

Tom Molloy, Director of Public Affairs and Communications speaking with Professor Lorraine Leeson, Associate Vice Provost for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

Tom: Hello and welcome to another episode of Trinity College Dublin talks. I'm Tom Molloy and with me today is Professor Lorraine Leeson who's worked in Trinity for 25 years as a lecturer as a sign language interpreter. And more recently, as the director of the Centre for Deaf Studies. A year ago, I think it was Lorraine, you were appointed the Associate Vice Provost for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. That's a relatively new role. You're only the second person to hold this role, and it was a role that all Irish universities were sort of mandated to create. Uhm, I wonder can we? Can we first of all, Lorraine just kind of unpick what, equality, diversity and inclusion really are? How would you differentiate between the three?

Lorraine: Well, hello, Tom first of all I have to say that I haven't even been in this role for a year, though it may appear so I've only been in the role since the beginning of September, so I'm certainly just finding my feet and I'm fortunate to be working with a brilliant team of people from across the college as I do this. So in terms of what would the differences be between equality, diversity and inclusion? I suppose equality is about equal opportunities and seeking to ensure that people aren't discriminated against. Diversity. It's about for me respecting and valuing differences that exist in our society and saying that that's something to celebrate. And then inclusion would refer to how we experience our communities that were engaging in, you know, be that of workplace, a college or wider society. And I would really emphasize, however, that I think we have to go beyond inclusion. We have to go to a place where you know it. It's not enough. To say, come on in the door you have to be able to say. Sure, take your shoes off there, put your feet up and make yourself at home. You've got to feel like you belong somewhere. So how do we foster a place where people belong regardless of what walk of life they come from? And how do we ensure that conditions are such that people can flourish regardless of where they come from or who they are?

Tom: Why do universities particularly need somebody in a senior position to kind of safeguard those three very important values? And is it because we haven't been good at it in the past? Or is it because we are good at it and it needs to be kind of reflected upon for wider society or how do you, you know? Because it is. It's no secret that that all Irish universities were ordered to create this. This role following problems in universities really around and the promotion of women. What do you think of the particular issues that affect Trinity has?

Lorraine: I think that's a really interesting question. I. I think you know. As you say, yes, they're there. They're always carrots and sticks. I think that there have been lots of people in Trinity for hundreds of years who have been seeking to push forward the way we do things. I mean, you just have to look back, not over 100 years to see how the push to have women as students in the college unfolded and how things have transitioned in the intervening years, but I suppose. We do have legal obligations. We have obligations under the Equal Status Act. We have a public sector duty to ensure that there are non discrimination policies and practices in place and you might say, well, you know if you were to take a laissez faire approach you would say, well, that's grand, isn't it? But it isn't. We know that you know in any discipline what you measure. You can monitor and you can make sure that things are put duly in place too. To support change we have to lower the blind spots. Everybody has blind spots and I think you know very often we might be motoring along in our everyday and thinking gee things are grand because from where we stand or where we sit things are fine or seem to be fine, but that doesn't mean

that things are fine for our neighbor. And as the university has diversified as society has diversified as we've seen, for example, over the past 20 years. More students and staff with disabilities coming through our midst as we have seen greater move towards internationalization, you know with the Erasmus programs and Fulbright programs, and because of migration and deliberate efforts to bring in students from abroad, well, then we also have a duty to say, well, are we making sure then, that our custom and practice in the everyday is keeping up with the ideals that we say we believe in, and that's also where we come in. You know how do we How do we make sure that we make the college a place that is welcoming for everybody? And equally on the other side of it, how do we make sure that we are responding to the obligations that we have from the Higher Education authority from you know, the Irish human rights and Equality Commission and from other players, so you mentioned. Gender equality, that's certainly one area that we have been paying attention to for the past 810 years, but certainly the road of travel, the direction of travel would seem likely to be a broader one where we're now paying more attention, and rightly so to consideration of race and ethnicity to consideration of age to consideration of disability, and making sure that we don't have systemic ableism. Or systemic racism in our institutions so we can do that in big ways such as having policies. But then we also need to make sure that that filters down to the everyday, you know, so that if you if you want to have access to a prayer room that you can do that or that if you are a student mother, that you have access to breastfeeding facilities and so on and so forth. So there's a very broad range of things that we need to think about. And to me, these are part of what it means. To be a good university, you know in that sense of who is the university for what is a university for. And if we see Trinity as a community, we've always talked about the college community. Well, then what does it mean to have a good community where everybody feels that they're part of that community and can flourish in that community? Community is a very interesting word, isn't it? Because it is a word that's bandied around a lot in in Trinity and a sincerely held. Kind of concept. I use it a lot at my colleagues is a lot. You used it there. Community. It's kind of a double edged sword, isn't it? Because on one hand a community can be inclusive and welcoming of diversity, but it can also be kind of exclusive in a way is that the tension that you're talking about here. Perhaps yeah, I think I think that's a great question. You know, I think we have to think through. Who is, who is part of the community, you know and who says so anyway. You know it, you know. Are you part of the community by virtue of the fact that you walk in through front gate? Are you part of the community by virtue of the fact that you have signed up to take a course with us? To me, you know a community is the, uh, the range of people who are engaging. In this, both physical and virtual space, UM, on a daily basis, and for me it's also about saying, you know, we often when we think about the college we think about students, we think about the staff, but we should also remember that there are children on our campus, in the college creche, there are children who go to the Walton club. There are older people who come through our extramural classes. You know, I remember a few years back about these two gentlemen in their late 80s. And maybe even into their 90s who were taking these evening classes. And so we have. We have this very broad spectrum of people who are on our campus in the every day and I. I think you know that we need to think about what does the college mean to them and how. Then you know do we reflect back through the institutional responses? A sense that this is an engaged, participatory environment that we're operating in? Yeah, I think.

