The TCD Strategic Plan 2009 – 2014 emphasizes ‘the inclusivity of our community, which offers equality of access and opportunity to all, seeking out and recognizing talent wherever it exists’. College has done much good work to make this aspiration a reality, but is restricted from doing more by the current admissions system, which ensures that most places in College are allocated on the basis of academic performance in a single set of examinations. This discussion paper invites Council to consider the area of admissions and whether College can better achieve a diverse student body which is enthusiastic and passionate about learning, motivated and suitable for its chosen courses, and with the academic ability and potential to be inspired by everything that TCD has to offer.

The discussion paper also looks at the TCD undergraduate curriculum and some recent challenges to it, and suggests that TCD has already developed the policies which can ‘stimulate active, not passive learning, and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers by posing problems and encouraging students to apply the information and concepts to a variety of new situations’ (National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030). Edmund Burke warned about the dangers of overthrowing an existing system and replacing it with a theoretical framework not grounded in practical experience. Council has long recognized the need for College ‘to be radical in its thinking in relation to teaching’ to ensure it developed graduates who were ‘creative and analytical thinkers’ (6 October 2002) and Council is invited to consider how best to support and renew the current undergraduate curriculum in the face of external pressures.
Paper from the Working Group on Admissions and the Curriculum
To be discussed at University Council on 15 February 2012
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Working Group on Admissions and the Curriculum

Foreword by the Senior Lecturer

I was asked by the Provost and the Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer to prepare a response to the ‘Hyland Report’, following the HEA/NCCA conference on the transition from second to third-level education in September 2011. To assist me in this work I formed a working group bringing together expert opinion from a range of stakeholders, including academics from all three faculties in TCD, the Students Union Education Officer, and an external advisor to provide a different perspective. The working group met on five occasions between October 2011 and January 2012 and, as the issues were discussed, it was agreed that it was necessary to widen the focus to more effectively address some of the challenges facing higher education in this area. The expanded remit of the working group and its membership was subsequently discussed and noted by the Undergraduate Studies Committee, a sub-committee of the University Council (see Appendix 1 for membership and terms of reference of the working group).

This discussion paper arises out of the deliberations of the working group and explores some high-level criteria and principles. It does not attempt to propose a definitive model for a new admissions system, or offer suggestions about possible pilot schemes. Rather it is an attempt to generate a discussion about how TCD would like to face these challenges, and whether it wishes to assert its autonomy in the area and define its own admission criteria and principles.

At present TCD has a formulaic admissions system, with places on most courses allocated on the basis of the Leaving Certificate examination. This limits how TCD can articulate what it is looking for in its students, and how it defines its educational ambitions and aspirations on the world stage, because in most cases it has no choice over who it admits. It is worth noting that the fifteen highest ranked universities in the world examined in Appendix 2 use a number of different modalities to admit students.
Each institution clearly articulates its own vision of itself, and identifies the kinds of students who it believes will thrive in its own educational setting.

The working group does not support decoupling admission to TCD from the Leaving Certificate examination. Rather it suggests that the Leaving Certificate should be just one of a number of different modalities which are used to identify students with the academic ability and promise to succeed and thrive academically at TCD. It recommends escaping from the ‘straightjacket’ of a formulaic admissions system which has been heavily criticised by experts (see Appendix 3 for a summary of the criticisms identified in the ‘Hyland report’), and considering other ways of admitting a diverse student body which is enthusiastic and passionate about learning, motivated and suitable for its chosen courses, and with the academic ability and potential to be inspired by everything that TCD has to offer. At a time of limited resources, the ability to match students more effectively to the right courses, and thus increase retention rates, would also be a significant benefit. Any change would have to be gradual, and the working group suggests that once the high-level criteria were agreed work could then begin on developing proposals for how this might be implemented in practice. This could take the form of one or more pilot schemes, which would be introduced on a limited basis, with perhaps a small number of places allocated, to test how it might be implemented.

Section A of the report proposes that TCD should attempt to define explicitly the criteria which it believes should be at the heart of its admission policy. Looking at both current activity and stated aspirations, it suggests three criteria: academic achievement, potential, and diversity, criteria similar to those of the world’s leading universities and which reflect TCD’s ambition to further become a university of global consequence. The first two criteria relate to the individual student, with the third referring to the composition of the overall student body. Alternatively it may be useful to consider additional criteria, such as motivation/suitability for the course. The criteria might thus be framed in terms of: academic achievement, potential, and motivation/suitability for
the course, which are underpinned by a recognition of the educational benefits of
diversity.

Section B is an attempt to define the principles which should underpin any new
admissions policy based around whatever criteria are agreed upon. Section C is a
reflection on the undergraduate curriculum and is a response to some recent challenges
to it.

The discussion paper does not suggest what a new admissions policy would look like, or
how it would be implemented, and these are areas that would need to be developed in
a follow-up phase after engaging with Schools and stakeholders across College to
explore these areas further. Ways of developing innovative approaches would be
brought back to the Undergraduate Studies Committee and to Council, and these
proposals would have to be assessed under a number of headings, including practicality
and feasibility. Section D summarises some of the areas for possible discussion and
offers suggestions for future activities.

Speaking at the Royal Irish Academy on 31 May 2011, the Minister for Education and
Skills, Mr. Ruairi Quinn, T.D., noted the need ‘to approach the way we do things with
fresh perspectives. Higher education in its traditional role as a stronghold of
independent thought, autonomy and uncorrupted inquiry, is ideally placed to identify
and articulate innovative ways forward’. The TCD working group endorses this view.

This discussion paper is one attempt to identify and articulate innovative ways forward
in the debate about admissions and the undergraduate curriculum and respond to some
of the challenges facing higher education.

Dr. Patrick Geoghegan,

Senior Lecturer/Dean of Undergraduate Studies

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^1 See www.education.ie or www.ria.ie for the full text of the speech.
Section A
Defining the Criteria for Admissions to TCD

Introduction

A.1. TCD agrees with the mission statement of the Department of Education and Skills and seeks to provide ‘high-quality education, which will enable individuals to achieve their full potential, participate fully as members of society, and contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development’. In its Strategic Plan for 2009 to 2014, TCD emphasises the value placed on developing an inclusive community, ‘which offers equality of access and opportunity to all, seeking out and recognising talent wherever it exists’ and this remains a key priority. This mission is in line with the high-level objectives of the National Strategy for Education to 2030 which seeks to develop ‘an excellent higher education system that will attract and respond to a wide range of potential students from Ireland and abroad and [which] will be fully accessible’. The National Strategy recognises that ‘institutions will be autonomous’ and will ‘respond flexibly to the changing needs of the economy and of society’. The following discussion paper represents an attempt by the TCD working group to articulate and define a response to these changing needs and challenges. The TCD working group proposes that TCD can best contribute to the higher education mission by reforming the admissions process for entry, and by continuing the renewal of its existing undergraduate curriculum, not by overthrowing an educational framework that is already educating graduates of world-class reputation and ability.

HEA/NCCA report, From Transaction to Transition

A.2. In December 2011 the published HEA/NCCA report, From Transaction to Transition, looked at concerns about the transition of students from second-level to third-level

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2 The mission statement can be found on the home webpage of the Department of Education and Skills (www.education.ie).
4 National Strategy in Higher Education to 2030, p. 27.
education. It focused on the problems in the senior-cycle curriculum and the teaching and examining methods, the role of the Leaving Certificate exam as the key determinant of access to higher education, and the knock-on effects that approaches to learning acquired in second-level have on third-level. The TCD working group sees value in some of the recommendations that have been made for reforming the senior-cycle curriculum (proposed actions 1-10) and recognises that activity at second-level can affect student learning at third-level. The negative effects of the ‘points race’ can be carried through to third-level and this must be compensated for at third-level. Some of these issues will be addressed in Section C.

