



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

**Report to Council on the Quality
Review of the BESS Programme**

10-11 February 2016

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Table of Contents

1. Reviewers' Report	1
2. Response from BESS Programme Director	19
3. Response from the Dean of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences	20

CONTEXT & EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bachelor in Economics and Social Sciences (BESS) programme at Trinity College Dublin is one of the flagship courses of study at the College encompassing four academic disciplines (Business, Economics, Political Science and Sociology) and straddling two schools (Business and Social Sciences and Philosophy). As four academics from different non-Irish universities, each representing one of the constituent disciplines, we have been set the task of reviewing the BESS programme from the standpoint of quality assurance.

Before arriving at the College for in-depth discussions with a wide range of stakeholders in the programme, we were provided with a self-assessment document prepared by BESS staff and College Quality Assurance (QA) officials as well as extensive appendices. In January 2016, we participated in a conference call with BESS staff and QA officers during which we aired a number of questions that had arisen during our review of the documentation. Several supplemental documents were then provided for us based on our discussions.

The committee subsequently met at Trinity College Dublin over the course of two-and-a-half days from 10-12 February 2016 with various stakeholder groups, including students, lecturing staff, teaching assistants, programme management staff, Faculty, School and Department heads, administrative support staff and Faculty and College staff responsible for a number of centrally provided support functions such as finance, IT, library services etc. On the basis of our discussions, all members of the review team have become convinced that the BESS programme is impressive in many ways. It has a strong brand identity, particularly in Ireland, attracting a large pool of nearly 2,000 applicants every year. Less than 15 per cent of these applicants are admitted, but that still means that some 236 Irish and EU students, along with a small number of non-EU students, enter the BESS programme every year, making it a programme of major importance for Trinity. The high degree of selectivity in admitting students means that BESS students are highly qualified, as measured by their CAO points, compared with other universities' programmes in similar fields of study.

Students are attracted to the multidisciplinary and flexibility of the BESS programme, they enjoy the modules offered within it and they identify very strongly as BESS students. Employers, too, seem to be very impressed with the graduates of the programme based on the supporting documentation we received and other stakeholders' comments. The staff members we spoke to, whether lecturing or support staff, were in the main very positive about the programme. Indeed the watchwords here have been enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism.

All of this is particularly remarkable given the fact that BESS, along with other teaching programmes in the School of Business and the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy (SSP), has come under increasing pressure over the past several years with regard to the

resources available to sustain their activities. They have seen increased numbers of students overall (which directly affects the BESS programme because all modules are delivered in classes that include students from other programmes), decreasing numbers of staff and a dramatic reduction in governmental funding. The effect of these trends is suggested by staff-student ratios that have grown to unsustainable levels. Class sizes are often enormous, and there is consequently a heavy reliance on TAs to deliver individual modules, especially in years 1 and 2. In years 3 and 4, although class sizes are smaller, they are often too large to accommodate the more interactive classes that students expect to enjoy in their sophister years as part of a Trinity education. In addition, administrative staff in the schools that contribute to BESS are struggling to support the programme despite their high levels of motivation and professionalism, with the pressure being especially acute for the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy. Finally, central systems, notably information technology, as well as the physical infrastructure of the College, seem to be struggling to cope with high numbers in the face of seriously constrained resources.

These pressures are a source of major concern for the future of BESS. They are inevitably affecting the range of courses available to students, the quality of course delivery, the availability and timeliness of feedback and many other aspects of the student experience. The programme is increasingly surviving on the strength of a brand and reputation that were established in the past, and there is a real and growing possibility that this will prove unsustainable in the future.

The general challenge that the BESS programme confronts became very clear from the discussions that the review team had with a wide range of stakeholders. In addition, a number of more specific issues emerged as a focus of particular concern from these discussions and in the review team's deliberations. They included:

1. Large class sizes inevitably entail a reliance on traditional forms of delivery, i.e. lectures, even in years 3 and 4.
2. The same pressure, combined with fewer teaching staff, has led to a narrowing of student module choice.
3. These pressures have also constrained curriculum development, in particular developments that might promote the multidisciplinary that is at the core of the rationale for the BESS programme in the first place. After the first year, there is no real need at present for students to take a range of modules in different subjects, which undermines the coherence and distinctiveness of the programme.
4. Resource constraints mean that teaching spaces are often unsuitable in terms of size or audio-visual provision or both.

5. There tends to be an over-reliance on end of year examinations, which are cumbersome and time consuming, as a key means of assessment.
6. Module and programme evaluations by students, while undertaken routinely and taken on board for the purpose of module development, feature very low response rates.
7. Much staff time is consumed by paper-based systems for module choice and approval of Erasmus learning contracts for both outgoing and incoming students. This is especially problematic, of course, for already overstrapped administrative support staff, but it also applies to heavily loaded academic staff, in particular in regard to Erasmus.
8. College and Faculty financial systems and practice do not seem to incentivise lecturing staff and School and Department management effectively in terms of innovation or expansion of programmes like BESS.
9. There are clear differences in resource provision not only between the Business School and the School of Social Science and Philosophy (SSP), but also within SSP between Economics on the one hand and Sociology and Political Science on the other. This fact is leading the latter Departments to consider, reluctantly we think, proposing decreasing intake for BESS and/or a lesser commitment to the programme.