Tom: Too many people think of universities as being essentially places where 18 year olds go to mature and then leave at 22, don't they? And it, it's easy if you just have a Superficial interest in in universities or just read the media here and there to think that. A university does little more than that and perhaps research on top, whereas really they they are, as you say, that the the communicating with children that communicating with the elderly they're communicating with all kinds of people from all over the world as well.

Lorraine: Who come to visit to come to study, come to teach. And research, and it's much smaller, a complex ecosystem than most people give universities and I think when you think about the fact that we have such a strong alumni network, you know that people hold the College in their hearts. They may come through the door as a visitor for you know we have these wonderful Trinity long room hub fellowships. For example, where people might come for three weeks. Visit and work with academics and yet they go away and they have these lingering, UM, relationships with the college you know you have students who come here as Erasmus students, and then they go home and they go on, but they still have this ongoing relationship with the college, and so I think we need to think about, you, know, our community really in sense of diaspora as well as the physically present Members who are here on a day to day basis. Or maybe you know for some, for a short period of time, some for a longer period of time and we need to think about that footprint in the world and you know what kind of a footprint do we have? And we want people to go away really feeling that the college is a place where they felt welcomed where they felt supported and where they felt that they could flourish. So to me it's about saying. What is what does success look like? And I don't mean academic success only because of course we're interested in excellence and in succeeding and being the best that we can be. But we have to make sure that we think about success in that broader sense of engagement and the development of the individual as a success story and the you know the opportunity for individuals to flourish during their time in the college, but also that that spills over into other parts of their lives. I know it all sounds very optimistic on my part, but that's something that I really believe I want people to have a good experience when they're here in the college, and that that's something that persists.

Tom: Well you have to be optimistic when around because your task is fairly daunting in many ways. I mean, if one takes a campus like Trinity College Dublin. In some ways it's very well located campus for people with physical disabilities because it is at the it's a kind of a transport, public transport hub and you can get here by train or by bus, or by almost any way you anyway you choose. Unlike many other universities, but on the downside, I suppose the buildings are old and they didn't have lifts in the 18th century. And it can be kind of a daunting prospect sometimes just to get around the buildings. How can we best cope with those kind of problems? Do you think, do you think it's best to say, well certain universities can provide certain services and we can provide others or should we? Should we change our buildings or what do you think we should do then?

Lorraine: Well, I think that we can. We can start by looking at how accessible our buildings are, and you know. We have an obligation to increase the number of staff with disabilities. Working for our university. All universities, all public sector bodies do to 6%. So, we should be asking students and staff with disabilities to tell us how accessible or inaccessible spaces are. I mean, can you imagine if you were navigating campus as a blind person, how would you do that? Can we change that and improve that for the better? What if you're navigating space as a deaf person? One of the considerations that we need to factor in there? I mean, we tend to, and rightly so, think about physical access, but we need to go beyond that. So we do need to be thinking about an intersectional approach to access ability, we need to, you know, we think about lighting. We think about what that means. In terms of feelings of safety, but we also need to think about signposting about you. Know if you are a deaf person because I come from deaf studies, I've worked with deaf people for most of my career. What happens if there's a fire alarm in a building that doesn't have a visual fire alarm system in place? Or what happens if you get locked into a room and you need support from security? You can't pick up the telephone, so how well signposted are the text? Numbers for security as well as, say, the phone numbers so that those kind of small changes, think the Japanese call it the art of Kaizen, you know, they say many little changes bring about significant change and that's I think to some degree what we can do. We can say look, there are