Problems with the Leaving Certificate Examination

A.3. Ireland currently has a formulaic admissions process, using the Leaving Certificate examination to decide how most places at HEIs are filled. The clear advantage of the current examination system is that it is uniform and objective, but there are criticisms that it is also predictable and perpetuates social inequality. Another problem is that the examination does not measure ‘creativity, motivation, passion for learning, and other skills and attitudes that are important for academic success’. Robert J. Sternberg, former IBM Professor of Psychology and Education at Yale University and author of *College Admissions for the 21st Century*, has suggested that if ‘the goal of admissions is to admit people who will be active citizens and leaders of society’, then a formulaic admissions system would ‘seem to miss the mark almost entirely’.

The problems that have been identified in the use of CAO points to determine admissions are worth considering for the effect they have on how the Leaving Certificate curriculum is taught. The emphasis is placed on ‘cracking the code’, on

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memorisation and rote learning. Recently there has been a debate in the letters pages of the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times* about rote learning and its educational value or otherwise. It should be noted that the HEA/NCCA document uses the term in the context of ‘memorising pre-packaged answers and essays and their strategic deployment in the right slots’, rather than the development of memory skills which may be seen to have a certain value. It should also be noted that the problem is not that excellent students ‘crack’ the code, rather it is decoded for certain students by teachers and grind schools, thus giving an unfair advantage to some in the examination. The negative effects of ‘the points race’ are acknowledged, and carry through to third-level, where the process tends to produce learners who are not well prepared for university education.

Some of the proposed changes to the Leaving Certificate curriculum are to be welcomed, but it remains to be seen how they will affect teaching and learning at second-level, and how long it will take before these changes are noticed at third-level. More importantly, these changes will not address the more systemic problem that only one kind of academic achievement is being measured and used for admissions.

Addressing similar problems in education in the United States, Sternberg has suggested that ‘some of the blame for the serious economic crisis can be assigned to a source that typically has not been singled out – our educational system, which places so much emphasis on memory and analytical abilities, but much less emphasis on creative, practical, and wisdom-based skills’. His critique of the US educational system can equally be applied to Ireland: ‘the problem is that we have created a closed system whereby we select individuals for analytical (as well as memory-based) skills and then teach in ways that reward these skills but largely bypass other skills, in particular,

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9 *From Transaction to Transition*, p. 12.
creative, practical, and wisdom-based ones’.\(^{11}\) The TCD working group agrees with his conclusion that colleges should be open to admitting students on the basis of how they have developed these wider skills, ‘because these are the students who are most likely to succeed after graduation’ and put the education they have received to the best use for society.

When addressing the problem of access to higher education, the HEA/NCCA report chose not to advocate ‘a decoupling of the Leaving cert examination from entry to third-level education’, noting that ‘one of its core strengths is that it is commons across all institutions, and easily accessed and understood by school-leavers and their parents’. Instead various actions were proposed, including changing the first-year experience at undergraduate level, reducing the number of course options and replacing them with more generic studies, and considering the possibility of introducing graduate-only entry to professional courses.

The TCD working group believes that the option presented in the HEA/NCCA report is a false dichotomy, implying that the only alternative to widespread changes at third-level means breaking away from the Leaving Certificate examination. Having addressed the issues in detail, and studied evidence from around the world, the working group suggests that other viable, and better options have not been considered.

The TCD working group proposes that a new admissions policy, underpinned by recognised principles for fair admission, would better address the problem of third-level admissions. An admissions policy is here defined as the *criteria* which govern decisions of inclusion and exclusion, the *procedures* for assessing applications, and finally the *practices* of the office of admissions. Appendix 2 shows how some of the world’s leading universities define their admissions criteria and provides a useful guide. The TCD working group suggests that criteria such as academic achievement, potential, and

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\(^{11}\) Sternberg, *College Admissions*, p. 173.
motivation/suitability for course, underpinned by a commitment to diversity would allow College to better articulate its mission in the area of education, as well as its aspirations and ambitions.

The current admission system is unrepresentative in (at least) two ways. First, it favours students who ‘learn to the test’ and work to maximise their points rather than developing knowledge and skills which would stand them to good stead in their course.

Second, it reinforces pre-existing socioeconomic distinctions. To assess the criteria for admissions (academic achievement, potential, and diversity) it is believed that a number of different modalities should be used, and evidence suggests that the use of any single scale would enrol an unrepresentative group of students. As a report from Harvard University has noted, ‘this is not to say that privileged applicants [from the top socioeconomic quartile] are the most qualified, but simply that they have the means and the wherewithal to excel in terms of any known measure of merit’.

The adoption of these criteria would not mean a radical departure from TCD’s existing commitment to delivering high-quality education to different parts of society, a commitment going back to TCD’s foundation documents. Rather it would represent a formal articulation of principles already stated elsewhere. The values of TCD are restated in the introduction to the Strategic Plan, 2009 – 2014, and emphasise ‘the inclusivity of our community, which offers equality of access and opportunity to all, seeking out and recognizing talent wherever it exists’. The Strategic Plan also notes that TCD values ‘diversity as a dimension of College life’ and is committed to the further development of existing pre-entry activities and alternative entry routes for students from different backgrounds. TCD already operates these principles in a limited way, for example, through the Trinity Access Programmes, and the HEAR and DARE schemes.

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and the interviews which are used to select applicants for some courses such as Drama and Music, and in the selection of mature students, but has been prevented from a more widespread application because of the exclusive reliance on CAO points for most courses. The three criteria put forward in here - academic achievement, potential, and diversity – are criteria that TCD already supports in principle, and the recommendation of this Section is to encode them formally as part of a new admissions policy.

The Importance of Academic Achievement and Other Criteria

A.4. Academic achievement – as measured by the Leaving Certificate examination and similar examinations – should not be considered the only measure of academic ability. TCD inspires, demands, and thrives on excellence, and the TCD working group suggests that a rigid reliance on a single scale for admissions works against its own educational ethos and ambitions.

The stated objective in the Strategic Plan is to ‘seek out and recognize talent wherever it exists’, suggesting the importance of potential as well as academic achievement when admitting students, and this is a good aspiration. The working group recognises the challenge in assessing student potential, motivation etc., but does not believe that the difficulties involved should preclude a genuine exploration of the area.

The Importance of Diversity

A.5. Diversity is a key part of the criteria for admitting students, because TCD recognises that universities operating for the public good have a responsibility to enrol a broad and representative spectrum of society. It also believes that diversity is in itself something worth achieving to advance its educational mission. In 2003 the University Council approved the final report of the Working Party on Teaching and Learning which had the promotion of inclusiveness as a key aim, and which recognised that:
Universities have a social responsibility to help build a more inclusive society through the increased participation of people from marginalised groupings and be developing graduates who can make a valued contribution to a fairer, more equitable society.¹⁵

Robert Sternberg suggests that ‘if students are from similar backgrounds their ability to learn from each other is greatly reduced, because they will tend to share assumptions and even entire ideologies’.¹⁶ Darryl G. Smith, a professor of education and psychology in the United States, has argued that higher education institutions will not be credible or viable if diversity is not fundamental, suggesting that in the future it will be an indicator of institutional effectiveness alongside student success.¹⁷ This discussion paper does not propose any changes to the existing methods of admitting a diverse student body.