Our overall recommendations follow from these general findings about the key issues at stake in the continuation and future development of the BESS programme.

1. We strongly believe that the BESS programme not only has a strong brand, committed students and lecturing and administrative staff and also an excellent track record by any standard over a long period of time, but also has real potential for becoming even better.
2. In order to enable that, a number of reforms and other measures are necessary or are strongly recommended.
 - a. More needs to be done to preserve the multidisciplinary of the programme beyond the first year. We suggest a number of ways in which this can be done.
 - b. Consideration should be given to increasing student choice through offering 5-credit modules for one term each rather than exclusively full year modules. These, furthermore, should be examined if necessary at the end of the term in which students take them, although we stress that this should **ONLY** be done in conjunction with streamlining the examination system.

- c. The examination system should be overhauled. Right now it is extremely costly in many ways without bringing many clear benefits.
- d. First-year students need to be given an introduction to business studies that is much broader than is currently on offer and more in line with the introductions to other subjects in the first year.
- e. The functionality of the SITS system needs urgently to be upgraded so as to allow direct input of module choices by students, thus freeing up academic and, especially, administrative support time currently spent processing paper forms at the very busy beginning of term.
- f. Erasmus and other exchange programmes need to be coordinated much more effectively, probably at College level, and the burden of paperwork and academic pastoral support associated with it (in particular in relation to Erasmus) needs to be rationalised through automation and a more sensible division of labour between academic and administrative staff.
- g. Trinity has a system of allocating budgets which provides perverse incentives by punishing rather than rewarding successful programmes. Budget allocations by College and Faculty for teaching and learning should be based to a much larger extent on the actual numbers of students rather than on historical grounds.
- h. There are possibilities to increase revenues from greater recruitment of non-EU students. Yet, we recommend that a clearer strategy must be devised for this, both in terms of recruitment as well as in terms of the attractiveness of Trinity in regard to facilities (including student housing).
- i. Consideration should be given, on the other hand, to lowering costs and/or increasing productivity through a combination of measures. We offer a number of suggestions for this.
- j. In addition, although we are generally very positive about the contribution of Teaching Assistants to the programme, we recommend more systematic training and oversight of them.

What follows is a detailed consideration, first, of the identity, strategy and structure of the BESS programme; secondly, of curriculum, teaching and learning; and thirdly of administration, resources and facilities. We end with a brief conclusion that elaborates in more detail on the key recommendations presented above.

IDENTITY, STRUCTURE AND STRATEGY

The BESS programme proposes a multidisciplinary education to undergraduate students in business, economics, political science and sociology over a period of four years. In the panel's discussions with them, BESS students spoke of their attachment to, and pride in, their programme. What they emphasized as distinctive about it, above any other feature, was its multidisciplinary identity. Specifically, they underlined the value of their exposure to different ways of looking at social challenges and opportunities from the multiple perspectives offered by business, economics, political science and sociology. Moreover, they appreciated the flexibility that BESS gives them to explore a variety of disciplinary perspectives before opting to specialize in one or two of them.

There was a strong echo of these views in the panel's discussion with staff. They emphasized that what was distinctive about BESS was its multidisciplinary identity. Moreover, across all of the disciplines, staff expressed a strong commitment to the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to education in their fields of interest. From this perspective, the BESS programme is seen as an exemplar of what Trinity has accomplished in multidisciplinary education and a potential model for new programmes in this regard.

Given the undeniable success of the BESS programme, the temptation of changing nothing is a real one. During our meetings, the American idiom 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' found local expression in the slogan 'Don't mess with BESS'. We fully understand these sentiments, particularly in times when financial and human resources are subject to extreme constraints. However, the panel believes that the future success of BESS requires a bolder and more visionary approach to its identity, its structure and its development. The primary reason for this assessment is that BESS does not fully deliver on its own ambitions of being a multidisciplinary programme.

The risks in this situation are substantial given the increasingly competitive educational environment in which BESS is likely to operate in the coming years. Within Trinity itself, there is a need to emphasise and strengthen the distinctive character of the BESS programme in light of the establishment of two new programmes. On the one hand, the Trinity Business School has established a specialized undergraduate degree in business (BBS) and, on the other hand, the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy has introduced a degree in Politics, Philosophy, Economics and Sociology (PPES). Since both of these new programmes offer undergraduate education in some of the disciplines in which BESS is present, its distinctive identity needs to be clear. Even more importantly, Trinity is positioning itself to attract greater numbers of international, especially non-EU, students. Increasingly, therefore, its programmes will compete more directly with those offered by universities outside of Ireland. The BESS programme, as one of the college's most successful programmes, is an obvious vehicle for international expansion, but that will be the case only if it has a distinctive identity that is cultivated within the programme itself.

