

Educational milestones – 10 years of growth and development

**Professor Kevin Mitchell, Senior Lecturer/
Dean of Undergraduate Studies and Professor
Martine Smith, Dean of Graduate Studies**

The undergraduate space

In October 2020 Trinity unveiled a new curriculum for undergraduate students which emphasises critical thinking, global citizenship, engagement with employers, flexible learning and integrating co- and extra-curricular learning opportunities.

It was launched by the EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris, TD.

The most ambitious renewal of the undergraduate curriculum in a century, the Trinity Education Project (TEP), planned and implemented over seven years, 2013 to 2020, began by asking what a Trinity Education should be, what attributes we want our graduates to have, and what approaches we should take to ensure we cultivate those attributes through our curricula.

The project strengthened our emphasis on research-led teaching and disciplinary excellence and rigour, through the capstone research project for all students, and enabled

more choice through flexible curriculum pathways and the opening up of space and time for students to take modules outside their own disciplines, Trinity Electives, thus exposing them to diverse perspectives and broadening their intellectual horizons. TEP also involved rethinking and diversifying modes of student engagement and assessment, and recognizing and supporting the extra-curricular activities that form a crucial part of any student's education at Trinity. The work of TEP, underpinned by many changes in policies, processes, and systems, has reinvigorated Trinity's undergraduate experience and laid the groundwork for continuing creative developments over coming years.

Reform of the undergraduate science programmes

TEP led a reform of the undergraduate science programmes, which began with an external review in 2014. At that time, there was one general Science course, 15 possible sophomore specialisations or moderatorships, ranging widely from astrophysics to zoology, and five smaller courses with direct entry, which overlapped in structure and curriculum with the main Science programme. These programmes have now been restructured and rationalised, resulting in four entry streams reflecting broad areas of science: Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Chemical Sciences, Geography and Geoscience, and Physical Sciences.

RIGHT – Students enjoying the sun outside the Arts Building.



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Each stream leads to multiple moderatorship options, including the previous direct entry specialties. A common structure and timetabling approach ensures the availability of modules across streams and students can choose between additional breadth components, including modules from across the University. The response to these changes has been hugely positive, with increasing demand from students, and new activity from the Schools involved, including development of new curricula and moderatorships.

Trinity Joint Honours

The option to take two subjects to degree level has always been a defining aspect of the Trinity education, especially in the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. Under TEP, the structures enabling this were reviewed and reorganised into a more integrative curricular structure. The development of a fixed timetabling system enables students to progress along flexible pathways and provides access to additional breadth elements – e.g. students who enter in joint honours may choose to keep both subjects going or concentrate exclusively on one of the subjects as they progress. Conversely, students who enter in single honours may take up a new subject in second year and carry it through to get a minor degree award. These options are underpinned by the new Undergraduate Common Architecture, which enables breadth components – Trinity Electives and Open Modules. In 2021, six additional subjects will formally enter this architecture: Business, Law, Computer Science, Political Science, Linguistics, and Social Policy.

The structure and systems underpinning the Undergraduate Common Architecture provide a solid footing that will open up creative opportunities, including the introduction of new subjects and combinations, as well as the continuing reinvention of the shared curriculum.

Postgraduate Education and Research

In the academic year 2011–12, when Professor Patrick Prendergast stepped into the role of Provost, there were approximately 7,000 applications online for postgraduate admission, both taught and research. Out of a total student population of 16,646, 29% (4,863) were postgraduate students, with almost half of these on the research register, accounting for 11.5% of the total student body.

A decade later, applications have increased to close to 10,500, with most of this growth happening in the past five years as Ireland emerged from economic crisis. While the overall proportion of postgraduates within the student body has remained relatively stable at around 28–29%, there has been a significant increase in postgraduate taught (PGT) applications and registrations. In 2019–20, almost 5,500 postgraduate students registered, with 70% of these PGT.

The Postgraduate Research Landscape

Ten years ago, the default option for research students was to register for a research Masters, and transfer to the PhD register after a probation of 12 months. The expectation that a PhD would be completed within three years meant that most funding

LEFT – EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, launching the Trinity Education remotely due to COVID-19.

BELOW – Inaugural Provost's PhD Project Award recipients with (seated centre) the Provost, Dr Patrick Prendergast, the Dean of Graduate Studies, Prof Neville Cox and Dean of Research, Prof Linda Doyle in 2018.

schemes provided fees for three years only. The concept of a Structured PhD was emerging in 2011, but had only begun to be embedded within the University. An apprenticeship/mentor model was common across many disciplines, with students engaging primarily with a single supervisor.

Now, much has changed. In line with our partner universities in Coimbra and LERU, the concept of a Structured PhD has been developed and expanded and all PhD students now follow this pathway. The proportion of taught elements varies, but all students take between 10–30 ECTS of taught modules. These learning opportunities have offered scope to formalize internship arrangements and support international mobility, as well as extending discipline-specific and transversal skills, such as career planning, teaching excellence, research integrity and open scholarship. Formal progression processes have been put in place, including the introduction of thesis committees, in line with international developments. There is now a clear roadmap for PhD students, giving them visibility over their progress, aligned with the National Framework for Doctoral Education, and Trinity has continued to contribute to policy development through the Irish Universities Association.¹

The year 2018–19 saw the launch of a new scheme of competitive internal funding for PhD students, the Provost's Project Award Scheme. Through generous philanthropic donations, it was possible to fund 40 PhD studentships linked to outstanding research projects led by Principal Investigators. Uniquely, these studentships cover fees for EU and Non-EU students as well as a generous stipend for four years. This scheme has been transformative, attracting approximately 145–160 applications each year from all Faculties. To date, funding has been awarded for 130 projects, driving developments at the frontiers of knowledge and offering career-changing opportunities for early-stage researchers, many taking on their first PhD student as a principal supervisor.

Developments in Taught Postgraduate Programmes

Growth and internationalisation – Taught postgraduate programmes have seen similar transformations. The growth in numbers of taught postgraduate (PGT) students has been spearheaded by ambitious strategies driven by the Vice-President for Global Relations and her team. In 2019–20, PGT students came from 95 different countries and Irish nationals accounted for only 55% of the postgraduate student population, with North America, India and China accounting for a further 25%. The ambitions of the strategic plans over the course of the



decade highlighted Trinity's global position, made concrete through formal agreements with prestigious universities to build new and creative postgraduate opportunities.

The most recent innovation is CHARM-EU (www.charm-eu.eu/alliance), a collaboration with the Universities of Barcelona, Utrecht, Eötvös Lorand (ELTE) and Montpellier to deliver a Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability. This ground-breaking initiative is a testing ground for new models of university collaborations within Europe, to develop a blueprint for future directions.

New structures and new challenges – Exciting new opportunities are on the horizon. Flexible pathways of learning are increasingly important and there is ever more potential of micro-credentials to both disrupt and enhance our approach to postgraduate education. The existential crisis of climate change looms large. Of the 13 new course proposals approved so far this academic year, six reference sustainability or innovation as a focus. It is increasingly clear that this challenge is one that affects us all and that identifying solutions requires our brightest minds and greatest collaborative efforts. These challenges have motivated new ways of teaching, learning and assessment. The potential (and the cost) of digital technologies have come to the fore as we seek new and better ways to work together.

¹ For example, Irish Universities Association, Irish Universities' Statement on PhD Graduate Skills Statement (2nd edition 2015).