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Interim Report on the Trinity Admissions Feasibility Study

Foreword

On 14 January 2013 Trinity College Dublin launched a feasibility study in admissions to test on behalf of the sector a new admissions route for a small number of places on three of its most popular courses. In September 2014 twenty-two students were admitted to Trinity through the new admissions route. This interim report is a summary of the work to date, reviewing how the process operated, and reflecting on the positives and the negatives. The feasibility study was initially designed to run for two-years – in 2013/14 and 2014/15 – and this report will make recommendations on the future of the project.

The objective was to operate a holistic admissions system, and see if it was possible to assess an applicant’s academic ability, potential, and suitability for course, in a process that was completely anonymous and free from any kind of external influence. Trinity wanted to see if there was a better and fairer mechanism to identify and admit talented applicants by using a number of different scales, rather than relying on a single scale alone - the current points system calculated on the basis of Leaving Certificate results. It was not designed as an access route for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; rather it was explicitly intended to benefit students whose ability and potential might not be captured under the current system, regardless of background. The first thing that had to be evaluated therefore was whether the process could work as designed. The second thing that had to be evaluated was whether the process was worthwhile, whether it had sufficient public trust, and whether it could be scaled-up for larger numbers of places.

The first part of this has now been demonstrated: it is possible to operate an alternative mechanism and have it operate as designed. The Central Applications Office (CAO) was successfully able to calculate the RPR (Relative Performance Rank) of the applicants and provide the information to Trinity in advance of the Leaving Certificate results being published. The CAO was also able to administer the online application form for the submission of the personal statement, and complete anonymity was maintained when these were evaluated in Trinity, in a process that was chaired by an independent judge and which had a number of external observers. The process
operated as designed, and this in itself was a significant achievement.

However is too early to assess whether the process itself can be deemed a success, whether it is scaleable, or indeed whether it has identified and admitted ‘applicants who are enthusiastic and passionate about learning, motivated and suitable for their chosen courses, and with the academic ability and potential to be inspired by everything that college has to offer.’ Some preliminary findings are presented here, but further analysis is required, and it will require more than a single year of operation, and indeed a single set of data before conclusions can be drawn. While the results to date are promising, they are not conclusive, and it is not clear whether expansion of the new admissions route is either practicable or desirable. This interim report therefore recommends that the study continues for a further two years, and that exploratory work is done to see if other courses within Trinity – and especially other courses across the third-level sector – are willing to test the new admissions route in 2016/17, so that this ‘experimentation around the edges’ can continue to help inform national policy in the area.

What the study has shown, however, is that it is possible to design and operate a new admissions route which can be administered in a professional, efficient, and anonymous way, and which can identify and admit a different kind of student. The students admitted in the first year came from all parts of Ireland, including schools that do not usually send many to Trinity. The intention from the beginning was to identify and admit students from all parts of Ireland, who had performed well in the Leaving Certificate, and were in the top percentile of students in their school, but who had missed out on their chosen course despite having academic ability and potential, and despite being a good fit for the course. While not all of these elements have been demonstrated after only a single year of operation, valuable evidence has been gathered through the running of this study, and it has reaffirmed the message that innovation can help address some of the recognised problems with the current points system.

Professor Patrick Geoghegan

Project Sponsor
Part 1

Background and Design of the Process

‘The launch of a pioneering feasibility study in admissions is something that could be transformative for Ireland – and is one that is vitally important for its future.... With this study, Trinity is sending a powerful message that with hard work anything is possible, including admission to Trinity or to any university in the world.’

(Dr. William R. Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Harvard, 14 January 2013).

The Trinity Feasibility Study in Admissions was designed to inform broader educational change by providing options to assist in the development of national policy. It was an attempt to see whether, on a small scale and in a strictly controlled way, it might be possible to admit students using a range of assessments (including the Leaving Certificate), with the results published and shared throughout the sector. It recognises the importance of having a Leaving Certificate examination that is fit-for-purpose and supports the reforms that are currently underway at second-level to ensure a more positive educational experience. It also recognises and values the great work and commitment of the teachers at primary and second-level throughout Ireland. The new admissions route being tested seeks to complement the role of the Leaving Certificate and the teaching community, by working with the Central Applications Office (CAO) to examine whether some approaches which have succeeded internationally might also work in an Irish context.
In the first year of the feasibility study (2013/14) the new admissions route was used to admit students on three courses – with ten places in History (TR003), ten places in Law (TR004), and five places in Ancient and medieval history and culture (TR028) set aside to be filled using the new admissions route. Applicants to any of the three courses involved in the study had the option of using the new admissions route, and submitting some short supplementary material online with their CAO application (in which case they were eligible for all of the regular places on the course filled in the traditional way, as well as the places set aside for the study), or opting out of the study, in which case they remained eligible for all of the places allocated in the traditional way, but not the extra places. Students applying for two or more of the courses in the study only to submit the supplementary information once.

