

**The University of Dublin
Trinity College**

Peer Review Group Report

Student Disability Services

May 2005

1. Members of the Peer Review Group

Ms Gaye Fallon, Trinity College	Internal Chair
Professor Alan Hurst, University of Central Lancashire	External
Mary O Grady, Head of Disability Support Service, UCC	External

2. Timetable of the Site Visit

The timetable is attached in the Appendix A. The timetable organised by the Quality Office was appropriate and allowed for consultation with all relevant parties and enabled the Peer Reviewers to have time for reflection and reporting. The reviewers met with staff of Student Disability Services, Students with Disabilities, Student Union, Heads of Services, Academic Staff, Officers of the University (e.g. Acting Director of Buildings, Architectural Services Officer, Admissions Officer, Examinations Officer and Senior Management).

3. Methodology

The approach followed the guidelines for Peer Review in Irish Universities with collective responsibility for the findings and the report. The views of each participant were explored with regard to their role, input, and level of contact with the Student Disability Services. Opportunities for future developments and perceived challenges for the service were discussed.

4. Site Visit

The Peer Review Group were treated with great courtesy and kindness by all staff of the Student Disability Services and they would like to thank the Head of Department and Disability Service Co-ordinator, Mr Declan Treanor and his staff for their cooperation. The Peer Reviewers would like to express their appreciation to all those who made themselves available during the visit.

5. Peer Review Group Report

An outline summary report was presented orally to senior management at an exit meeting on the second day of the review. The Internal Chair of the Peer Review Group, Ms Gaye Fallon, Trinity College did not contribute to the final report. This was developed between the two external peer reviewers via e mail and discussion exchanges.

6. Overall Analysis

6.1 Self Assessment Report and Other Documentation

The reviewers found the self -assessment report and accompanying appendices to be comprehensive and very well prepared. All areas of activity were covered in the report and this provided the peer reviewers with an excellent insight into the service as it currently operates. There is substantiating evidence to show that this is clearly an excellent service which is student focussed and service users are made to feel welcome and appreciated by all staff of the SDS, thus enriching their “Trinity Experience”

During the past five years the service has undergone enormous growth and development under the leadership of Declan Treanor, as service co-ordinator. The numbers of students registered with the service have grown from 176 in 2000/01 to 349 in 2004/05 and a comprehensive range of supports have been developed to enable students with disabilities pursue degree programmes across all faculties. Collaboration with academic departments and other services has been actively pursued by the co-ordinator through the Learning Statement and Uni- Link Projects. The peer reviewers felt that the present review was taking place at a critical time of development for the service as it strives to raise the profile of Disability within the University and embed the philosophy of inclusion within the culture of the College.

The reviewers were heartened considerably during their preparations prior to the visit from reading the following in the College’s Mission Statement (p.5)

“Disabled students will find the College more friendly and supportive and they will have access to a learning and social environment which will be appropriate to their needs.”

7. Findings of the Peer Review Group

7.1 Examples of Good Practice:

There are a range of impressive accomplishments which exemplify the implementation of current best practices in the ways in which the Student Disability Services are meeting the needs of students with disabilities, the reviewers wish to comment on the following in particular:

- ❖ The development of policies and procedures in relation to inclusion of students with disabilities in University
- ❖ The professional Assessment of needs and implementation of individual support programmes for students with disabilities
- ❖ The professionalism of the Educational Support Worker system

- ❖ The provision of AT support for students with disabilities in all the Trinity College Libraries
- ❖ The comprehensive and accessible website of the Student Disability Services
- ❖ The work of the SDS in providing training and support on web accessibility to end users in Trinity College
- ❖ The Learning Statement Project
- ❖ The Uni-Link Mental Health Project

7.2 Organisation and structure of the Department:

The present organisational structure of the service, is that the Co-ordinator reports to the Senior Tutor and all staff of the SDS report to the Disability Services Co-ordinator. There is also a Disability Services Committee, which is a sub committee of the Student Services Committee. It seems that this structure is not giving sufficient profile or autonomy to this expanding and important service in Trinity College. The peer reviewers feel that the SDS should be awarded the status of a stand- alone service like the other student services in the University. Thus, the Co-ordinator of the SDS should report directly to the Secretary of the College who is Head of Administration. This management structure would ensure that the service has govern ship at the highest level of the College and would enable the service to attain the recognition that it deserves both internally within Trinity College and at a national and international level also. There is evidence from elsewhere that the close involvement and interest and commitment of senior staff is the key to success in embedding policies and practices and ensuring the quality of what is provided for students with disabilities.

