

TRINITY ACCESS:

Transforming Education

By Ciara Kenny

Dr Cliona Hannon on 25 years of Trinity Access and how the programme is inspiring generations of students and leading change in the Irish education system.

There's barely a white space free on the walls lining the stairway up to the Trinity Access offices in Goldsmith Hall. In frame after frame, groups of smiling students hold degrees and awards. Thank-you messages from graduates declare how "Trinity Access made my life", or was "the best thing I have ever done".

Headlines from newspaper clippings proclaim how Trinity Access students are "bucking international trends" by securing comparable jobs to the wider student body, with case studies of teachers, trainee

solicitors and social workers who owe their careers to Trinity Access, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.

The framed articles tell the story of just a tiny fraction of the thousands of students who have

benefitted from the initiative over the past two and a half decades.

Trinity Access was set up in 1993 to widen access to under-represented groups at the University. Since then it has worked with schools, community groups and businesses to develop a broad range of initiatives encouraging new admissions, in an effort to reflect the diverse composition of Irish society on campus.

"Not all schools are similarly resourced, and not all families have the means to support young people to reach their potential," Trinity Access Director Cliona Hannon explains.

"But if you take students in on reduced points from certain schools and give them some supports when they transition into higher education, they have enough innate talent and drive to achieve just as well academically as anyone from any other social background."

Outreach begins with primary school children in designated disadvantaged areas, in a bid to spark an interest in third-level from a young age. Summer programmes bring secondary school students on campus to experience the physical, academic, cultural and social aspects of student life at Trinity, while shadowing days and mentoring initiatives connect them with undergraduate students from a similar background to their own, giving them a relatable role model from their own community.

Around 50 students annually – split between school-leavers and mature students – are accepted onto the Trinity Access foundation year. Their Leaving Certificate points don't matter, but they must demonstrate an ability and interest in one particular subject area.

During the foundation year, they study core subjects including IT, educational guidance, and study skills. They also choose other subjects that they are particularly interested in, such as History, Law or Economics, before progressing on to first year in their chosen degree course.

This year, there are more than 900 Trinity Access



Dr Cliona Hannon,
Trinity Access Director

Photo: Paul Sharp

participants studying for undergraduate degrees in all areas of the college, from Medicine and Human Genetics to Business Studies, Law, Engineering and Computer Science. Retention rates and academic results are similar for Trinity Access participants and students who enter college through the general admission route.

Trinity Access students have “gone on to do extraordinary things,” Hannon says, citing the “obvious example” of Senator Lynn Ruane. A single mother who left school at 15, Ruane returned

Trinity Access currently works closely with 20 primary and 20 secondary schools, but this will scale up to 70 nationwide by 2021 under the Trinity Access 21 initiative, which has been funded by Google and Social Innovation Fund Ireland, and many individual and corporate supporters. About 30 per cent of participants are now from ethnic minority backgrounds, with some living in direct provision.

“It is great to see Trinity change,” says Hannon. “Students are making the case for greater diversity in education.”

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to education as a mature student. As President of the Students’ Union in 2015, she became a strong advocate for social justice issues including housing, migration, minority rights and climate change, before taking her talents to a national platform when she became the first undergraduate student ever elected to the Seanad in 2016.

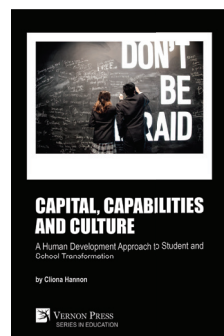
“We have had surgeons, academics, politicians, writers, journalists, teachers, social workers – you name it, Trinity Access graduates have done it,” Hannon says. “And apart from what they are doing professionally, three-quarters of them are active in their own community in encouraging further study. They do a lot of giving back.”

Although Government funding has not increased in recent years, corporate and alumni funding has allowed Trinity Access to build new programmes and expand their reach.

“We try to secure additional financial support for our students while they are on the undergraduate courses. This helps enormously with financial crisis management, but also day-to-day costs of travel, lunch, books, and lab equipment. It makes a huge difference.”

Since 2016, Hannon has been working with Lady Margaret Hall (LMH) in Oxford and has recently announced plans to roll out the programme to other Colleges in the University. Cambridge University is currently fundraising for a similar initiative, which they hope to launch in 2021.

“Seeing some of the programmes we have built being scaled and taken up by leading institutions internationally is very satisfying,” Hannon says.



Dr Cliona Hannon's new book *Capital, Capabilities and Culture: A Human Development Approach to Student and School Transformation* is now available from Vernon Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ciara Kenny B.A. (2006) is Acting Editor of *The Irish Times Magazine* and Editor of *Irish Times Abroad*, an online section for Irish-connected people around the world. Follow her on Twitter @ciarak.

Alexander Fay



“I was a bit of a nerd at school,” says Alexander Fay, who grew up in North Wall in Dublin’s north inner city.

He loved astronomy and astrophysics and popular science, so when a teacher suggested a science summer school at Trinity when he was in 6th class, he decided to give it a go.