It is the view of the review panel that more could be done to make sure that is the case insofar as BESS's multidisciplinary character is concerned. Currently, there are some shortfalls in the programme's ability to deliver upon its multidisciplinary identity. They can be seen upon careful examination of the programme's structure and the pattern of student trajectories within it.

1.1 Programme Structure

The first year of the programme requires all BESS students to take modules across all of the contributing disciplines. None of these introductory modules are offered exclusively for BESS students. Instead, all modules dovetail with disciplinary programmes (although the first-year module in business seems to be more limited in scope compared to the others). What is more, once BESS students have completed their first year, there is little in the programme structure that obliges them to maintain a multidisciplinary perspective. Especially when they reach their sophomore years, they are relieved almost entirely of the obligation of maintaining a multidisciplinary perspective. Indeed, in extreme cases it is possible to avoid all other disciplines in 2nd, 3rd and 4th year in order to focus on just one discipline. Thus, beyond the first year, the structure of the programme does not guarantee that BESS graduates that exit the programme will be the multidisciplinary adepts that they chose to be by opting into the BESS programme when they entered Trinity.

1.2 Student Trajectories

An analysis of student trajectories suggests that the composition of the BESS student body has shifted strongly in favour of one or two disciplines and has become less multidisciplinary as a result. Already in 2011-2012, 58 per cent of BESS students pursued a degree in Business or Business and Economics; by 2014-2015 the share of these degrees had risen to 65 per cent of BESS degree pathways. What is happening, therefore, is that the largest and most popular degree pathways -- Business and Economics (joint honours degree) and Business (single honour degree) -- are pushing out alternative routes through Political Science and Sociology. To the extent that this trend continues, the BESS programme risks evolving into a specialized pathway to Business and/ or Economics degrees rather than an omnibus entry point to a wide range of degrees. Indeed, it is already true that more than eight students out of ten opt for a Business-inclusive degree through the BESS programme.

What is clear, therefore, is that the structure of the BESS programme offers only limited support for the multidisciplinary quality of the programme. Furthermore, students are not compensating for this shortcoming through the choices they make about the trajectories of study to pursue within BESS. To the contrary, the programme is moving further away from, rather than closer to, the multidisciplinary identity of BESS that so many stakeholders seem to value. It is plausible, of course, that there is an interaction between programme structure

and student preferences in this regard. To the extent that the programme structure does not emphasise and demand multidisciplinary as much as it could, students may come to value it less as they move through the programme. There is, in fact, some evidence that the tendency for students to cluster around one or two disciplines increases as they advance in the BESS programme.

Therefore, the review panel believes that there is an important mismatch between the multidisciplinary identity of BESS that many of its stakeholders value so highly and the characteristics and dynamics of the BESS programme as it actually operates. One reaction to this mismatch would be for the BESS programme to accept the reality of a programme that is increasingly providing a degree in Business/ Business and Economics. Of necessity, however, that would demand an abandonment of the broader, multidisciplinary ambitions that so many people seem to associate with, and value in, the programme. For a number of reasons, the panel members thought that it would be extremely unfortunate if the BESS programme were to move in such a direction. Above all, they believed that the value of embedding the teaching of business and economics in a broader programme that includes political science and sociology is just as compelling today as when BESS was established, and arguably even more so. Moreover, there are already many alternative offerings for students who want to go down a more specialized route to a business education. The NUI's Bachelor of Commerce programmes are the leading examples in this regard but there are many others and Trinity Business School has itself recently inaugurated a specialized undergraduate business degree.

What makes the BESS distinctive is the multidisciplinary perspective it proposes and, for that reason, the panel members believe that the mismatch that exists between the programme's ambition and reality of what it delivers needs to be redressed as a matter of considerable importance. There are multiple reasons for the current state of affairs and overcoming some of them is beyond the complete control of the schools that offer BESS. Still, there are some clear structural changes that might be pursued to bring about improvements in the multidisciplinary quality of BESS.

Even without the expenditure of large amounts of new resources, there may be more immediate ways of offering a more consistently multidisciplinary programme to BESS students. In this regard, the panel members identified three possibilities for structural change in the BESS programme that we believe deserve some serious reflection as means to reinforcing the multidisciplinary identity of BESS.

- a. The creation of multidisciplinary blocs of modules, organized around important themes for contemporary societies, which benefit from a multidisciplinary approach for their understanding. Examples would be migration, inequality and globalization but these are only a few among a large number of themes that would be possible foci

of such blocs. These blocs would be created from existing modules on offer from the SSP and Trinity Business School as well as other modules, such as those in history, that are currently on offer at Trinity.

- b. The introduction of a requirement for students to pursue a joint honours degree. Currently, it is possible for BESS students to specialize in only one of the four disciplines on the programme, and a number of them take advantage of that option, especially insofar as business is concerned. Such a career path seems to the review team to be inconsistent with BESS's identity as a multidisciplinary programme, and requiring students to pursue a joint honours degree would be one way of reinforcing the programme's commitment to that identity.
- c. The maintenance of the possibility of a single honours degree but the introduction of a requirement for students to pursue a 'minor' discipline alongside their major discipline. This option would achieve some of the same ends as the previous one but in a fashion that might be more palatable to students who have grown used to, and protective of, the flexibility in BESS.