The inclusion of diversity among the three criteria should not be controversial. Evidence suggests that it is vital to the intellectual life of a campus. As Sternberg notes:

‘Parents sometimes fail to realise that, when they are sending their children away to college, they are paying as much for the fellow students their child will meet as they are for the professors and the campus facilities. If they all have the same point of view, the student will miss out on one of the most important aspects of a college education – learning how to understand and appreciate diverse points of view’.¹⁸

This emphasis on diversity remains true to the rich history of the College. As McDowell and Webb note in their history of TCD, in the late-nineteenth century it was proudly said that ‘in Trinity College, as nowhere else in Ireland, Orange and Green, Protestant and

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¹⁶ Sternberg, College Admissions, p. 59.
¹⁸ Sternberg, College Admissions, p. 70.
Catholic, believer and sceptic could meet and argue in a friendly atmosphere and on equal terms’ and they confirm that this ‘was broadly speaking true’.19

The geographical distribution of students, nationally and internationally, is something that will be explored in a future document, in line with the new Global Relations Strategy and the College’s Access policies. It is worth noting that data from the Trinity Access Programme for 2010 suggests that the top twenty TCD feeder schools (all fee-paying and located in the greater Dublin area) send almost as many students (750) to Trinity as the entire thirty-one counties of Ireland outside of Dublin combined (837).20 Examining the data for new entrants for 2011, it can be seen that only 3.8% of fee paying schools send no students to TCD, in contrast to 37% of non-fee paying schools. Only 23% of non-DEIS schools send no students to TCD, in contrast to 63% of DEIS schools. Close to 50% of schools in Munster send no students to TCD, in contrast to 38% for Connaught, 26% for Leinster (outside Dublin), and 33% for Ulster.

In 2008 a questionnaire was distributed to all publically funded higher education institutes in the UK, and 71% of all HEIs responded. It is significant that 98% of respondents agreed that it was important that universities and colleges have students from a wide range of backgrounds, and almost all respondents thought it was desirable or necessary to consider additional measures of assessment.21

**The Problem of a Lottery**

A.6. Some experts, in Ireland and internationally, have suggested the possibility of a lottery-based admissions system for those with strong academic credentials as the fairest way of admitting students.22 In Ireland it would mean setting a minimum points threshold, and then using the lottery to allocate places. Such an approach is seen as

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20 Data from a TAP report discussed at the TAP Steering Committee, 14 November 2011 and compared to data collected for the Senior Lecturer’s Annual Report for 2010/2011.
‘democratic’ rather than ‘meritocratic’, but there are a number of problems that have been identified with such a system:

a) It presupposes that the examinations system gives each student an equal chance to succeed and thus gain college admission. The reality is that not all students have the same educational opportunities, and thus the system does nothing to address the problem of inequality at second-level, the ability of some students to pay for ‘grinds’ and gain other educational advantages, and other factors that separate students from different schools and different parts of the country.

b) It runs contrary to the view that people should be rewarded for their efforts. There would be little incentive to work at school, beyond reaching the minimum points threshold, and it would have a demoralising effect on those who missed out on a place in a particular college despite doing better in the examinations than others who were admitted.

Rewarding Academic Achievement, Potential, Motivation and Diversity

A.7. The TCD working group recommends developing a new policy on admissions (discussed in Section B) which would reflect the ambitions of TCD to further become a university of global consequence, and build on its educational mission developed over the past four hundred years. This would involve TCD using the Leaving Certificate examination alongside other contextual data to admit students, under the guiding principle of admitting students on the basis of set criteria (such as academic achievement, potential, motivation and diversity), rather than measuring the kind of academic achievement calculated solely in CAO points. Contextual data is defined here as ‘data or information which sets the application in its educational or socio-economic context’. 23

23 Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (www.spa.ac.uk).
Recognising the Diversity of Institutions

A.8. Each HEI in Ireland has its own unique identity and selling points. A student may prefer to study Law in TCD instead of UCD for a host of reasons, personal, academic, or geographic. The TCD four-year degree (discussed in Section C), the quality of the research-led curriculum, and the quality of the academic staff enable the delivery of an undergraduate education that is unique in Ireland and comparable to that delivered by the leading universities internationally. This is something that should be developed and enhanced, rather than homogenised and destroyed.
Section B
Principles Underpinning a New Admissions Policy for TCD

Introduction

B.1. The TCD working group supports and endorses the recommendations in the report prepared by the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, chaired by Steven Schwartz, in 2004 in the UK, which brought together leading experts and practitioners in the field.\textsuperscript{24} To quote from the foreword by Professor Schwartz:

‘Admissions are the responsibility of universities and colleges themselves, and rightly so... But it is important that everyone has confidence in the integrity of the admissions process. Access to higher education matters to many people, and so do fair admissions’.\textsuperscript{25}

It also shares the belief of Professor Schwartz that: ‘if we have a fair admissions system, then success will not depend on connections, money or influence, but on talent and motivation. This is a goal worth working towards’.\textsuperscript{26}

The TCD working group agrees with the definition provided of a fair admissions system: ‘one that provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations’.\textsuperscript{27} While there is general agreement that applicants should be chosen on merit, it is recognised that there are challenges involved in defining merit and fairness (see below). Since the introduction of the ‘points system’ applicants have been admitted on the basis of the highest examination marks, but a new system would also mean taking a wider view about each applicant’s achievements and potential.

\textsuperscript{24} Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice (www.admissions-review.org.uk).
\textsuperscript{25} Fair Admissions to Higher Education, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{26} Fair Admissions to Higher Education, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{27} Fair Admissions to Higher Education, p. 5.
The TCD working group endorses the conclusion of the Schwartz report that ‘preserving academic freedom requires that academic institutions retain three basic rights in relation to teaching: the right to choose who will teach, what will be taught, and to whom’. TCD has a strong policy on academic freedom which recognises that ‘allied with academic freedom is the principle of autonomy of the university; Trinity’s Strategic Plan reiterates the importance of institutional autonomy alongside a commitment to accountability for the quality of teaching and research, and for the stewardship of resources’. 

TCD recognises the diversity of the missions of the different HEIs, and the need to ensure that students should be best suited to the particular course in the particular institution, and therefore must be responsible for its admission policies and decisions.

**Seven Principles underpinning a new Admissions Policy for TCD**

B.2. The TCD working group recommends the adoption of the five key principles of the Schwartz report. The TCD admissions system:

a) should be transparent
b) should enable it to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential
c) should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
d) should seek to minimise barriers for applicants
e) should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes

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29 [www.tcd.ie/about/policies/academic-freedom.php](http://www.tcd.ie/about/policies/academic-freedom.php).
In addition, the TCD working group proposes that a number of different modalities must be used to achieve a fair admissions policy. Therefore it would add the following principle, recommending that the TCD admissions system:

f) should try and reflect whatever admissions criteria are agreed using different modalities as appropriate

The TCD working group proposes that these different modalities should be agreed following wider consultation within the university, and an extensive consultation process about whether there should be a single TCD procedure, or a separate one for each subject area. The priority is the development of a system or set of systems that recognised academic achievement, potential and diversity. Interviews, alongside the use of contextual and other data, is one possibility that should be considered. Aptitude tests are another option, however it should be noted that the evidence for the use of aptitude tests, in Ireland and internationally, is not uniformly positive. These however are just two options, and a wider consultation process is needed to see if different ways of recognising these three attributes (and, in particular, potential) can be devised.