“We went on a trip to the Science Gallery and made LED lights. It was my first time in Trinity College. Maybe the first time I was in any college.”

Throughout secondary school, he went back to Trinity a few times a year for events and workshops, and received grinds before his Junior and Leaving Certificate exams.

“I had the push at home from my parents to get a better education than they had the opportunity to receive. Both my Ma and Da left school at around 14 or 15. I was the first person in the family to give it a serious go. I had no shyness about it.”

In 6th year, he applied for the Trinity Access foundation year. “All I had to do was pass the Leaving Cert. I got into college because I was me, not because of my points. I am proud of that,” he says.

He spent two weeks studying each subject, and was drawn back to science, applying at the end of the year to the Science degree course. He is now in second year.

“Most of the class were from Dublin and around, but ethnicity-wise and nationality-wise, there were people from a lot of different backgrounds. That was enlightening, to see there were people who look different to me, talk different to me, had a different experience than me, but had the same grounding and interest in education. There was no reason that these people should not have been in college, which helped me see there was no reason that I should not have been in college. We were all on an equal ground, despite the huge differences between us.”

Fay is now a Trinity Access ambassador, which involves giving talks in schools, and bringing students on campus tours. He also runs the Edmund Rice summer camps, “for kids in the inner city who might need a break from something that’s going on at home or in school”, managing a team of 70 leaders.

“You do encounter active and passive discrimination, and there are social differences that have to be overcome unfortunately. But Trinity Access has given me confidence and pride in where I am from. I might be different to a lot of other people here, but that doesn’t make me any better or worse.”

Deirdre McAdams



Deirdre McAdams first became involved with Trinity Access in primary school as part of the Bookmarks Programme, when a writer and illustrator visited to help the pupils design and write their own books. She visited Trinity for the first time when her book went on display in the Old Library and visited regularly with her grandmother after that.

In 6th year, she applied for the Trinity Access foundation year, and went on to achieve the highest grade on the course, which led her to a degree in Medicinal Chemistry.

"I won a travel award to Thailand in the summer of my first year, became a Trinity Scholar and attended prestigious conferences in second year, participated in academic internships in third year and graduated with an excellent degree in final year, all possible through the guidance and support I received through Trinity Access," she says.

Following her degree, she worked for a year with a partner organisation, College for Every Student (CFES) in New York, developing and delivering leadership workshops, and conducting peer mentor training with schools in Boston, New York, Indiana and Ohio. After a second year working in the chemical industry in America, she returned to Ireland last October to begin her Ph.D. in Medicinal Chemistry.

McAdams is now the Biology Tutor on the Trinity Access foundation course, as well as a tutor with the Scholars Ireland Programme, an initiative run in conjunction with Trinity Access. She also tutors 12 students from the Assumption Secondary School in Walkinstown, where she went to school.

"Trinity Access shaped who I am and what I want to do in the future, as a person, as a researcher, as an advocate for fair and equal access to education," she says. "Before I started with Trinity Access, I didn't even know I had an interest in these things, and now they are pivotal to who I am. It brings so much hope and joy to so many people."

Photo: John Cairns



Louise Richardson,
Vice-Chancellor,
University of Oxford

University of Oxford and Access

Oxford has long experienced difficulties in recruiting academically qualified applicants from diverse backgrounds. An environment like ours – in which entrance requirements are high and competition for places intense – tends to privilege those who have already experienced advantage in their pre-university education. Many of us have sought to change this, but it is not easy in a system in which prospective students apply, not to the University, but to one of our 34 colleges and halls that admit undergraduates.

It was against this background that the Principal of one of our colleges, Alan Rusbridger, met Provost Patrick Prendergast and learned about the Trinity Access programme. He decided to adapt the Trinity Access idea to his college, Lady Margaret Hall (LMH) and give it a try. Not only did we get the idea for a foundation year from Trinity, we also received lots of encouragement, support and advice. Cliona Hannon was a regular visitor helping us to learn from Trinity's experience as we adapted it to Oxford's collegiate structure.

"The foundation year has made me realise that I can fit in to Oxford – and there is no one typical Oxford student and I'm just as much an Oxford student as anyone else. I've found a place here that I didn't think I would find."

2016-17 foundation year student

The two programmes are not identical. Ours is smaller, admitting 12 students a year. A more significant difference is the fact that our foundation year students leave home and live in the College for the academic year. Finally, our students are not guaranteed a place at Oxford, rather, they apply during the course of their foundation year. The majority of the participants have been offered a place at LMH, but not everyone.

Whereas Trinity Access has been running in Trinity since 1993, we are only in the third year of our foundation programme. Other Oxford Colleges are watching the LMH experience closely, and we hope that once its effectiveness has been demonstrated, other Colleges will decide to adopt a foundation year too, and we will be able to roll out a university-wide programme.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise Richardson M.A., LL.D. (H.C.) (1980) is a graduate of the School of Histories & Humanities at Trinity College Dublin.