The panel proposes that these various proposals be considered at some length by the BESS governance group to assess their desirability and feasibility. To the extent that the members of the governance group see alternative ways of reinforcing the programmatic multidisciplinary of BESS that have not been suggested by the review team, they should obviously be considered too. One crucial benefit of initiating such a discussion within the BESS governance group is that it would turn it into the forum for strategic reflection on the future of BESS that it should become. Right now, the group is preoccupied with troubleshooting concerns that have tended to push more strategic considerations to the margins. Working towards a strategic objective that all stakeholders can agree on -- strengthening the multidisciplinary identity of the BESS programme by addressing the mismatch between ambition and reality that we have emphasized above -- seems like an opportunity to stimulate a different type of discussion among members of the BESS governance group.

2. CURRICULA, TEACHING AND LEARNING

BESS is characterized by a complex and flexible architecture that allows very different trajectories of study to be constructed from the building blocks of four disciplinary curricula. The word 'curricula' is of the essence here since the BESS programme is based on four distinct disciplinary offerings whose coherence is determined by the discipline that controls each of them. The BESS programme, therefore, is dependent on the modules made available to it by the four constituent disciplines and the various permutations in which

they are combined to constitute the different trajectories of study that can lead to a BESS degree.

In the first year, the structure of the BESS programme largely determines what students will study by requiring a series of courses that offer an introduction to each of the four disciplines as well as a course in Mathematics and Statistics. Students have a choice with respect to only one of their modules in the first year that includes, but is not confined to, a language option. From then on, however, students begin to specialize, to eventually concentrate on one or two disciplines that lead to single honour or joint honour degrees.

This structure of the curricula can and does channel students out of two if not three of the BESS component disciplines after the Junior Freshman year. As a consequence, it is quite possible that students might gain only modest exposure to subjects/disciplines that are assumed to be part of the overall background of an undergraduate programme in social science. Indeed, as we explained in the previous section, that is exactly what is happening in BESS with Business and Economics (joint honours degree) and Business (single honour degree) together attracting two thirds of students. Moreover, the overall weight of business and economics seems to have risen over the last four academic years. In this sense, as we have argued above, the BESS programme does not live up to its label as a multidisciplinary combination of business, economics, political science and sociology. De facto, business, and to a lesser degree economics, take the lion's share of students' preferences and overshadow sociology and political science.

The pattern is made possible by the structural features of the programme that we emphasized in the previous section. However, it is reinforced by the content of the curricula offered by different disciplines to the BESS programme. Indeed, by virtue of being conceived of, and delivered as, disciplinary offerings, these curricula and the modules of which they are comprised, typically lack a multidisciplinary perspective. Largely because of resource constraints that substantially limit the range of modules that different departments can offer, BESS students are offered the same courses that are available to other undergraduate students. There are, in fact, no modules that are specifically designed for, and offered to, BESS students that might offer such a multidisciplinary perspective.

As a result, although BESS students' multidisciplinary perspective is supposed to allow them to think in a different way, they do not have access to modules that would reinforce the value of that perspective and show them how to exercise it to conceive of, and address, social challenges in innovative ways. One likely externality of this situation relates to the content of BESS students' education. The specificity and originality of BESS as a multidisciplinary education may be increasingly watered down by the early and substantial exclusion of certain disciplines from the curricula that students study within the BESS programme.

In the previous section, a number of possible structural solutions were proposed that might be pursued to reinvigorate the multidisciplinary of the program. As far as course content is concerned, there are some possibilities that might serve the same objective, notably through the development of modules that would bring BESS students together beyond the first year. These modules could be organized in a wide variety of different ways. One possibility would be to create a BESS seminar series with prominent people in Irish society invited to discuss issues of business, economic, political and social interest with students. They could then break into discussion groups, organized by teaching assistants, to debate what they have heard. Another possibility would be new modules that cut across disciplines. These could be either substantive modules focusing on themes relevant to different disciplines, or modules focusing on the development of relevant skills, such as presenting, searching information, writing and doing research. Clearly, the prospect of any of these, or similar, possibilities coming to fruition depend on a certain minimal amount of resources being made available to allow them to be launched, but they would certainly contribute to the value and distinctiveness of a BESS education.

Beyond the issue of curricular content, there is another externality of the declining multidisciplinary of the BESS programme. It relates to the internal balance of investment by different departments in the programme, especially moving forward. Given the current structure of the curricula, the relatively marginal contribution of sociology and political science to students' honours education and training may lead to a questioning of the commitment of these disciplines to BESS and even of their role within it. The members of the review team consider that prospect to be an unfortunate one, both for BESS and for the disciplines that contribute to it, since it would diminish their cross-fertilizing impact and potentially reduce their presence at Trinity.