The feasibility study was being operated in partnership with the Central Applications Office (CAO) and all applications were made completely anonymous before evaluation, in an attempt to ensure the process was free from any external influences.

The three scales (or modalities) used to assess applicants in the study were as follows:

(a) Leaving Certificate results.

(b) Relative Performance Rank (RPR) – the performance of the applicant relative to other applicants from their school. This scale looked at the rank of the applicant compared to every other applicant from their school who has applied to
any course, in any college, through the CAO.

(c) **Personal and Contextual Data** – a personal statement and supplementary information provided online by the applicant before 1 March 2014.

Applicants did not need to have one of the three courses as a first preference. All preferences were evaluated equally, without Readers being aware of whether it was a first choice or a tenth choice.

Names of applicants, any identifying information, and the names of schools attended, were made completely anonymous before being evaluated by the review panels. Applicants were required to provide supplementary information requested in a Trinity Application Form online through the CAO before 1 March 2014. Applicants were asked to submit an honest piece of self-reflection, discussing what they would like to study, and why, and this is what will be evaluated. Grammar, vocabulary, or writing style were not scored.

**Evaluating the Success or Failure of the Feasibility Study**

A number of criteria for assessing the success or failure of the feasibility study were agreed by Trinity’s University Council before the project began. The following questions were posed:

1. **Operations.** Did the ‘machinery’ work smoothly and efficiently – for example, the submission and processing and assessment of applications – and were there any system problems at any stage of the review process? Was the anonymity of all the applicants maintained?
2. **Resources.** Was it demonstrated that there were sufficient resources to implement the study, and was it feasible to continue or expand the scheme based on the resource implications?

3. **Public Trust.** Was there sufficient public trust in the scheme?

4. **Matching Students to Courses.** Since an objective of the new admissions route is to assess motivation and suitability for course, alongside academic ability and potential, were the students matched to the right courses (or did students transfer or withdraw from the course)?

5. **Meaningful Results.** Did the three scales produce meaningful results?

6. **Legal Challenges.** Were there any substantive legal challenges, and were the procedures robust enough to withstand them?
Part Two

How the Process Operated in its First Year (2013/14)

Communications

Presentations on the new admissions route were given at the Trinity Open Day in December 2013, and to groups of guidance counsellors, and information was provided in the Trinity Prospectus. In addition, a guide on applying through the new admissions route was sent to schools in the Republic.¹

There was an Information Morning for Guidance Counsellors on 2nd October 2013 and it was very well-attended. The Guidance Counsellors provided a lot of feedback, some of which was used to amend online information and the Trinity Feasibility Study Application Guide. The session on the Feasibility Study at the Open Day in December 2013 was well-attended with a postive response coming from parents and students. The Guidance Counsellors feedback session in April 2014 also had a good turnout and Guidance Counsellors reported that they had talked to their students who had reported they had generally found the application process easy to complete and were supportive of the process. Many mentioned that they thought there would be greater numbers of applicants from their schools if the Study was expanded to a larger range of courses. There were some concerns raised about the RPR and how this might

create a competitive atmosphere in schools with traditionally high progression rates and where a number of students would apply for Law, for example.

**Systems and Processes**

Processes relating to the study were developed in consultation with the Trinity Admissions Feasibility Study (TAFS) Implementation Group, which had the following membership:

Senior Lecturer/Dean of Undergraduate Studies (Chair)
Professor Ciaran Brady School of Histories & Humanities
Frank Costello DIT Admissions Officer (External)
Cliona Hannon TAFS Project Manager
Professor Eoin O’Dell School of Law
Joseph O’Grady Central Applications Office (External)
Susan Power Admissions Officer
Professor Brendan Tangney School of Computer Science & Statistics

The CAO was enormously helpful in data management related to the Study. Applicants were able to use an additional section within their online CAO application to apply. Within Trinity, IS Services was also extremely helpful in setting up a suitable, password protected, data storage mechanism within the Academic Registry Sharepoint site and in converting the TAFS data received from CAO in March into a useable format.

By 31 January 2014 a total of 670 applicants, representing 1,399 unique course applications, indicated on their CAO that they wished to apply through the Trinity
Admissions Feasibility Study. Of these, 243 applicants completed the application, making 270 unique applications: 61 in History; 187 in Law; and 22 in Ancient and Medieval History and Culture. These applications were tested using plagiarism-detecting software, and 7 applications were deemed ineligible following this assessment.

In total 51 applications, were deemed ineligible by the time that offers were made due to either the applicant not sitting the Leaving Certificate (33 applications), identified instances of plagiarism (7 applications), and/or the applicant having withdrawn their Feasibility Study preferences from their CAO list before the Change of Mind 1st August deadline (11 applications).

