **Trinity Centre for Academic Development (TCAD)** to replace CAPSL. Its objectives would be to:
   
   (a) promote and enhance quality teaching at institution-wide, programme and individual level, and to fulfil the Trinity Education by fostering a university-wide culture of teaching excellence grounded in scholarship, critical enquiry and collaboration.

   (b) maximise the effective use of teaching resources, including learning technologies, to meet Trinity’s goals and priorities.

   (c) keep Trinity on the cutting edge of teaching excellence and innovation by fostering a community of peers engaged in reflection and improved student learning, and by advancing and stimulating new thinking, cross-university discussion, and the sharing of successes and lessons learnt.
8. There is also a commitment to introduce regular programme reviews, and look at grade bands and marking criteria.