The Trinity Education Project
University learning in the 21st Century

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Renewing the Trinity Education
The 2014–19 Strategic Plan for Trinity College Dublin set out an ambitious goal for the university: to renew the Trinity education. We knew, of course, that the teaching mission of the university was already performing well. Trinity courses have already proven their attractiveness for students, and growing numbers from outside of Ireland testify to the global reputation of our courses. At the same time we do see that much of this is related to reputation and “brand” rather than any actual measure of quality, and in a world in which the nature of knowledge is changing in unprecedented ways, staying as we were was not an option: as a character in a well-known novel says: “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change around here”.

From the outset of the renewal process, it was clear that students came to Trinity not simply because they wanted to acquire a certain set of facts or skills: they came because they had an understanding of the sort of person they wanted to become. Our first step, then, was to try to codify something that almost eludes definition: an answer to the question, “what kind of person can I be?” We distilled this sense of transformation into four graduate attributes:

» to think independently;
» to communicate effectively;
» to act responsibly; and
» to develop continuously.

If our graduates can lay claim to these four attributes by the time they walk out Front Gate for the last time, we believe we will have done them some service.

Achieving this goal, however, is a complex task, and we were conscious that two competing values had to be accommodated in a Trinity education. On one hand, throughout the university community there is a strong value placed on the importance of a solid disciplinary formation. Students told us that they want to become experts in their discipline, and that they want to engage in research alongside their
teachers and “become” a historian, or a sociologist, or engineer. For many, this was a defining feature of Trinity’s offering.

At the same time, as their professors, we know we are in an era when the ability to reach out from a secure disciplinary base to other areas is important. This is true not simply in respect of future employability, but in terms of what it means to be educated in our changing world. In addition to identifying the importance of a solid disciplinary formation with points of contact beyond itself, the view quickly emerged that, to achieve the graduate attributes to their fullest, we should redefine the learning experience to include co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Finally, we recognised that any review of our curriculum provided an opportunity to examine the ways in which students can experience a wider range of teaching, learning and assessment methods so that they can take an active, self-directed approach to their learning and thereby develop twenty-first century transferable skills.

In short, in a world in which the nature of work, and the nature of knowledge, is in a state of flux, we want our students to have both the solid foundation and the mental flexibility to live fully their responsibilities and potential as global citizens.

The Mechanics of Change
Trinity is now in the process of implementing a renewed curriculum that will embed these goals in our teaching practice and student learning experience. One immediate fruit of this work will be a simpler system of entry routes for Science beginning in 2018–19, with new entry routes for other programmes opening up in 2019–20. The simpler system of entry routes for Science starting this year is described in greater detail by Dr Kevin Mitchell farther on in this chapter – see p18. Briefly here, in 2018–19 students will be admitted to Year 1 of the new programme architecture for Science via the four new Science streams: Physical Sciences; Chemical Sciences; Biological and Biomedical Sciences; Geography and Geoscience. These new entry routes will not only simplify student choice, they will allow for better decision-making, in that the four entry points correspond to existing second-level Science subjects. So, where a prospective student might not be expected to know what Nanoscience is, they will have already studied Physics or Chemistry. This means that they can enter through a familiar Physics or Chemistry route, and then progress to specialise in less-familiar Nanoscience in their final years. And so too with other more specialised areas, such as Immunology, Astrophysics, Medicinal Chemistry or Geoscience.

The new Science architecture exemplifies the greater degree of pathway flexibility for which we are striving. Enabling this involved much energetic work beneath the bonnet to standardise processes and procedures across the university. In the Arts and Humanities, we are also building a more flexible programme architecture to allow students to explore more subject areas and shift focus or pick up a minor subject in later years.

Achieving this kind of flexibility in our programme design and systems will also enable more students to avail of study abroad and internship opportunities, and we are vigorously pursuing these avenues as well. The
work necessary to put in place the mechanics for this kind of syllabus is not simple. However, in examining our rules, regulations and procedures, we have applied four simple criteria: simplicity, transparency, consistency, and fairness. When we have embedded these principles across the board, and opened up our structures, the effect on student experience will be transformative.

A more flexible programme architecture will also allow students to avail of specially designed modules that will be open to all students, to be called ‘Trinity Electives’. Trinity researchers have, over the past few years, created a series of cross-institutional Research Themes. Currently there are nineteen research themes, ranging from Identities in Transformation, to Cancer, Ageing, and International Development (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Trinity’s 18 research themes that will drive the undergraduate modules as ‘Trinity Electives’

We are currently developing new undergraduate modules from these research themes led by some of the country’s leading researchers, providing an innovative conduit for world-leading scholarship to find its way into the undergraduate curriculum. In this way Trinity will further live its mission as a research university.

Trinity is diversifying its assessment strategies to include a greater range of formative assessment. The distinction between ‘formative’ and ‘summative’ assessment is crucial to pedagogical practice in the contemporary university. Where once assessment was simply about determining the extent to which a student had (or had not) learned the required material (‘summative’), and assigning this a grade, formative assessment takes a wider view of assessment. Formative assessment is part of the learning process, not its endpoint. So, instead of simply
receiving a grade, the student undertaking a piece of formative assessment (typically in the middle of a module) will not only be given feedback on how to improve, but also the opportunity in a subsequent piece of assessed work to build on what they have learned through the assessment process. The culmination of this reform of assessment will be the introduction of a ‘capstone’ project for every student (already in place in many parts of the university), which will take the form of an independent piece of research-as-learning, which all students will complete in their Senior Sophister (final undergraduate) year. Depending on the discipline, this may take the form of a minor dissertation, a performance, a recital, a set of experiments, or a design project.

Let’s Talk...
The most visible part of the Trinity Education Project over the first two terms of the 2016–17 academic year has been the work dealing with structures and systems: the shape of the academic year, programme pathways, progression routes, and related matters. However, ticking along beneath the surface there has been an equally important piece of work underway, involving colleagues sharing their most innovative assessment practices with one another.

In Spring 2017, a dozen ideas exchanges were held around the University, involving academic staff, students, administrators, and those involved in supporting student learning. The formats of these idea exchanges varied, including workshops, seminars, discussion groups and fora, and collectively they have enabled the Trinity community to come together to discuss approaches to assessment in Trinity, and to explore how innovative approaches to assessment can make us better teachers. Themes to date have included assessment variety, programme assessment, the capstone, self and peer assessment, technology-enhanced assessment, and assessing graduate attributes, creativity, and reflection.

Such consultation is very important to us within and outside Trinity. Transformational changes are occurring in the educational context: some are the effect of developments in technology and globalisation, others are a result of the changing needs and expectations of students, employers, and of society at large. Trinity has always made changes to its educational offering to ensure that we are at the frontiers of learning. The Trinity Education Project in renewing our undergraduate education is part of that tradition.

More information available from: trinityeducationproject@tcd.ie and www.tcd.ie/academic-services/tep