loads of little things that we can do that collectively will have a very significant impact for many members of our Community. And then there are other things that we can do, like we can say Well, because we have this amazing old campus, a lot of what we've been doing for the past couple of decades is retrofitting and trying to bring things up to spec for accessibility in the 21st century. But we've also been building forward so and we will continue. I'm sure to build forward. So as we're imagining where we're going over the next decade, we need to think about, well. You know, we know that we have, you know, a demographic of young women on campus so we can imagine that many of them may become mothers while they're working with us or studying with us. So why don't we when we're building a new building, make sure that we're putting in adequate space to support. Again, you know things like breastfeeding or baby changing spaces. If we know that we're going to have a more diverse Community, well then we need to accept and ensure that we're providing adequate, maybe multifaith spaces so that people can take a little bit time out of their day, and they can pray. Or they can sit in contemplation of if that's what they would like to do, but we build in those spaces from the beginning rather than you know afterwards. Going, Oh my God, we never thought it this where are we going to? Put this in now, and those retrofits tend to be more expensive and they tend to be probably less ideal than they would be if you were building them in from the beginning, so for me, my mission is to say, let's make equality, diversity and inclusion thinking fundamental to everything we do, put it as a starting point. It can't be a plug in after the fact. We need a new operating system here. So how do we do that and how do we, how do we just check and cross check the decisions that we're making to ensure insofar as we can, that there aren't unintended consequences of decisions that are going to more negatively impact certain parts of our Community than others? So you know, I think sometimes it's just about taking a little moment and saying OK. What does this decision mean from the perspective of XY and Z and joining up some of the dots a little bit, but I'm, I'm very reassured by the many great conversations I've had over the past two to three months with colleagues. There's a great deal of energy and enthusiasm for this conversation, so I think it's very timely, Tom.

Tom: I think I think you know you and I sit on several committees together Lorraine and I know that. Uh, I certainly see the enthusiasm for what you're what you're talking about and I certainly see the benefit of baking this into at the planning stage rather than, as you say, scratching their heads and wishing you done it after building is completed, or whatever, right? How did you? Uh, what were the steps in your life that that have made you so interested in this topic? cause obviously many people are interested and we, we should all be interested in. I think will be more interested as time goes on but you have you've been in this area for quite some time now. You know take us back to and before you became a lecturer. Before you join Trinity, you did many other jobs. You worked in a cake shop. There's a swimming teacher and a lifeguard. And so on and so forth. How did you become an academic?

Lorraine: Chance I think, uhm, I grew up in Cabra, Tom, and I was the eldest of six kids. My parents like so many of their generation left school after primary school because at that time there was no free secondary education and their families couldn't afford to support them through secondary school and it would have been unheard of really at the time anyway. But my mother in particular was absolutely determined that her kids would all do the leaving Cert and then she really didn't mind what it was that we wanted to do beyond that, but that was her goal, so when we were doing secondary school you know we're coming close to leaving cert. I think our current guidance teacher must have been having a bad day because she basically said to us, you know, I don't know why you're all doing this search. You're all going to be married off or working in you know retail or you know secretaries. I don't know why you're bothering do this. And that kind of was where it was at in the in the late 1980s for working class kids. I guess so. So for me it was like, well, what do I want to do? Well, I'm the eldest of six, and so I