The prospect of some disciplines rethinking their commitment to BESS seems especially likely in a climate in which staff-student ratios have risen to extremely high levels. In this regard, BESS might well become an unfortunate victim of its own success. The programme brings in large numbers of high-quality students to Trinity, but with classrooms at saturation point, and teaching and administrative staff increasingly overwhelmed by growing demands on their time, BESS risks being seen as a poisoned chalice for modules and departments struggling to deal with excessive numbers of students given the resources at their disposal.

In light of these pressures, however, it must be stressed once again that the BESS programme is a long-established and prestigious course of study at Trinity College and in Ireland. BESS graduates tend to fare very well on the labour market, and their success in this regard feeds back into the programme's persistent prestige. As a consequence, BESS enjoys an enviable popularity among secondary school students, being selected by over two thousand of them as their preferred option in higher education yearly (numbers are even

on the rise over the last two years). This guarantees an outstanding quality of incoming freshmen: the CAO minimum entry points of those choosing BESS ranks higher than alternative and competing programmes in Ireland.

This is a most precious capital that possibly stems from the decades-long established reputation of BESS, as well as its rooting in Trinity. The austerity policies of the last years have not undermined this reputation, not least thanks to the visible and admirable dedication of the programme staff at all levels (academics, administration, teaching assistants). Austerity measures, however, have meant and continue to mean that for all these categories of personnel, the burden of work has increased dramatically in recent years to a point where it is becoming critical (see elsewhere on personnel/students ratios). These issues require immediate attention because they have a direct negative impact on the quality of the Trinity education that students receive in the BESS programme.

On the teaching front, BESS students are part of extremely large classes. In the first two years, they can attend only one class where the number of students is less than 120. But even in the Sophister years, only 22 per cent of classes have fewer than 50 students. The situation is to a large extent the result of financial cuts and hiring freezes and it clearly has a major negative impact on the possibilities for teaching and learning within BESS. There is increasing reliance on tutorials to partly compensate for the lack of individualized teaching and the limited opportunities for the development of presentation and participation skills among students. However, although tutorials are widespread throughout the programme, they are not organized or taught according to systematic guidelines. Furthermore, their effectiveness is not adequately assessed and their quality – according to student representatives – varies. Doctoral students who are in charge of these supplementary teaching activities can hardly compensate for the expertise and experience of more senior academic staff.

Given the constraints on academic staff, as evidenced by high staff-student ratios, pedagogical innovation and experimentation are difficult to envisage. Therefore, traditional lectures remain the dominant teaching format. Unfortunately, students' evaluations are too few to be considered representative of the student population (averaging only 18 per cent of attendees) and are therefore practically useless as a basis for pedagogical improvement. As an incentive to quality assessment and optimization, they should be made compulsory, either in class or online, for instance as a prerequisite before taking exams.

Student representatives express a demand for complementary teaching in IT. This request could fit into a restructuring of the educational offering that includes shorter modules, some additional explicitly interdisciplinary modules and a different calendar (i.e. semesterization). Moreover, while popular, Erasmus exchanges could be better adapted to serve as integral elements of the BESS programme. That might involve targeting specific

programmes at other universities for these exchanges based on their coherence with the distinctive identity of BESS. Alternatively, they could be framed explicitly as an opportunity to enhance the foreign culture, including language, skills of BESS students by encouraging them to go to universities where they can attend courses in foreign languages. Currently, the full academic potential of Erasmus exchanges is not being realized within the context of BESS largely because the large amount of administrative work involved is assumed by over-worked academic staff (see below).

Finally, the review team believed that there was one major opportunity to economise on the use of existing resources in the BESS programme although the problem is not a BESS-specific one. The examination process seems to be an extraordinarily elaborate and time-consuming activity for Trinity academics and administration. The relative burden of this activity seemed excessive to all members of the review team and to represent a waste of human resources at a time when they are so scarce. Streamlining the examination process would free up a great deal of time for more productive and creative use in teaching and research. A simplification of the grading procedure and, in particular, a limitation of the two-level appeal system to one – while it might initially be unpopular among students – may be used to free up time for complementary modules/tutorials/seminars for smaller groups of students or for additional student-professor contact. Consideration must be given here to the fact that the vast majority of students sitting supplemental exams pass them, at least in the BESS programme, thus raising questions as to the necessity of a super-supplemental opportunity.

The institutional emphasis on exams stands in inherent contradiction with the fact that grades in the first three years do not contribute to the final degree. The fact that the grade of student degrees is based only on their 4th year results allows for a de-dramatization of module results. Use of multiple-choice tests, even if they should not be used exclusively, could further lighten the burden of grading, especially if they could be administered online, and might also have the effect of curbing student litigiousness. Teachers could consider their use in continuous assessment, possibly assisted by IT facilities. Moreover, especially in the first two years, a number of modules could be graded in a ‘pass/fail’ fashion, which could ease corrections of exams and reduce controversies.

3. ADMINISTRATION, RESOURCES AND FACILITIES

As the previous section makes clear, the BESS programme faces an increasingly critical situation on a number of different fronts. Fundamentally, all of these problems reflect a major mismatch between the requirements of teaching and supporting a high-quality educational programme on the one hand and the extremely constrained resources available to do so on the other. The fact that this problem arises for a programme that is a Trinity flagship is extremely unfortunate.