Recommendation : the College should review the line management structure of the Disability Services section with a view to giving it the same status as others within the broader group of Student Services

7.3 Insecurity of Staff Posts in Student Disability Service

The Student Disability Service has developed and expanded as result of external funding through HEA Strategic Initiative Funding and ESF Fund for Students with Disabilities. The Core Budget contributes just 1.8% to the total cost of the Service which indicates a low commitment by Trinity College to the SDS and highlights the dependency of the service on external funding for all the support structures for its stakeholders. Currently, to quote one of our informants “the service depends on professionalism and passion rather than permanence and progression.” The uncertainty of security of tenure has already led to the College losing some valuable experienced, knowledgeable staff. One should also remember how this impacts too on the quality of the student experience. One student with mental health difficulties with whom we talked expressed considerable anxiety about having to start to make new

relationships to replace those which had already been made, a process which because of the nature of the impairment, this student had found challenging. The peer reviewers view this situation with the utmost seriousness and concern. One strategy might be to make use of the findings and recommendations of the study undertaken by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 1999 which tried to establish what every HEI should make available as the very basic level of provision. This was intended to clarify what services the HEI ought to make available and what services disabled students would need to purchase from their own resources.

Recommendation : the College, as a matter of urgency and priority reconsiders the staffing situation in Disability Services with a view to:

- (a) More permanent positions being established forthwith within the service. This would ensure that the Co-ordinator could plan effectively with his team to further develop the service and actively pursue the disability agenda within Trinity College, thus ensuring a quality Trinity Experience for all its service users.
- (b) Funding for what might be defined as baseline provision(cf Baseline Provision – HEFCE 1999) should be allocated to Disability Services based on the commendable and proactive approach already being undertaken by the college to increase access and participation of non traditional learners.

7.4 Other issues specific to Disability Services

On exploring the issues associated with risk assessment it appears that the policies, practices and procedures of Disability Services have been neglected. Although there has been no formal approach from College relating to risk assessment, an informal one was made by the Director of the Careers Advisory Service. As the timing coincided with this review, the Disability Services felt unable to proceed at the time. This matter is identified in the Self Assessment Document (p.22 and p.41).However, now the review has been completed, the issue needs to be taken up as a matter of urgency. Given the nature of the work, sometimes staff might be put at risk when meeting students with particular kinds of impairment. Should an incident occur, the position of the college could be weakened if it became evident that a thorough process of risk assessment had not been undertaken.

Recommendation : the College ensure that as a matter of priority a risk assessment by appropriately qualified and experienced staff is undertaken and actions are taken to implement any subsequent recommendations to protect the college, the Disability Service, and its staff

The peer reviewers recognised huge commitment by the Co-ordinator and staff of the SDS to their work of supporting students with disabilities. This unrelinquishing demand on their skills and time puts all staff under pressure as they are expected to find solutions to a never - ending array of problems. The

peer reviewers endorse the comment made in the self assessment report that all staff should undertake continuous professional development which would enable them cope with increasing demands from new and emerging cohorts of disability such as students with mental health difficulties.

Recommendation: the College ensures that all staff working in Disability Services have opportunities for continuing professional development

One important way of becoming involved in continuing professional development is establishing and maintaining links with others working in the same area in other places both within the country and in the wider world. Making high quality provision for students with disabilities adds to the already distinguished and distinctive features of TCD. The written policies are comprehensive and something of which the College can be proud. There is a significant amount of good practice which is worth disseminating at all levels internally, nationally, and internationally

Recommendation : the College encourages staff in Disability Services to maintain their national and international connections and to develop new ones

7.5 Mainstreaming Policies and Provision

The peer reviewers met colleagues from a range of services and it is perhaps clearer if this report looks at each in turn:

7.5.1 Information and Publicity

The information provided by the College for prospective learners with disabilities is comprehensive. It includes print and electronic materials which can be accessed easily by people with a range of impairments. The overall impression given to users is one of a desire to be helpful and supportive. The overall strategy is underpinned by the application and implementation of the social/educational model of disability which sees the potential barriers to inclusion as the result of the social and educational context rather than emanating from the individuals and their impairments. It seems too that efforts are being made to implement the principles associated with independent living, most notably the right to have choices and the right to take decisions about one's own life. These are important and would help Disability Services if they could be stated clearly in all appropriate documentation and publicity. For example it would make it clear to members of Faculty that they have responsibilities to adapt their approaches to learning and teaching, rather than expecting students to fit in with the standard approach to pedagogy.

Recommendation : the College ensures that the fundamental philosophy underpinning its policies and provision is publicised widely

7.5.2 Admissions

Meetings with staff working on the admission of students demonstrated that progress has been made in moving towards a totally inclusive institution. Trinity College is pro-active in increasing access for Students with Disabilities by the inclusion of a supplementary admissions procedure for students who do not achieve the required amount of points through the CAO system. The peer reviewers recommend that the Student Disability Service engage in research to track the success of students with disabilities to determine the level of retention of this cohort versus the main body of students in the University.