Finally, to ensure the admissions system retains the confidence of the academic community, and the wider public, a final key principle is recommended. The TCD admissions system:

g) should be free from any internal or external interference

This principle is self-explanatory, and will be discussed alongside the other key principles below.

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30 John Aubrey Douglass, The Conditions for Admissions: Access, Equity, and the Social Contract of Public Universities (2007), chapter 4. For example, the SAT in the United States has been criticised by a President of Harvard for being coachable, for not capturing accurately what students learn at school, and for not assessing the kinds of skills students need to succeed, such as writing (Douglass, Conditions for Admissions, p. 229).
The Seven Key Principles Examined

(a) Transparency

B.3. Applicants must be provided with the information they require to make an informed course choice. This information must also extend to the application process, with applicants aware of the likely weight to be given to academic achievement and other criteria, and how they will be measured. Decisions will be recorded, and feedback will also be provided to unsuccessful applicants.

(b) Selecting students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential

B.4. Ability to complete the course successfully should be a prerequisite for admission to TCD. TCD has not in the past admitted students whose non-academic achievements (for example in the sporting arena) outweighed academic ability or suitability for the field of study. TCD’s report on retention in 2009 revealed that ‘issues of course choice/compatibility and commitment were among the most prevalent reasons why students withdrew from Trinity College. These were particularly prevalent for first years’. Trinity inspires, demands, and thrives on excellence and therefore academic ability – measured in a broader way than at present – should be used to assess applicants as individuals. This can be done on the basis of formal achievements in state examinations, indicators of individual potential and relevant capability, such as interviews, and recognising the educational benefits of diversity.

(c) Assessment methods that are reliable and valid

B.5. It is recognised that some assessments use quantifiable methods (for example, examination grades) while others use qualitative judgements (for example, the performance in an interview), but this is not a negative thing and both methods are used extensively in the wider world (for example, the selection processes for certain
jobs and in other leading universities internationally). The process of assessing applicants, using both quantifiable methods and qualitative judgements should be transparent and the reasons for each decision should be recorded.

(d) Barriers minimised for applicants
B.6. The admissions process should minimise whatever barriers are obstacles to students applying or being admitted. These include: socio-economic or geographic background (and the ability to take part in the admissions process), disability, and the nature of the assessment itself. On the one hand different disciplines may wish to assess potential etc. using discipline specific techniques (for example, Music and Engineering may look for different attributes) but if a student was applying for multiple courses in TCD it might be advisable to have a single assessment in TCD, rather than impose a separate assessment for each course.

(e) A professional admissions system, underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes
B.7. There should be clear lines of responsibility for the admissions policy and processes across the institution, to ensure consistency in the implementation of the policy and an efficient feedback service for applicants. There should also be clear procedures for complaints and appeals. There would also need to be an appropriate allocation of administrative resources to support the system, and support and recognition of academic staff who contribute to it. There would also need to be clear guidelines for the appointment and training of staff involved in the admissions process.

(f) Using different modalities as appropriate to try and reflect the agreed admissions criteria
B.8. Recognising that the use of any single scale provides unfair advantages, TCD would use a number of different modalities to assess students. The commitment to expanding
how academic achievement and potential would be recognised would build on the work of the Trinity Access Programmes, and the introduction of the DARE and HEAR schemes, which already help to address the challenge of diversity.

(g) Preventing internal or external interference
B.9. In a country the size of Ireland there is always the risk of internal or external influence being brought to bear on the admissions system in support of one or more applicants. To ensure that the admissions process is not interfered with in this way – and to remove any appearance of it being open to tampering – it is a key principle that any attempt to influence the process in an inappropriate way will result in the applicant being penalised, and any serious or persistent attempt to influence the process will result in the applicant being disqualified.

Obstacles to adopting a new Admissions Policy
B.10. The TCD working group recognises that there are a number of obstacles to agreeing a new admissions policy. The first is that there are differing opinions of how to define merit. Many believe that examination results should be the only evidence that is used. However studies in the UK and elsewhere, and the work of the Trinity Access Programme internally, have demonstrated that educational and socio-economic disadvantage affect pre-entry achievement. In the United States it has been argued that ‘by conventional definitions, the privileged are the meritorious; of all students nationwide scoring over 1300 on the SAT, 66 per cent come from the top socio-economic quartile and only 3 per cent from the bottom quartile’. It has been argued that the effect of social background on academic achievement begins to appear by the age of two. There is also evidence that the quality of the school attended has a major impact on attainment, and this relates to the principle of diversity. For example, work by the Trinity Access Programme has shown that 25.6% of the students at TCD are

32 Fair Admissions to Higher Education, p. 22.
drawn from the top twenty schools in the Dublin area, even though they only account for 1.4% of the number of post-primary schools nationally.34

Another critical consideration is the potential extra workload that would be placed on academic and administrative staff, and the resource implications involved. Any proposals would therefore have to secure external support to be viable. It would also be necessary to communicate any changes clearly to the general public and to the existing and prospective student body so that there was no confusion or misrepresentation. Any pilot scheme that was developed and tested would also have to be able to work on a larger scale.

The Problem of Defining ‘Merit’

B.11. The TCD working group is aware of the problems in defining merit, and recognises that the term has been abused in the past to justify elitism and social exclusion. The modern system of admitting students in the United States was developed in the 1920s to allow the ‘Big Three’ of Harvard, Yale and Princeton to accept, and more specifically reject, whoever they wanted. As Karabel and others have shown, ‘the Big Three wanted the latitude to admit the dull sons of major donors and to exclude the brilliant but unpolished children of immigrants, whose very presence prompted privileged young men to seek their education elsewhere’.35 At the heart of this policy was the search for ‘character’, a loaded and intangible term that became ‘shorthand for an entire ethos and way of being’, something that could only be judged by those who had it. At times it could be as arbitrary as physical height, with Yale measuring the size of entering freshmen; more often it was used to encode a policy of racial and religious discrimination.36 Over the years the criteria governing selection to American

34 TAP internal report (July 2011).
36 Yale measured the height of freshmen from 1879 until 1963. From the 1940s to the 1960s Yale, Princeton and other colleges took nude photographs of freshmen, ostensibly to examine their posture, but in reality as part of an attempt to link genetically based body types to temperament and personality (see Karabel, The Chosen, p. 625).
universities became the source of bitter conflict, often revolving around the definition of ‘merit’. ‘The history of admissions at the Big Three has thus been, fundamentally, a history of recurrent struggles over the meaning of “merit”. The definition of “merit” is fluid and tends to reflect the values and interests of those who have the power to impose their particular cultural ideals’. 37

The TCD working group suggests that it is dangerous to use ‘merit’ or other loaded terms such as ‘the best’ when defining its admissions process. While it aspires towards a meritocratic ideal, it recognises that in practice ‘the ideal is routinely violated, and that it veils the power relations beneath it’. 38 Instead it recommends the adoption of an admissions policy based on core principles that can be measured and assessed such as academic achievement, potential, motivation and underpinned by a recognition of the importance of diversity.