Readers for the Trinity Application Form

Each participating academic school was asked to nominate suitable candidates to read and assess the Trinity Application Form. These readers were not members of the academic staff, but had expertise in the subject area (usually a Ph.D.). Six readers were recruited and trained in March 2014 – two for each course - using a Reader’s Manual developed by drawing on best international admissions practice, a detailed consideration of six ‘sample’ applications and a group discussion. IS Services also provided systems training on Sharepoint (see Appendix A for application score sheet and criteria). Readers were provided with the criteria for marking applications, and all applications were to be scored by each Reader independently.
In August, the CAO collated the RPR (percentile and converted score) and the Leaving Certificate points for each candidate and sent a master-file to Trinity. These two modalities were combined with the third modality, the TAFS score, and a total for each candidate was arrived at through adding the total across the three modalities.

**Scoring the three modalities**

The three modalities used to assess applicants to the study were:

(a) Leaving Certificate results *(Modality 1)*.

(b) Relative Performance Rank (RPR) *(Modality 2)*.

(c) The Trinity Admissions Feasibility Study (TAFS) form submitted online *(Modality 3)*.

Each modality was equally weighted (625 points), up to a total of 1,875 points. All identifying information was redacted before being evaluated by the Readers. All applications were independently scored by two, discipline specific readers and ‘moderated’ by the Dean of Undergraduate Studies. In addition, the TAFS Project Manager conducted a 15% sample quality assurance for consistency and fairness across all applications.
(a) Leaving Certificate and (b) RPR

The CAO provided to Trinity the following information for the most recent sitting of the Irish Leaving Certificate for each applicant to the TAFS:

(i) Rank of the applicant in relation to all other applicant in this year with this roll number on the entries file from the State Exams Commission (Modality 2, RPR).

(ii) Leaving Certificate points for each candidate, alongside their RPR score (Modality 1, Leaving Certificate points).

The RPR was determined by scoring all Leaving Certificate records according to the common points scale and from the best six subject scores from one sitting. All candidate scores were sorted for each school, with the highest score receiving 1st rank, second highest score receiving 2nd rank and so on. Tied scores received equal rank. Rankings were allocated sequentially.

Having ranked within school, each first placed candidate was placed in band A* receiving 625 points. Remaining candidates were placed in a band according to their percentile. In calculations, where rounding to the nearest whole number is required, standard rounding rules were employed - e.g. 10.5 and above rounds up to 11, while 10.4 and below rounds down to 10. The percentile bands and associated points were:
Band A* = First in class of all those who have applied through CAO = 625
Band A = in top 5% inclusive (but not in first place) = 600
Band B = in top 6-20% inclusive (but not in top 5%) = 550
Band C = in 21-35% inclusive (but not in top 20%) = 500
Band D = in 36-50% inclusive (but not in top 35%) = 450
Band E = in 51-75% inclusive (but not in top 50%) = 400
Band F = in 76-100% inclusive (but not in top 75%) = 350

Having allocated 625 to the candidate who came first in the school, the remaining candidates in the top 5% would receive the points equivalent to the second band then those outside the top 5% but in the top 6-20% would receive the points equivalent to the next band and so on. Each band is inclusive – so band A includes all candidates within the top 5% and band F includes all those between 76-100%. Scores make no reference to eligibility requirements (to be considered, applicants must be eligible anyway). Scoring includes bonus for D3 or better in higher level mathematics if that subject is one of the six subjects being counted for points. Trinity used the most recent Leaving Certificate sitting and the candidate was given an RPR score relative to all candidates in the school in which they received their instruction for their final year compared to every other applicant from that school who has applied to any course, in any college, through the CAO.
(c) Personal & Contextual data (Modality 3)

The CAO sent a data file to Trinity in March 2014 and the CAO number was replaced with a random number. The data was converted into separate files and each file was redacted by an individual who was not involved in the formal assessment of the Study. A ‘query log’ was developed, so that if there was a query relating to whether a piece of information should or should not be redacted, it was considered by Professor Eoin O’Dell, member of the Admissions Feasibility Study Implementation Group. Professor O’Dell offered expert advice throughout the process but had no direct role in the admissions process and did not see any of the applications.

Once it was clear there was no information to identify a candidate, the files were split by course(s) and made available (with restricted access) to Readers who saw those files only. The project and assessment team used SharePoint to house and manage the application data. Readers only had access to their own files and a screening sheet. Readers completed a separate screening sheet for each course for which the applicant had applied (Appendix A). Each application was assessed by two Readers, independently of the other.