thought. Well maybe childcare would be, you know, something I could do? 'Cause I certainly didn't want to be a secretary. And I thought, well, OK, I'll do this course. So I did a post leaving certificate course, Tom, and through that course I happened to secure a placement out in the Central Remedial Clinic in Clontarf. And while I was there, there happened to offer an Irish Sign language class and I happened to take it and I was terribly bad. Terribly, terribly bad at it, but from that, then I did some more studies and applied for a job as a house parent, in Saint Joseph School for Deaf Boys in Cabra. And I walked in, and I did my leaving certificate at age 16, so I was very young and so really yeah, absolutely. And so at 18 I walked into Saint Joseph School for Deaf Boys thinking I was going to work with little deaf kids and I was in a house as a housemother to 16 deaf teenage boys aged 15 to 20. So that was the start in many ways of my journey, but I suppose. You know, for me, I've been very interested in these issues. I suppose you know, coming from a working-class family. Uhm, my dad was unemployed for a lot of the 1980s. You know the Great Recession, so I understand what it's like to come from a socioeconomically disadvantaged space. I understand what it's like to have sort of gender expectations placed upon me. I've been asked more times than I can count over my career if I'm the secretary. I have no problem with being a secretary. But I certainly was never the person being asked if I was the director of the Centre for Deaf Studies. So you know, there's there are those stereotypes assumptions I've worked with. Deaf people I've worked with, people with disabilities. And that, to me, has enriched my life and helped me to think broadly about what it means to be in Irish society. And what does one have to do in order to be able to get in the door, to a degree, but then also to feel at home and to flourish. And you know what are the conditions that help with that. Now, I've been extremely fortunate I've met so many wonderful, welcoming people here in college and across my own career. I also studied at the University of Bristol and you know, I had people who were very encouraging, and I think that that encouragement and that reassurance that you can do things that people who sign to, you know, being a first generation student also brings its own challenges because you don't even know what the questions are that you should be asking, never mind knowing how to navigate. UM, some of the things that you would navigate on a daily basis if you had a different world view or a different realm of knowledge available to you. So, I suppose that it's those multiplicities of experiences that have certainly informed my approach and they make me very passionate about this role and I'm really, really grateful that I have the opportunity to step into this space and work with such a wonderful team of people here in the college to see how we can build on the great work that has been done and build forward even more stronger.

Tom: That's very interesting. So, it was really totally random really, wasn't it? I mean, a lot of people who come into this space have experienced something in their own lives or their families lives. Or, you know, when I ask you a question, I thought maybe you would have a deaf relative or something like that, but it was just that chance of going to that particular centre in Clontarf at that particular time.

Lorraine: Well, well, yes. And I also grew up in Cabra, which is where the main schools for the deaf in Ireland have been located since the mid-1840s. I hasten to add that I have not been there since the mid-1840s, but, so there were deaf people in the neighborhood. Our local shoe mender was a deaf man. You know, I remember meeting him as a 3-year-old. So yeah, deaf people were around it was it was just normal and there were members of my own extended family, who had disabilities, and that's absolutely normal. It's just this is the fabric of our society. And you know, if we give people space to be the best, that they can be, well, then we can do amazing things in the world. So we as a university, I think should be giving people space to be the very best that they can be.

Tom: Well, we should really end on that optimistic note, but at that we can do wonderful things in the world and the universities are our vehicles for that. But I do have one last question. If you don't mind in

a couple of weeks, it's Irish Sign Language Day and I know that you know you're an expert, you know. Sign language. One thing I've never understood and I'm intensely curious about is. Why do we have an Irish sign language? And an English-speaking sign language? Why? Why is it different? It's always seemed to me that it would have been a great opportunity to teach everybody in the world the same sign language, UM, but we don't seem to do that. Why?

Lorraine: That's a great question. It's because languages evolve naturally overtime, so sign languages aren't created by somebody with the deliberate intent of teaching deaf people. For as long as there have been deaf people, there have been signed languages. And just like spoken languages change over time and come in contact with other languages and borrow from them, so too does Irish Sign language. So contemporary Irish Sign Language has historical roots in French Sign language, but also has a lot of contact with the sign language used in the UK, which is called British Sign Language. I should really emphasize that it's in some ways you know when we say Irish Sign language, people automatically think they know it must be something to do with Gaelic. But it isn't so. Irish Sign Language is just simply the sign language that is used in Ireland. It's officially recognized by the state. We have an Irish Sign Language Act and we can also say that it is as different from English or Irish as French is from English or Irish. It is its own syntax, its own grammar, its own structure, and it is a living wonderful thing. It's a beautiful language and so too are the other sign languages that we experience in the world. So, it's like a whole other hidden layer of the language ecology.

Tom: It was kind of a kind of a stupid and arrogant question on my part. I assumed, I suppose, because most of the people on the island of Ireland and yeah, under Britain can understand one another that that should be the case with sign language. Of course, there's no reason why it should be. In a nutshell, isn't it? It's a different language developed different.

Lorraine: Yeah, they're different languages, but uhm, many Irish deaf people understand British Sign language because in the UK, they're really good at putting sign languages on TV, so you see a lot of British Sign language in the media because they're Off-COM standards around that. And of course, if you look at the COVID briefings over the past two years, if you look at the Northern Irish briefings, you'll see that there are two sign language interpreters on screen, both one for Irish Sign Language and one for British Sign Language. So, you can, you can check them out and see if you can identify similarities and differences in the patterns. That you see on the news each night.