Perhaps the most important constraint on the development of a BESS into a more multidisciplinary programme is the standard departmental policy pursued both by SSP and the Trinity Business School of offering their undergraduate modules across multiple programmes. From the perspective of departments and the schools that house them this policy is really the only one that makes any sense. For BESS, however, the policy creates both serious limits on the possibilities available for developing its distinctiveness as well as a reduction in the quality of the programme as BESS students are crowded into classes with students from many other programmes.

Without an increase in resources to sustain BESS, the increasingly critical situation confronting the departments that contribute to it, especially the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy, is likely to induce the perverse response of wanting to shrink the BESS programme to make it more manageable. A 50 per cent cut in the number of students admitted to the BESS programme would go some considerable way towards taking the pressure of overloaded classrooms, academic staff and administrative personnel. The perversity of such a solution, however, is apparent to everyone we spoke to given the success of the BESS programme. For the review team, it seemed clear that it would be much better to make resources follow students in a more consistent and transparent fashion. Nevertheless, if that does not happen, a reduction in student numbers, including in the quota for BESS, may be the only way to maintain a high-quality education.

3.1 Management and finance

The BESS-program is managed by two different schools, the School of Social Sciences and the Business School. The School of Social Sciences has four different departments that reside in this School: Economics, Political Science, Sociology and Philosophy. These departments together employ 42 permanent staff members. The directors of the schools are budget holders. The Business School employs about 25 staff members and it has no departments.

There is no earmarked budget for the BESS program. Instead Trinity College funds its three faculties largely on the basis of historical allocations, and the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences funds its constituent schools on the same basis. Since government funding for universities has significantly decreased as a result of the financial crisis and the government's austerity measures, the budgets available to the schools have substantially decreased. Moreover, an 'employment control framework' has operated in recent years, which essentially means that employment numbers are increasingly detached from the budgets allocated to schools.

As a result, the number of staff residing in departments is unrelated to their student numbers and the income generated by teaching. Each year up to 2000 EU-students apply to be admitted to the BESS programme, and less than 15 per cent (around 240) are admitted

each year. This stability is the result of a quota. Even though the numbers of BESS students has been very stable, the number of staff has decreased substantially, leading to a student-permanent staff ratio of around 35:1, a ratio that stood at 23:1 before the crisis. Obviously, this affects the quality of teaching in several ways. Fewer courses are offered, tutorials bear more and more of the pressure of teaching and more teaching is done by junior and adjunct staff.

While financing faculties and schools on historical grounds seems sensible in view of the constraints of the 'employment control framework', it leads to a situation in which a growth strategy is discouraged. As noted above, a successful programme like BESS even faces incentives to *reduce* its student numbers in order to attain a more attractive student-staff ratio. Such incentives seem rather perverse to the review team, and are not in the interest of the students, the university nor the broader society. BESS graduates are very successful on the job market, so it would be in the public interest if the university could accept more rather than fewer of the 2000 applicants. As a result, this committee believes that it is imperative for schools to have some positive incentives which would reward success and establish a clearer relation between, on the one hand, the number of students and the income they generate (mainly from government grants and registration fees), and on the other hand the number of staff (and related expenses).

There appears to be one exception to the general rule of 'funding on historical grounds': Schools can generate extra resources by attracting non-EU students. Trinity College has increased its efforts to attract more of these students and has been somewhat successful in this respect. However, as of yet, the BESS-programme has attracted only a limited number of non-EU students. Moreover, notwithstanding the apparent financial appeal of attracting more of them, in reality the share of the resources they bring that schools actually receive may be lower than they expect. Last year, for example, only half of the tuition paid by non-EU students was paid to schools instead of the 70 per cent expected. And it must also be taken into account that attracting and supporting large numbers of additional non-EU students involves significant investment in recruitment, accommodation, upgrading of teaching facilities and student support (e.g. English language provision). So, while this committee thinks it is certainly important to try to attract more non-EU students, we also believe that the expectation that they will generate enough revenues to have a major impact on school budgets is too optimistic, particularly if rules about the redistribution of student fees are not revised.

3.2 Programme administration and support staff

BESS is a complex programme with 10 different degree pathways. All the courses are offered by the two Schools and their administrative staffs provide support for them. Two Programme Administrators, one of them on a temporary contract, are assigned to the

Course Office, which is responsible for a number of programmes including the BESS programme as well as a number of other School activities. However, since there are no specific modules offered exclusively to BESS students, scheduling and administration are taken care of by other support staff at the two schools. Financial constraints have impacted negatively on the workload of the support staff in just the same way as for academic staff. Overall, student numbers in the two Schools have increased while the numbers of support staff has remained largely stable. Despite the growing pressures placed upon them, the committee was impressed that the BESS programme and its different degree pathways were well organised and administered by very dedicated support teams.