37 Karabel, The Chosen, p. 5.
Section C

The Undergraduate Curriculum

Introduction

C.1. As stated in the Strategic Plan for 2009-2014, College is committed to maintaining and developing the ethos and quality of undergraduate education through research-led teaching and curriculum renewal. A key objective over the past decade has been the promotion and development of nine attributes believed to be desirable in a Trinity College student and graduate: articulacy, literacy, numeracy, inquisitiveness, analytical ability, adaptability, breadth of reading, ethical responsibility, and international outlook. This aligns with the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 which recognises that teachers in higher education ‘need to stimulate active, not passive learning, and to encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers by posing problems and encouraging students to apply the information and concepts to a variety of new situations’. 39

The TCD working group has severe concerns about the suggestions for radical changes to the undergraduate curriculum which have been outlined in the HEA/NCCA report. It believes that the changes recommended have not succeeded elsewhere, and would result in the imposition of a shallow learning experience for undergraduates which would devalue internationally the educational experience at TCD. It also believes that such an approach is not needed at TCD where, since 1999, there has been a policy in place to develop a truly broad curriculum. 40 This includes an emphasis on generic skills, and an explicit commitment to developing the nine attributes of the Trinity graduate: articulacy, literacy, numeracy, inquisitiveness, analytical ability, adaptability, breadth of reading, ethical responsibility, and international outlook. Rather than overturn the Trinity curriculum on the basis of unproven speculations, it would recommend work on the renewal of that curriculum, specialist and broad, and a continuation of the world-class education currently provided. The Trinity four-year undergraduate programme

40 See policy on the Broad Curriculum (www.tcd.ie/Broad_Curriculum/pdf/policybc.pdf).
allows for a unique learning experience that is quite different from that offered in other Irish universities, or Institutes of Technology. TCD students often achieve the same standard and depth in their final year as students on some postgraduate courses elsewhere. This is because TCD students are some of the most able, motivated and hard working, and are provided with some of the best teaching and learning facilities in the country.

Quality of Information

C.2. The TCD working group welcomes the recommendation in the HEA/NCCA report that ‘higher education institutions should take steps to improve the quality of information on the subject content and learning outcomes of their courses’. This is a priority area which TCD has previously identified. In 2009 TCD developed a policy on student retention which recognised that ‘a significant factor for non-completion and early withdrawal from a course is the ‘wrong course choice’.’ As a result it was agreed that:

‘All courses should review their undergraduate Prospectus entries and make sure that these realistically describe the course and expectations. Entries should provide web links to course handbooks, especially first year handbooks, and programme and module learning outcomes should be articulated and published. Descriptions of courses in the undergraduate Prospectus should be accessible’.

In addition it was suggested that:

‘Schools should review and update their website to ensure ease of access to course descriptions for prospective applicants and Schools should consider:

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41 From Transaction to Transition, p. 19.
(i) Recruiting student ambassadors to visit second-level schools
(ii) Organising discipline-specific open days
(iii) Posting video and audio podcasts of lectures, practicals, etc. on School website.

Since June 2009 significant work has been done in many of these areas, and there is ongoing work at Undergraduate Studies Committee on the remaining items.

The Debate about Higher Education

C.3. Addressing the concerns about the transfer from second to third level education, the ‘Hyland report’ suggested a number of actions as a tentative ‘way forward’. The first of these was to ‘reform the configuration of first-year courses in higher education institutions and use a lottery system or a weighted lottery system to select students’.43 It also suggested that ‘consideration should be given to deferring entry to professional courses, including healthcare courses, until after a foundation year or years’ had been completed by students. Many of these recommendations were endorsed in the subsequent HEA/NCCA report, From Transaction to Transition, which suggested that higher education institutions should ‘review their undergraduate portfolio with a view to reducing the number of denominated courses and introducing more generic first-year courses’.44 In addition it was claimed that ‘deferring entry to professional courses, including health-care courses... would alleviate the intensity of competition that arises in the current “points race”’.45 It has been proposed that a research paper to be prepared in 2012 will conduct research into the ‘viability and potential benefits and consequences of introducing graduate-only entry to professional courses’.46

45 From Transaction to Transition, p. 19.
46 From Transaction to Transition, p. 6.
The TCD working group recognises the need to develop generic skills over an undergraduate programme, but it suggests that the proposal to achieve this through reducing the undergraduate portfolio and introducing generic foundation years would not work in a TCD context and would be an ill-conceived overthrow of centuries of pedagogic theory and experience.

TCD’s educational values are enumerated in the College Calendar and are worth stating here.

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.47

The skills mentioned in (c) are further divided into two categories: (i) Thinking skills and (ii) Communication skills; and are discussed in detail.

In addition, in 1999 TCD approved a policy which set-out to promote nine attributes of the TCD student and graduate: articulacy, literacy, numeracy, inquisitiveness, analytical ability, adaptability, breadth of reading, ethical responsibility, and international outlook. A strategy to promote these attributes was developed in the report by the Working

Party on Teaching and Learning in 2002-2003, and approved by Council at two meetings (6 October 2002, 26 February 2003). This report outlined the values and commitments which TCD aspired to enshrine in the future educational practice of the College. These included a commitment to serve the community, develop student leadership skills, and produce graduates who are reflective and positive citizens. The teaching and learning strategy which developed out of this had as its second point to: ‘Enhance the generic and learning skills of students’. On 26 February 2003 Council ‘indicated its strong endorsement of the educational philosophy set out in the report and approved the report and implementation plan as proposed’. Council recognised that this was an opportunity for College ‘to be radical in its thinking in relation to teaching’ to ensure it developed graduates who were ‘creative and analytical thinkers’ (6 October 2002).

From this it is clear that the TCD curriculum already embraces the need to develop generic skills in higher education, and it is recognised that it is necessary to review this regularly, as part of the existing commitment to curriculum renewal.

The TCD working group also rejects the idea of any kind of lottery system to allocate places, believing that this contradicts the definition of a ‘fair admissions’ policy.

Edmund Burke, one of TCD’s greatest ever graduates, warned about the dangers of overthrowing an existing system and replacing it with a theory that was not grounded in practical experience. The TCD working group would oppose any attempt to restructure its undergraduate curriculum based on theories which have not been demonstrably proven to have succeeded elsewhere, and which in any case may not work in an Irish context.

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50 Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790).
The TCD working group proposes that TCD academics are best placed to conduct a review of its undergraduate curriculum and make whatever changes are needed to prepare our graduates for the challenges of the 21st century. This process has already begun at Undergraduate Studies Committee level.

**Problems with the American Example**

C.4. The perceived attraction of the generic courses approach is that it attempts to approximate the approach in universities in the United States. However it must be recognised that the educational system in Ireland and the United States are fundamentally different at both second and third level. Bill Gates delivered an address to the National Education Summit on 26 February 2005 in which he argued that ‘America’s high schools are obsolete... broken, flawed and under-funded... and cannot teach our kids what they need to know today’.

He compared the American education experience unfavourably to that which he has encountered when travelling abroad. The TCD working group would reject any attempt to imitate the working models of other countries without sufficient research into how the systems operate in those countries, and without due regard for the different educational systems already in place in Ireland.

**Problems with Graduate-Only Entry**

C.5. One consequence of any decision to introduce graduate-only entry to professional courses across the sector is that it would bring Ireland out of line with established practice across the EU, and proposed EU directives in the area. It might also encourage employers internationally to revise their opinion of Irish qualifications.

**TCD’s Commitment to Educational Reform at Second-Level**

C.6. TCD is deeply committed to helping transform the educational experience at second-level as well as third-level. Over the past number of years it has been at the forefront of a number of important initiatives. For example, Bridge21 is a joint venture

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51 Bill Gates speech, 26 February 2005 (can be accessed at [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org)).
of TCD and Suas Educational Development which is developing a new model of practice for 21st century learning that can be adapted for use in Irish secondary schools. This learning model is team-based, technology mediated, project based, and cross-curricular. Bridge21 has participated in the NCCA’s consultation on reforming the junior cycle curriculum and is working to tackle the problems of rote-learning and teaching to the test and, instead, allow students to gain vital key skills that will prepare them for life.