Recommendation : that the College reviews the statistics routinely compiled about its students to ensure that information about participation, success and retention of students with disabilities is available and accessible.

7.5.3 Curriculum and Course Design

Some of the more serious challenges currently being met by students with disabilities and those working to support them stem from the ways in which the courses they have chosen have been designed. Often little thought appears to have been given about how students with particular disabilities might participate. Often too it is assumed that those with particular disabilities will be unable to pursue a study programme precisely because of the nature of their impairment. Unlike the situation elsewhere there is no law to which students can turn if they feel that they have been subject to unfair discrimination. However, the possibility of new anti-discrimination law is growing and the college needs to be in a position as soon as possible to be able to cope with the new context. To address this there are a number of strategies. The first is that when new courses are being proposed and old course being renewed, those responsible for approving them should ask questions about meeting the needs of students with disabilities as a matter of routine.

Recommendation: that the College, through Council, reviews the procedures for the validation of new courses and the continuing validation of existing programmes, to ensure that the needs of students with a range of disabilities are taken into account and that the concept of universal design is adopted and promoted

7.5.4 Curriculum Content

One way of embedding disability in an institution is to ensure that it is present within the curriculum content of courses. In our meetings with staff we were offered examples of how disability related matters are covered and introduced to the wider community of students. It would be useful both to Disability Services and the college to know the extent of the current infusion of disability in the curriculum and to promote further developments. Perhaps this is part of the role of the newly created Centre for Academic Practice and Students Learning (CAPSL) and also the new Directors of Teaching and Learning (undergraduate and Postgraduate) in each School.

Recommendation : the College, working with Disability Services, considers auditing current programmes of study to investigate the extent to which disability is included in syllabi

7.5.5 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

The peer reviewers found ample evidence both in the documentation and in their exchanges with students that the greatest barrier to increasing the participation of students with disabilities and including them in courses is the unhelpfulness and inflexibility of many of the teaching staff (e.g. "... due to a reluctance to modify current procedures and teaching styles" (Appendix Two Document Two page 32)

To address this is a significant undertaking and is extremely challenging. Nevertheless it is a matter which does need urgent and immediate attention. One possible model to adopt stems from the "Teachability" initiative pioneered in Scotland. This involves every Department examining its portfolio of course to evaluate the extent to which they are inclusive, what the barriers are to making them more inclusive and how these barriers might be overcome. A starting point to aid this audit would be for academic staff to identify the core, non-negotiable requirements of their programmes. This makes it possible to identify where accommodations might be possible and where, because of the intrinsic nature of the course, it would not be possible for a student with a specific impairment to join the course. The audits should be concluded by the production of written reports which can be disseminated subsequently to appropriate staff. Clearly the newly created CAPSL and the Directors of Learning and Teaching (undergraduate and Postgraduate) in each School have key roles in the process.

Recommendation : the College, as a matter of priority and working with CAPSL and the Directors of Learning and Teaching (Undergraduate and Postgraduate) in each School, asks teaching staff to audit their courses to explore the extent to which currently they are inclusive and to identify how they might be made more inclusive

- ❖ In order to undertake the recommendation made above it will be necessary to offer teaching staff the opportunity to have some continuing professional development. For example colleagues familiar with and experienced in the "Teachability" programme could be invited to organise and deliver a series of workshops. To make the initiative more manageable, the process could start with one or two selected departments from each faculty – preferably those already known for their understanding approaches so that the chances of a successful launch are greater prior to tackling those areas of solid resistance found in all institutions.
- ❖ Teaching staff could also be rewarded for good practice by the inclusion of an honorary certificate for Innovative Teaching and Learning practices for diversity in the classroom

Recommendation: That the College devises a strategy to provide appropriate staff development opportunities so that teaching staff are better placed to initiate the exploration of inclusive learning and teaching

7.5.6 Examinations

Discussions with staff representatives assured the reviewers that the approach adopted was one which characterises an inclusive institution i.e. those responsible for the administration and organisation of examinations do so for ALL students. It appeared from the discussions with examination staff, that other strategies such as the facilitation of alternative assessments by use of orals and practicals have not as yet been considered by Trinity College.