Unfortunately, the support staff has to invest much time entering information into the computer system SITS, once they receive them from students who fill in paper forms. Their work could be done much more efficiently if the students could enrol into courses online as is common practice in the universities of the four committee members. However, the creation of the functionality to make this possible within SITS does not seem to be a priority of the central services charged with its development and operation. That seems to the review team to be very unfortunate in light of the substantial and unnecessary burden its absence imposes on school-level administrations.

In addition, the committee was struck by the fact that some academic staff were performing tasks, for instance with respect to the Erasmus programme, with a great deal of administrative content. That is not a good use of their time and, since staff assigned to this role are understandably keen to offload it as soon as possible, such an allocation is inefficient because it curbs any accumulation of expertise within the schools for managing these exchanges. The Business School has recently confronted these problems by appointing a full-time Erasmus coordinator with excellent results. The Law School reportedly has a similarly successful arrangement. The review team believes that the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy would also benefit from the appointment of a dedicated Erasmus coordinator who could deal with the challenges of BESS Erasmus exchanges.

3.3 Resources and facilities

Many of the fundamental facilities for effective learning are present at Trinity. It has a good library with access to the most important academic journals in the different fields and it has an impressive collection of books. Librarians already offer adequate support for teaching and learning and seem willing to do more if they are asked. There are many computer labs on the campus and facilities such as Wifi seem adequate. Much the same can be said for audio-visual and other equipment in the lecture halls although staff expressed some reservations about its reliability.

The review team did identify three resources that require substantial improvement. The most important one is the SITS system, which does not allow students to enter module

choices themselves. Instead, they have to fill in paper forms that are subsequently processed manually by support staff. The second problem is the quality of the smaller seminar rooms and the furniture in those rooms. These appear not to have undergone any renovation since the 1970s, and are not very attractive learning environments to staff and students. This situation seems especially concerning in light of plans to attract non-EU students who would pay relatively high tuition fees. Finally, and along the same lines, student housing appears to be very limited which is a major concern given the difficulties of finding affordable housing on the market in Dublin. Foreign students are unlikely to come to Trinity if there is nowhere for them to live at a reasonable cost.

4. CONCLUSION

Our overall recommendations follow from these general findings about the key issues at stake in the continuation and future development of the BESS programme. We strongly believe that the BESS programme has a strong brand, committed students and lecturing and administrative staff and also an excellent track record by any standard over a long period of time. Yet, the committee shares the concerns expressed in the SWOT analysis in the self-assessment report, which points at a number of weaknesses and to some developments that seriously threaten the future of the programme. We think that the BESS-programme has real potential for improvement, and we think that some of these improvements are essential to sustain the programme's future. Our recommendations are as follows:

- a. More needs to be done to preserve the multidisciplinary of the programme beyond the first year. This might be done in a variety of ways, for instance by offering a joint second-year module exclusively for BESS-students, focusing on a number of themes that can be studied from different disciplinary perspectives, or focusing on the development of skills, such as presenting, doing research and writing. Other measures to reform the programme, which would not require the development of new modules, would be to require all BESS students to do a joint degree, to require all of those doing a single subject degree to have a minor subject or to require all students to do a cluster of thematically linked modules. The latter might include, for instance, modules focusing on inequality, migration, globalisation etc. Because of the fact that the majority of BESS students tend to do business and economics, any of these three options would have the likely effect of increasing BESS student participation in courses in sociology and political science beyond the first year.
- b. Consideration should be given to increasing student choice through offering 5-credit modules for one term each rather than exclusively full year modules. These, furthermore, should be examined if necessary at the end of the term in

which students take them, although we stress that this should *only* be done in conjunction with streamlining the examination system.

- c. Continuing on from the previous recommendation: The examination system should be overhauled. Right now it is extremely costly in many ways without bringing many clear benefits. The pass rate in years one and two is very high, and the outcomes in years one to three do not affect the final degree result. The fourth year degree result, in turn, does not differentiate among students well enough because an extremely high percentage of students leave with an upper second-class degree. It also places the entire burden of performance on the final year (and to a large extent on just a few weeks of the examination period at the end of the year). Consideration should be given to including third year results in the overall degree result classification, e.g. using the ratio 30:70 or 50:50. In addition, consideration should be given to differentiating more finely among outcomes for students by using a grade point average rather than the insufficiently differentiated degree classification system currently employed.
- d. First year students need to be given an introduction to business studies that is much broader than is currently on offer and more in line with the introductions to other subjects in the first year.
- e. The functionality of the SITS system needs urgently to be upgraded so as to allow direct input of module choices by students, thus freeing up academic and, especially, administrative support time currently spent processing paper forms at the very busy beginning of term.
- f. Erasmus and other exchange programmes need to be coordinated much more effectively, probably at College level, and the burden of paperwork and academic pastoral support associated with it (in particular in relation to Erasmus) needs to be rationalised through automation and a more sensible division of labour between academic and administrative staff. The appointment of a dedicated Erasmus officer in the School of Social Science and Philosophy along the lines of those that have been in the Schools of Business and Law would go a long way towards meeting this goal.
- g. While we recognise that there are real limits to this, resources should be increased and their allocation should be organised in such a way as to reward rather than punish success. A system which makes it attractive for a successful programme to reduce its student numbers is clearly providing perverse incentives. Therefore, budget allocations by College and Faculty for teaching and learning should be based to a much larger extent on the actual

numbers of students rather than on historical grounds. In other words, budgets should 'follow the student'. This would result in increased revenue for the constituent BESS Schools and Departments.