Since 1993 the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) has been working in partnership across the education sector and with students, teachers, families, communities and businesses to widen access and participation at third-level of under-represented groups. Through its School and Community Outreach Links (SCOL), TAP works with 19 primary and 20 second-level schools in Dublin to get students involved in learning, increase students’ interest in going to university, improve students’ junior and leaving certificate exam results, help create a college-going culture within the school, and encourage parents and guardians to support academic achievement among their children.

In addition, TCD academics have played important roles in reforming the curricula for the Leaving Certificate (such as the new History curriculum), advise on the setting of papers, and contribute to various debates about educational reform on a national level. For example, Professor David McConnell of the Smurfit Institute of Genetics recently argued in the Irish Times for ‘the need to re-organise the way in which our children are educated, at home, at school and in every waking moment’ and suggested ‘a radical way forward’ in terms of the second-level science curriculum and university admissions in science. TCD has long accepted the challenge of the Minister for Education and Skills

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52 See www.bridge21.ie
53 See www.tcd.ie/Trinity_Access.
54 See The Irish Times, 17 January 2012.
‘to identify and articulate innovative ways forward’ in the area of education and will continue to do so.
Section D

The Next Stage

D.1. The TCD working group invites Council to consider whether it would like to define explicitly the criteria TCD looks for in its students, whether using a number of different modalities such as those used by other leading universities, or relying on the single scale of the Leaving Certificate examination. Possible criteria are included in Section A, but there may be a better way of articulating TCD’s ambitions and aspirations. Should potential be a criterion and, if so, should this be defined as potential for academic excellence, or more broadly as the potential to benefit from the Trinity experience and to contribute to College life?

D.2. The TCD working group invites Council to consider the seven guiding principles proposed in Section B which would underpin a fair admissions policy for TCD and whether this could form the foundation for any further discussions in the area.

D.3. The TCD working group invites Council to consider the challenges facing the undergraduate curriculum at TCD, discussed in Section C, and whether it wishes to reject the suggestion to radically restructure the undergraduate portfolio at TCD, but reaffirm its commitment to maintaining and developing a first-class educational experience at TCD.

D.4. The TCD working group invites Council to advise on how it should proceed in its work, and whether the next stage is to work in conjunction with Schools and Departments on these issues. One possibility might be to develop one or more pilot schemes which could be used to admit a set number of students on a particular course. If so, it would be necessary to prepare detailed plans for how applicants would be assessed and admitted, and analyse the resource and personnel implications. These
proposals could then be brought back to Council and the academic community for further discussion.

D.5. Council is invited to advise on the holding of a national conference which TCD would host on the areas of admissions and the undergraduate curriculum on 18 May 2012 in the Trinity Long Room Hub, building upon the HEA/NCCA partnership model, and bringing together international experts to help define and debate the challenges facing higher education in Ireland. This conference would be an opportunity for TCD to present the admissions criteria and principles, debate the challenges facing higher education, and share national and international expertise with the government, the academic community, and the wider public.

This is an opportunity for TCD to show leadership in the area of admissions and the undergraduate curriculum, to share its experiences and expertise, and confirm its willingness to address the challenges facing higher education in Ireland.
Appendix 1

Membership and Terms of Reference of the Working Group on Admissions and the Curriculum

Senior Lecturer (chair)
Ms. Rachel Barry, SU Education Officer
Professor Martina Hennessey, School of Medicine
Professor Donal O’Donovan, School of Mathematics
Professor Michael Shevlin, School of Education
Professor Brendan Tangney, School of Computer Science and Statistics
Professor Graeme Watson, School of Chemistry
Mr. Stephen McIntyre, Google
Ms. Sorcha De Brunner, Secretary, Office of the Vice-Provost

The chair of the working group also sought expert advice and input where appropriate [including with the Provost, the Vice-Provost/Chief Academic Officer, the Vice-Provost for Global Relations (for Appendix 2), the Admissions Officer, the Chair of the Fellows, the Secretary to the Scholars, and the TAP Steering Committee]. Professor Myra O’Regan also advised and is conducting a statistical analysis of which types of schools send students to TCD.

The Working Group on Admissions and the Curriculum was formed originally as an expert group to advise the Senior Lecturer and prepare a response to the Hyland report and the HEA/NCCA conference on admissions to third-level. As it began its work its focus widened to looking at three critical issues:

- **Where** does TCD get its students from? Is Trinity attracting ‘the best’ students from all over Ireland and how should we define ‘the best’? It is realistic to expect Trinity to be the first preference of the top students from
the Republic of Ireland, or the island of Ireland? Can Trinity do more to encourage students to consider coming to Trinity?

- **How** does TCD admit its students? Is TCD happy with how it is admitting its students? Is there another way that would be better and which would also be fair and transparent? Would it be better to get involved in reshaping the Leaving Cert assessments so the points system is fit for purpose, rather than changing how we admit? Should TCD organise its own Trinity matriculation exams? Should College encourage TCD Schools to review how they would like to admit students?

- **What** happens to the students once they enter Trinity? Does TCD do enough to compensate for the negative effects of the ‘points race’ - the rote learning and so on that have been identified as key problems with the current system? Does Trinity continue to produce graduates who are articulate, literate and numerate and who have the independent and critical thinking skills necessary in the modern world?

The membership and expanded remit of the Working Group was discussed and noted by the Undergraduate Studies Committee on 13 December 2011. The Working Group has met on five occasions (26 October 2011, 2 November 2011, 7 December 2011, 11 January 2012, 23 January 2012).
APPENDIX 2
Admissions Criteria of the world’s highest ranked universities\textsuperscript{55}

1. University of Cambridge.

‘Our aim is to offer admission to students of the greatest intellectual potential, irrespective of social, racial, religious and financial considerations.

Two further aims are:

1. Aspiration: to encourage applications from groups that are, at present, under-represented in Cambridge

2. Fairness: to ensure that each applicant is individually assessed, without partiality or bias, in accordance with the policy on Equal Opportunities, and to ensure that, as far as possible, an applicant’s chance of admission to Cambridge does not depend on choice of College

Detailed selection criteria vary from subject to subject but in all we are looking for:

• academic ability and potential;
• motivation and suitability for the chosen course;
• commitment and self-discipline.

Every applicant is considered individually in an holistic assessment using all the information available to us.’\textsuperscript{56}

2. Harvard University.

‘Harvard is committed to making educational opportunity accessible. Admission is based on achievement and promise; applying for financial aid does not diminish a student’s chances of admission. Indeed, the Admissions Committee may respond

\textsuperscript{56} www.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/info/policy.html.
favorably to evidence that a candidate has overcome significant obstacles, financial or otherwise.

There is no formula for gaining admission to Harvard. Students with vastly different credentials come from thousands of secondary schools across the country and around the world. What unifies our students are the talents they bring to Harvard and the passion to explore its vast resources.

Applicants can distinguish themselves for admission in a number of ways. Some show unusual academic promise through experience or achievements in study or research. Many are "well rounded" and have contributed in various ways to the lives of their schools or communities. Others are "well lopsided" with demonstrated excellence in a particular endeavor—academic, extracurricular or otherwise. Still others bring perspectives formed by unusual personal circumstances or experiences.