Recommendation : That the College continues to implement a “ whole institution” approach to making exam arrangements for students with disabilities and in conjunction with the Disability Services staff, encourage debate about the use of alternative assessment as accommodations to meet the needs of students with particular disabilities

7.5.7 Learning Support

It is important to draw the distinction between learner support (e.g. for individual students because of an impairment) and learning support (i.e. for students encountering difficulties with studying). Whilst it seems clear from the Self Assessment Document (page 11) that there is an awareness of boundaries, it is important to ensure that the demarcation continues to be clear. In exchanges with staff and students this was not always the case. One possible strategy to aid the process of separating responsibilities might be to shift the perspective from seeing dyslexia as a learning difficulty to seeing it as a learning difference.

Recommendation: the College continues to distinguish between learning support available to all students and not the specific responsibility of Disability Services and learner support for which Disability Services does have a responsibility shared with others.

7.5.8 Libraries and Learning Resources

Throughout the visit, staff and students especially commented favourably on the resources made available in the libraries and also the welcoming and supportive approaches of staff.. Links and collaboration with Disability Services work effectively. The library is also aware of developments elsewhere in relation to working to improve access to resources.

Recommendation : the College continues to support the libraries and learning resources services to continue and to enhance what is already high quality provision

7.5.9 The College Environment

Trinity College is renowned for its historic campus. Some features of this make it difficult to make changes which would be of help to people with particular kinds of disability (e.g. changing the cobbled squares to improve access for wheelchair users). This example has been chosen deliberately since it allows the reviewers to be accused of perpetuating the traditional image of disability equating only with wheelchair users. The peer reviewers gained the impression that the college needs to fully embrace the principles of Universal Design within the built environment. There was insufficient evidence to suggest that those responsible for the physical environment considered the needs of blind and visually impaired people for example in their choice of colour schemes inside buildings or use of range of floor coverings to aid recognition of location. Signage also could be reviewed. Some of the gaps identified were surprising given the fact that the College has many tourist visitors.

Recommendation : the College should encourage staff responsible for building work to consider the needs of people with a wide range of disabilities when making changes to the physical environment

7.5.10 Research

Clearly the College sees research as being of vital importance and would wish its current reputation to continue. An additional strategy to embed disability into the institution is to promote and support research which has a focus on disability. In discussions with staff it emerged that some of the work already being undertaken was in the field of disability.

Recommendation: the College encourages and supports research about disability

8. Staff Awareness Raising

Whilst the staff encountered during the visit had sound knowledge of many of the issues associated with the development of high quality policy and provision for students with disabilities, in a context where funding will not be unlimited, it is essential that most efficient use is made of what is available and to direct it towards where it might be most effective and where too the progress made is embedded in routine procedures and staff duties and responsibilities. To initiate greater awareness and to ensure progress is embedded, there should be sessions on inclusive policy and provision for students with disabilities in the induction programme for all staff, the induction and training of new tutors and in the programme of continuing professional development for existing staff. It is arguably easier to make attendance at the programme compulsory for all new staff; to encourage the attendance and participation of existing staff, some incentives might be helpful. It would also be helpful if staff at the most senior levels and also members of the College Board and College Council were to be involved and to participate. As a very

minimum, consideration of disability at this stage of development could become a routine timed item on Council and Board meetings

Recommendation: That the College includes policies and provision for students with disabilities in all induction programmes for new staff and that it starts to address in a systematic way the development of knowledge of those involved at senior management level including the College Council and the College Board.

9. Conclusion

As stated at the outset, the range of policies is comprehensive and they continue to develop to meet new situations. However policies cannot deliver in a context where the culture remains the same. Changing cultures will be hard and painful but it is necessary if the College wishes to ensure that the “Trinity experience” continues of the highest quality and exemplifies the implementation of best possible contemporary practice for ALL students. Some action is needed if the statement about students with disabilities identified in the Mission Statement is to be more than rhetoric.

Key Priorities

Having made these recommendations, the College might find it helpful to know which the peer reviewers see the following as key priorities for immediate attention/action. They are:

1. The College, as a matter of urgency and priority reconsiders the staffing situation in Disability Services with a view to:
 - ❖ More permanent positions being established forthwith within the service. This would ensure that the Co-ordinator could plan effectively with his team to further develop the service and actively pursue the disability agenda within Trinity College, thus ensuring a quality Trinity Experience for all its service users.
 - ❖ Funding for baseline provision should be allocated to Disability Services based on the commendable and proactive approach already being undertaken by the college to increase access and participation of non traditional learners.
2. The College should review the line management structure of the Disability Services section with a view to giving it the same status as others within the broader group of Student Services
3. The College, as a matter of priority and working with CAPSL and the Director of Learning and Teaching, asks teaching staff to audit their courses to explore the extent to which currently they are inclusive and to identify how they might be made more inclusive
4. The College includes policies and provision for students with disabilities in induction programmes for all new staff and that it starts to address in a systematic way the development of knowledge of those involved at senior management level including the College Council and the College Board

