Exploring higher education in the digital age
Timothy Savage

Globally the demand for higher education has never been greater and this massification brings issues of both access and quality. Society is looking to universities to tackle global issues around sustainability and humanity through research and equipping graduates with the right skills and mindsets.

Simultaneously, new and emerging technologies offer opportunities unthinkable a few decades ago. Students can collaborate in real-time across the globe. Learners can access vast and ever-expanding learning resources, videos, documents and online discussions from an ubiquitous handheld device - the mobile phone.

My research focus over the last 20 years has been on meaningfully integrating technology into teaching and processes and, more recently, developing appropriate models of higher education for the digital age, within the European context.

The meaningful integration of technology into learning — The first decade of this millennium saw an incessant stream of new technologies, each promising to revolutionise education. My initial focus, working with a small team of researchers and PhD students, was on the role of virtual worlds for learning. These avatar-driven immersive environments offered great potential in creating highly immersive constructed and constructible spaces. An Irish Aid funded project in development education for schools soon followed along with a National Digital Research Centre funded commercialisation project exploring the role of virtual worlds in corporate training and on-boarding.

MOOCs for Trinity students and the wider public — As the technology matured, my research focused on providing accessible online education and part-time higher education for non-traditional students. In 2012 I was appointed Trinity’s first Associate Dean of Online Education where I led a talented team creating the university’s first online courses and massive open online courses (MOOCs) aimed at both Trinity students and the broader public.

The CHARM European university project — In 2018 the European Commission announced the European Universities initiative, a high-profile call to support the emergence of bottom-up networks of universities offering a future model of higher education within Europe.

The CHARM-EU consortium was formed by the rectors of Trinity College Dublin and the Universities of Barcelona, Montpellier, Eötvös Loránd (Budapest), and Utrecht. In 2019 we were awarded funding as one of the first European University networks. This exciting and challenging three-year project will deliver on the vision of a truly European University experience.

The key challenge CHARM-EU will address is Reconciling Humanity and the Planet. It envisages a truly mobile, research informed, challenge-based European educational experience aimed at confronting issues of climate emergency and sustainability.

As Trinity’s Principal Investigator, I am responsible for leading the development of this new model of curriculum. CHARM-EU students will co-construct their own curriculum, moving seamlessly between the partner institutions, following their emergent interests and engaging with the business and research communities, all the while addressing authentic challenges based around sustainable development goals.

This approach to deep and authentic learning will empower students and provide a deep and meaningful learning experience that focuses on the ability of future graduates to tackle head-on the problems of sustainability and the reconciliation of humanity with the planet.

Timothy Savage received his BA in Sociology from the University of East Anglia (1987), his MSc in Computer Science and PhD in Education and Technology from Trinity. In 2002 he became an Assistant Professor in Technology and Learning. This multidisciplinary background underlies his research focus on the meaningful integration of technology into learning and the future of higher education in the digital age. Appointed Trinity’s first Associate Dean of Online Education, he led the online education initiative and is the Trinity PI on the CHARM-EU European University project.

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