Academic accomplishment in high school is important, but we also seek people with enthusiasm, creativity and strength of character.57

3. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

‘When we admit a class of students to MIT, it’s as if we’re choosing a 1,000-person team to climb a very interesting, fairly rugged mountain - together. We obviously want people who have the training, stamina and passion for the climb. At the same time, we want each to add something useful or intriguing to the team, from a wonderful temperament or sense of humor, to compelling personal experiences, to a wide range of individual gifts, talents, interests and achievements. We are emphatically not looking for a batch of identical perfect climbers; we are looking for a richly varied team of capable people who will support, surprise and inspire each other.

A strong academic foundation in high school both improves your odds of getting into MIT and will help you make the most of the Institute when you're here.

Some applicants struggle to turn themselves into clones of the "ideal" MIT student - you know, the one who gets triple 800s on the SAT. Fortunately, cloning is still for sheep. What we really want to see on your application is you being you - pursuing the things you love, growing, changing, taking risks, learning from your mistakes, all in your own distinctive way. College is not a costume party; you're not supposed to come dressed as someone else. Instead, college is an intense, irreplaceable four-year opportunity to become more yourself than you've ever been. What you need to show us is that you're ready to try.

Once your application is complete, it will first be read by a senior admissions officer who will consider your application in a holistic manner, within its proper context. Strong applications will then be evaluated by additional admissions officers, who will summarize it at length for the committee.58

4. Yale University.

'As we carefully and respectfully review every application, two questions guide our admissions team: “Who is likely to make the most of Yale’s resources?” and “Who will contribute most significantly to the Yale community?”

While there is no hard and fast rule, it is safe to say that performance in school is more important than testing. A very strong performance in a demanding college preparatory program may compensate for modest standardized test scores, but it is unlikely that high standardized test scores will persuade the admissions committee to disregard an undistinguished secondary-school record.

We convene a committee of experienced admissions officers, Yale faculty, and Yale deans to select applicants who have shown exceptional engagement, ability, and promise.

58 http://mitadmissions.org/.
Yale is above all an academic institution. This means academic strength is our first consideration in evaluating any candidate. The Yale application tries to get at the personal side of the applicant through the use of two essays whose scope is broad enough to accommodate most writers. We encourage you to take the writing of the essays seriously and to write openly and honestly about activities, interests, or experiences that have been meaningful to you. Again, we are looking for students who will make the most of Yale and the most of their talents.59

‘Tutors are looking for excellent academic ability and potential, and also for self-motivation and enthusiasm for the degree subject. They look for evidence that you applicants are thinking independently and willing to engage with new ideas, beyond the scope of the school or college syllabus.

Tutors would prefer a candidate who has read around their subject beyond their school or college work, and who shows a great passion for their subject, over a candidate who may have taken more subjects, but who is not able to discuss their interests with any enthusiasm or in any depth.

Each application to Oxford is considered carefully on its individual merits, so if you feel that you have not performed, or will not perform, to the best of your ability because of extenuating circumstances, please explain this on your application form.60

6. Imperial College London.
‘The College’s mission is to maintain excellent standards of achievement in teaching and research in order to attract and admit students of the highest calibre, and its international reputation relies on the people who make up its diverse and high-achieving community.

59 http://admissions.yale.edu/what-yale-looks-for.
60 http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate_courses/finding_out_more/frequently_asked.html.
In pursuing this aim, Imperial adheres to a comprehensive policy of equal opportunities which ensures that it does not discriminate against any individual, from the first point of contact through to graduation. Selection for entry is based on consideration of academic ability, motivation for study, interest in the subject area and the potential to benefit from the experience and to contribute to College life.

All indications of candidates' interests outside their academic studies assist selection by providing valuable background information. Many selectors wish to choose candidates who, as well as being intellectually able to cope with the course of study, will contribute to the creation of a balanced intake with a wide cross-section of interests in each year."61

7. University College London (UCL).

‘UCL is keen to attract applicants from a diverse range of backgrounds who will benefit from the academic nature of our degree programmes and the way they are taught and examined. In applying to UCL, you will need to be committed to your chosen discipline and have an open mind and a questioning attitude to knowledge.

At UCL, our principal concern when considering applications is to recruit and select students who are likely to complete the programme successfully and derive benefit from it. Once these requirements are met, we disregard other issues such as disability, age, ethnic origin, sex, marital status, sexual orientation, number of children and beliefs relating to religion and politics. This attitude and these considerations underlie the equal opportunities policy of UCL, to which we are firmly committed. We positively welcome applications from members of groups which are currently under-represented.

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61 www3.imperial.ac.uk/ugprospectus/howtoapply/equalopportunities and www3.imperial.ac.uk/ugprospectus/howtoapply/selectionrequirements.
We are looking for individuals who are enthusiastic and passionate about learning, who are looking to take advantage of every opportunity that UCL will offer them and who will benefit from and contribute to UCL.\textsuperscript{62}


'The Admissions Committee at the University of Chicago considers all of the information you present in your application; it truly is a holistic process, not just test scores and GPA. We are hoping to find out who you are, as a whole person, and what you will bring to our campus. You will find a college that desires you, your personality, your skill set, your potential.

The admissions committee considers a candidate’s entire application—academic and extracurricular records, essays, letters of recommendation, and SAT or ACT scores.

We look for bright students with an unquenchable \textit{thirst for knowledge} and \textit{passion for learning}. Show us how you maximized your high school experience and pursued opportunities to develop unique talents.\textsuperscript{63}


'As a major research and teaching institution with an emphasis on undergraduate education, Penn seeks students who will avail themselves of the rich academic, cultural and social opportunities of the academic community. As an institution, Penn prides itself on its enormous diversity -- not only in the great wealth of our undergraduate and graduate programs, but in the wide variety of students and talents that such programs attract. The student who flourishes in the Penn community possesses a history of

\textsuperscript{62} \url{http://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/undergraduate-study/tabs/application-and-entry/undergraduate-study/application-and-entry/ug-selection/}.

\textsuperscript{63} \url{https://collegeadmissions.uchicago.edu/apply/}. 
strong academic excellence, a healthy degree of motivation, and a well-developed interest and involvement in his or her environment.

We are also interested in learning about your interests, community service, and extracurricular activities—while recognizing that patterns for non-academic involvement vary from country to country.\(^6^4\)


‘The Columbia University first-year class is chosen from a large and diverse group of applicants. In the process of selection, the Committee on Admissions asks questions about each applicant's academic potential, intellectual strength and ability to think independently. The Committee also considers the general attitudes and character of the applicant, special abilities and interests, maturity, motivation, curiosity and whether he or she is likely to make productive use of the four years at Columbia. In its final selection, Columbia seeks diversity of personalities, achievements and talents, and of economic, social, ethnic, racial and geographic backgrounds. Each applicant's academic record is examined, together with reports on personal qualities that have been supplied by the principal, headmaster or counselor and by teachers. The student's record of participation in the life of his or her school and community is also important, as is his or her performance on standardized tests.\(^6^5\)

11. Stanford University.

‘As we review applications for admission, three principles guide our holistic evaluation and selection process: Academic Excellence, Intellectual Vitality, and Personal Context.

Our admission process allows – and indeed encourages – the flexibility of a high school to design the most appropriate curricular offerings and opportunities for its students. What a course is named or whether it concludes with a standardized test is considerably

\(^6^4\) [www.admissions.upenn.edu/applying/](http://www.admissions.upenn.edu/applying/).