Tom: Irish Sign Language was kind of recognized by the Act, wasn't it? I think about 6-7 years ago, one of the few private Members bills to actually get through the Parliament. If you could create one piece of legislation to kind of combat an issue in the quality, diversity, inclusion space. Would you share with us what piece of legislation you would enact?

Lorraine: Oh, that is such a good question, and this is really taking me now. On the spot and gosh. You know what, I think it would probably be around just public spaces, and that I would say, you know, universal design. Probably now you're putting me on the spot, but I would say fairly fundamental things. Design and accessibility, yeah. It would probably be welcomed by many other people, wouldn't it? You know? I mean It's useful for people pushing buggies, or in that's it exactly, and you would be thinking about things like public, you know, public lighting. You would be thinking about things like, just safety, you know, on our streets for everybody. And I think you know if we have a space, if we have a Civic

Society where everybody feels safe in the community. You know in, say, public transport or going about their daily business without fear? Well then that's a better society for everybody.

Tom: And this I think this is what I'm taking from what you're saying, really emphasizing it's a win for everybody, isn't it? Whether you personally benefit in the immediate term from EDI changes, you benefit in a wider sense. For sure, I should have actually asked you about one last thing. And if you don't mind, I will. It's about the Speak Out campaign that you and Trinity are bringing forward in the next few days. Would you like to just tell us what it is? Sure, well the Speak Out tool is an online anonymous reporting tool and the Higher Education Authority has asked each and every higher education institute in the land to ensure that they have a consent framework in order to tackle issues around sexual violence but also hate crime, harassment, and bullying. So, the Speak Out tool is an anonymous tool where students, staff, visitors to an individual, college or university can just log in and they can report their experience. It's really important to say that it is totally anonymous, but what it does give us is a sense of the level of experience of negative behaviors in the community at large and from that then we can build forward. We can build better policies and we are indeed we're working with the college to build a new sexual misconduct policy and we are reinvigorating the dignity and respect policy, but also means that we can engage in rolling out more robust educational responses to, you know, so we see consent training that's become the norm and rolled out by, you know the Student's Union, with the Senior Tutor's area, with Counseling Service and we can maybe build forward on that even more just to make sure that the bottom line is that you know, in in a community, in in the college community we have a zero tolerance for any kind of harassment, bullying, sexual misconduct, and we need to say that very strongly, and I think it's quite timely and appropriate that we launched the Speak Out tool to an international consent day as part of the 16 days of action against violence.

Tom: Is harassment, bullying, a significant problem or a limited problem with obviously terrible consequences for those involved. Do you think it's widespread?

Lorraine: I, I think our colleagues in HR are probably best placed to answer that question, but I would get the sense I would. So, there's several things to say. I think I think one important thing to say is that in places where people feel that they can safely reveal negative experiences, the level of reporting tends to be higher, so we shouldn't be afraid if people start to feel that they can tell us that they've had negative experiences. It doesn't mean that there is, you know, a new epidemic of bullying that has come onstream. Rather, it means that there is a space where people feel safe to do that. And we know this because, for example, somebody recently said to me, you know, Sweden has the largest annual reports of rape in Europe. It's not that Sweden is a less safe country, it's that more people feel that it's safe to report their experiences of rape to the system there than perhaps in other countries. So, to me, you know. The issue of bullying, harassment, you know. It's something we have to take seriously, and we really have to demonstrate by our actions that we're willing to do something to stop this. The first step on that journey is to hear what people have to say. And to believing people when they tell us about their experiences. And then, as I said, you know from that you build forward, you need to make sure then that you respond and act in appropriate ways. And on that front. That's where we work very collaboratively across the college to make sure that our responses are appropriate. Our alignment, natural justice, of course, and that we do respond. I think that's really, really important that you can't ignore the terrible damage that people experience when they are living quietly through very negative experiences. Be that as we said, you know bullying be that harassment, be it as a result of some kind of sexual misconduct or assault. We just have to say that is not acceptable and we need to say that regularly and often. And then we need to match our words to our actions through our policies through

our education system through what we say to people on the day-to-day and then, how do we respond to people when they do come forward and tell us? What have they experienced?

Tom: Well, that that that's a good place to end this, uh, this particular episode. It's quite clear isn't it. You have a pile of work ahead of you. You're still quantifying the problem in many areas, such as this one and dealing with the and implementing the solutions in in other areas. Thank you very much for joining us today.

Lorraine: Well, thank you very much for the opportunity to talk with you Tom. It's been a pleasure. Bye.