- h. In addition, revenue increases can come from greater recruitment of non-EU students. There is considerable scope for this because the College has not engaged in internationalisation to the extent that has been done in many other universities, for instance in the UK. But it must be stressed that a clearer strategy must be devised for this, both with regard to BESS and other programmes, one which takes into account the upfront costs necessary to invest in international student recruitment, the costs of commissions for agents and the costs of supporting international students once they are in Dublin. The latter will be especially high for non-native speakers of English, but will also include increased provision of accommodation and so on for all internationals as well as the hiring of additional staffs and provision of additional teaching space for the non-EU students.
- i. Consideration should be given, on the other hand, to lowering costs and/or increasing productivity through a combination of measures. Unless the College and Faculty are prepared to alter their model for allocating funds to the schools fundamentally (see g. above), the schools should seriously consider the possibility of decreasing the quota of BESS students from its current level of 236 per year. There might also be consideration given to decreasing the number of hours spent in class, which amounts to some 18-20 hours at present in years one through three. Admittedly, this would have to be done carefully in order to ensure proper coverage for each subject. Finally, academic, administrative and central College staff might be relieved of a considerable administrative and academic burden by placing less emphasis on formal end of year examinations.
- j. While the contributions and enthusiasm of TAs have been emphasised both by students and lecturing staff, there needs to be more systematic training and oversight of them.

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN, THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

School of Social Sciences and Philosophy & Trinity Business School

INTERNAL MEMORANDUM

TO: Quality Office
FROM: Dr Michael Wycherley, Director of BESS
DATE: 23 March 2016
SUBJECT: BESS Review Report – Initial Response

The School of Social Sciences and Philosophy and the Trinity Business School welcome the report on the BESS programme, as provided by the external review team, who have been extremely hard-working in their efforts to understand and provide constructive feedback on what is a complicated programme, and for this we are very grateful. What follows is an initial high level response to the report. As requested, it does not deal with the individual recommendations.

The reviewers agreed with many of the stakeholders that BESS is a valuable programme with an excellent reputation and outcomes, but that it is under serious threat of failing to live up to its reputation. There was also agreement that this was primarily due to the issue of resourcing of the two Schools involved.

The reviewers made a number of helpful suggestions, some of which are internal to the Schools and will be carefully considered: indeed, we look forward to exploring ideas about multi-disciplinarity within our programme management structures. However, it is clear that some suggestions are beyond the control of the programme and the two Schools. This is either because they require changes at College level or because they are dependent on additional resources being made available to the two Schools. We agree with the reviewers that the improvement of certain College systems and infrastructure is essential in meeting the expectations of all BESS students, particularly non-EU students.

The BESS Review team particularly welcomes the reviewer's comments on perverse financial incentives. The team also notes that if additional resources are not made available, the reviewers urge that consideration be given to reducing the intake of students into first year as a way of reducing the unacceptable size of Sophister classes, along with possibly reducing contact time between staff and students. The first of these is an option that has been informally discussed in the past, but perhaps should be considered more seriously.

The Schools are committed to working through the Review Report, its recommendations and to developing an implementation plan, where possible, in the coming months and years.



MEMORANDUM

TO: Quality Office
FROM: Professor Darryl Jones, Dean AHSS
DATE: 29 March 2016
SUBJECT: BESS Review Report – Dean’s response

I want to begin by thanking the reviewers for their diligence and commitment, and for producing such a detailed and helpful report, which will be of substantial use to the School and the Faculty, over the next years. I would also like to thank Dr. Michael Wycherley and the BESS team for their hard work in producing their self-assessment report.

I note that the Review is broadly very supportive of BESS. It recognizes the programme’s ‘strong brand’ (p. 3) – its high recognition and reputation both nationally and internationally. I am particularly pleased to read the comment, on p. 1 of the Executive Summary: ‘Indeed, the watchwords have been enthusiasm, commitment and professionalism.’ This is very gratifying.

However, I note also the serious concerns expressed in the Review, largely over external pressures which seriously jeopardize the programme’s ‘strong brand’. The Review comments on the ‘dramatic reduction of governmental funding’ (p. 2). One consequence of this, as the reviewers rightly state, is that class sizes in BESS have become ‘enormous’ (p. 2); this in turn has put serious pressure on ‘the quality of course delivery’ (p. 2).

However, many of the reviewers’ suggestions are within the power of the BESS programme team to act on, for example the issue of a greater degree of multidisciplinary. I am glad to see that Dr. Wycherley’s response indicates that the BESS team will consider these suggestions.

Professor Darryl Jones
DEAN