\(^6^5\) [www.studentaffairs.columbia.edu/admissions/category/tags/admissions.](http://www.studentaffairs.columbia.edu/admissions/category/tags/admissions.)
less important to us than the energy a student contributes to the learning process and the curiosity with which he or she pursues questions and ideas.

Stanford's student body is arguably among the most diverse in the United States.

Among the many measures of diversity, more than half of our undergraduates are students of color and approximately 17 percent of our students are among the first in their families to attend college.

Diversity at Stanford means more than geographic, racial, or ethnic differences.’66

12. California Institute of Technology (Caltech).

‘Caltech typically enrolls 230 outstanding freshmen each fall term. Students who have not yet earned a high school diploma or who have not enrolled in college courses for credit after graduating from high school will be considered as freshman candidates. While Caltech requires one math or science teacher recommendation AND one humanities or social science teacher recommendation letter, you are also encouraged to submit one letter of evaluation from a mentor or supervisor who might know you in a different context. Suggested optional recommenders include (but are not limited to): Arts or Club Instructors, Employers, Research Mentors, Religious or Community Leaders, Program Advisors, or Coaches.’67


‘Princeton’s admission process goes beyond simply looking for academically accomplished students. For each freshman class, we bring together a varied mix of high-achieving, intellectually gifted students from diverse backgrounds to create an exceptional learning community. We care about what students have accomplished in

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67 www.admissions.caltech.edu/applying/freshman.
and out of the classroom. The process is highly selective. In recent years, we've offered admission to only about 10 percent of applicants.

The University's admission process involves a holistic review of each applicant's entire file. No particular factor is assigned a fixed weight; rather, the process involves a highly individualized assessment of the applicant's talents, achievements and his or her potential to contribute to learning at Princeton.68


The University of Michigan looks at the whole student, not just grades. The University of Michigan actively seeks students who demonstrate a range of ideas, experiences, skills, and talents. While demonstrating evidence of conquering academic rigor is important, how you've participated in the life of your school demonstrates what kind of person you've become—given that you are applying for entry into a dynamic, broadly diverse community, this is an essential criterion for admission.

Learning often involves more than just studying textbooks. Students who have gone above and beyond in their studies and displayed original thinking are often sought-after. How often have you participated in school and community activities? There are lessons to be gained by assuming leadership positions on your campus, for example. What kinds of leadership experience have you had and what does it say about you?69

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68 www.princeton.edu/admission/applyingforadmission/.
15. Cornell University.

‘At Cornell, we celebrate the great diversity and globalism of our university, its faculty, and students and we are excited that you are considering Cornell for your education.

But our need-blind admission process means that we don’t consider economic circumstances when reviewing applications. Access and affordability are extremely important to us, as are diversity and inclusion. Our admission process is highly individualized, and we spend lots of time evaluating if you’ll be a good fit for the culture and philosophy of our university. The result is an incredibly rich mix of students which is one of the best things about Cornell.

So what do we look for?

Intellectual Potential. Have you challenged yourself with the highest-level courses? How have you demonstrated your passion for learning?

Character. Honesty. Open-mindedness. Initiative. Empathy for others. Your values are important to Cornell. Do your application essays and recommendations reflect your strongest personal attributes?

Involvement in Extracurricular activities. Community involvement. Workplace experience. Leadership. What special talents or interests have you developed?

Reasons for Choosing Us. Whether you’ve decided on a major or not, how do you plan on taking advantage of the exceptional learning environment at Cornell? Why is it the right place for you?  

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70 http://admissions.cornell.edu/apply/what-cornell-looks.
APPENDIX 3
The Hyland Report
Summary of the Analysis of the Problems with the Leaving Certificate and the ‘Points Race’

HEIs have the power to change their selection criteria
It is important to bear in mind that the points system was created and is owned by the higher education institutions and that it can be changed at any time by those institutions. As its history shows, the system can and has been changed and adjusted from time to time to take account of different selection criteria. It is open to the higher education institutions together or separately, at any time, to change their selection criteria. This does not seem to be widely appreciated, even by those within the system. If the higher education institutions believe, either individually or collectively, that the current selection system is no longer appropriate, they have the authority and the power to change it.

Problems with the Leaving Certificate as the sole criteria for admissions
1 Many students are entering higher education without adequate skills (including numeracy and literacy skills) to cope with higher education.
2 The Leaving Certificate rewards rote-learning and does not reward problem-solving, critical thinking, or self-directed learning. Consequently many students make the transition to higher education without the generic skills needed to cope successfully at that level.
3 For many courses, students are not required to have studied a related subject(s) for their Leaving Cert and are therefore unprepared academically for their third-level course.
4 The choices listed by some applicants on their CAO form are often unrelated to each other, with a wide variety of different courses appearing on their list of ten choices. Lack of coherence in the overall list of choices set down by a student may raise questions about the student’s commitment to or understanding of the courses applied for.
5 It is easier to get a high grade in some Leaving Cert subjects than in others. Some students choose Leaving Certificate subjects because it is easier to get a high grade in them, rather than because of their relevance for the third level course(s) for which they are applying.

6 As regards the marking and grading of the Leaving Certificate – some people argue that the old system where letter grades had no sub-division was a better system. Others are of the view that since the exam scripts are marked on a percentage scale the points system should be based on raw marks.

7 Some students choose their courses on the basis of their likely points rather than on their interest in the course – they don’t want to “waste their points”.

8 Society and the media emphasise quantitative indicators, and judge schools and their students on the basis of their Leaving Certificate results, thus encouraging students to apply for high points courses.

9 Some critics suggest that six subjects are too many on which to base one’s points; others suggest that there should be flexibility to count more than six subjects.

10 There are too many denominated courses in First Year which can make it difficult for students to choose, and which require them to make specific choices before they enter college, without a full awareness of the implications of their choice.

**Socio-economic inequality**

The increasing practice by those who can financially afford it, of paying for private tuition during their final year in school, further disadvantages students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are not in a position to do so.

These factors may also be exacerbated by the fact that schools in less advantaged areas sometimes offer fewer Leaving Certificate subjects at higher level, especially in the area of Maths and Science. In addition, students from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to be in a position to pay for additional out-of-school coaching or grinds, which can enhance a student’s confidence and their performance in the Leaving Certificate examination. Assessment tends (and always has tended) to concentrate on what is
relatively easy to measure, rather than what is most important, and this is true not only in Ireland, but in other countries as well.

**Negative effects on student learning**

Because the Leaving Cert is a high stakes examination, used as it is for selection to higher education, its backwash effect on teaching and learning and on the student experience, especially in senior cycle, is considerable.

The points system influences an individual student’s subject choice; the examination becomes the determinant of what is studied and how; non-examination subjects get little or no attention and in many cases, broader co-curricular activities are ignored or minimised. Student stress levels increase as the June examination looms and for some students their final year in school is an unhappy experience which they simply want to get through as quickly as possible.

**Some further criticisms**

In 1999, the Report of the Points Commission also referred to the negative impact of the points system on students and on their senior cycle school experience. Issues raised in that report included high levels of student stress; the negative impact of the points system on students’ personal development.

At a meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education in December 2010 which focused specifically on the transition from second to third level education, several speakers said that the Leaving Certificate, with its focus on rote learning, left students ill-equipped to meet the challenges of third level. It was stated that an increasing number of students entering third level education exhibit serious deficiencies in basic literacy and analytical skills. Tom Boland, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Authority said that there was growing concern about the Leaving Certificate across the third-level sector – particularly its failure to foster problem-solving and independent learning.