If the two readers were in agreement and gave the same applicant the same score, that score became the applicant’s final score for the essay; this was the result in 101 cases. If the two Readers differed – i.e. one assessed the Application as a ‘1’ and the other as a ‘2’, then the ‘Casting Vote’ individual (the Dean of Undergraduate Studies who had read all applications and scored them independently) determined whether it
was a ‘1’ or ‘2’ by looking at the three scores (the two Reader scores and his own); this was the result in 89 instances. If there was a larger disparity (i.e. between a ‘1’ and a ‘3’), the TAFS Reader team all discussed the application and agreed a final score; larger than 1 point discrepancies occurred in 29 instances. Detailed notes on outcomes were maintained by all Readers, who uploaded completed screening sheets to SharePoint. Overall, 6 applications received a TAFS essay score of ‘1’; 42 applications received a ‘2’; 110 applications scored as a ‘3’; 50 applications scored as a ‘4’; 5 applications scored as a ‘5’; 6 applications received a score of ‘6’. No applications received the 1* score. The essay scores were then converted into a 625 point scale as follows:

```
1* = 625
1 = 600
2 = 550
3 = 500
4 = 450
5 = 400
6 = 350
```

The original CAO file was kept as the master copy spreadsheet and loaded on the SharePoint site with restricted access. The TAFS team checked and quality-controlled all TAFS scores.
June 2014: In June 2014 the Admissions Review Committee, comprising internal and external interested parties, met who were invited to review files at random from all completed application forms, and decide on any cases where the difference between the first and second reader was great than one point. The Committee was chaired by an independent (retired) judge, Dr. Yvonne Murphy. Its membership comprised: Professor Aine Hyland; Senior Lecturer/Dean of Undergraduate Studies; the Dean of Students; the Readers; the Academic Secretary, the TAFs Project Manager and Project Assistant, representatives from the subject areas and the Admissions Officer. The Admissions Review Committee considered the overall rating for each applicant, on a scale of 1-6. Plagiarism cases were discussed and reviewed, as well as a selection of the applications (including those where there was a difference of more than one point between the Readers). At this meeting a single agreed score for all of the applicants under Modality 3 was decided upon, and these scores were fixed and could not be altered at a later stage.

12 August 2014: The CAO sent Trinity a file with applicants’ personal information, Leaving Certificate points and the RPR. The final scores from the Trinity application form were connected with their CAO number and the scores for the other two modalities. If an applicant had applied for more than one course and had more than one score for the Trinity application form, then they had different ‘outcomes’ for each course list. Each applicant had a composite score across the three modalities for each course to which they had applied.
Publication of Leaving Certificate results: A Final Review Committee convened on 13th August 2014, the day when the Leaving Certificate results were published. This review committee was also chaired by the same independent judge, Dr. Yvonne Murphy, who chaired the Admissions Review Committee meeting in June and comprised of: Professor Aine Hyland; the Senior Lecturer/Dean of Undergraduate Studies; the Academic Secretary; the TAFs Project Manager and Project Assistant; representatives from across schools in the College; representatives from the key student bodies (USI and Trinity’s own Students’ Union), the teaching unions, the representative bodies for the colleges (IUA and IOTI), respected groups like the NAPD (National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals) and the JMB (Joint Managerial Body) and business and employer bodies like IBEC. A full list can be found in Appendix B.

The Final Review Committee reviewed all combined applicant scores and discussed the process for the Study. Following the meeting, the TAFS team sent a confirmed list of all candidates’ combined scores to the Admissions Office, where they were rated so that CAO could issue an offer.

Offers were made in the usual way through the CAO on Monday 18th August 2014. Applicants only received one offer: either an offer for a place through the feasibility study, or an offer of a place through the regular pathways. Trinity notified the
applicants of their scores for each modality and their composite score for each of the courses to which they applied. The Admissions Office made sure applicants were all contacted on Monday 18th August, the date which CAO offers were made.

At no point did anyone in the Final Review Committee know the names of the applicants under consideration, the schools they attended, or anything else about them. Anonymity was strictly preserved until after the formal offers were made.

**Rechecks and Remarks**

Trinity had a recheck process relating to administrative errors only. Applicants were entitled to a ‘recheck’ to see if all elements had been calculated correctly, but not a ‘remark’ (the TAFS could not be re-evaluated and scored). A recheck log was established and all recheck cases were reviewed by the Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the TAFS team in early September. The study was evaluated through surveys and open discussion meetings with key participants, such as the academic schools/departments, students, parents and guidance counsellors in the 2013/14 admissions cycle. In the 2013/14 cycle, there were 19 queries and 1 formal recheck (details below).

**Recruitment data**

Applications came from 145 schools across the country. A total of 670 applicants making 1399 unique course applications, indicated on their CAO that they wished to
apply through the Trinity Admissions Feasibility Study. Of these, 243 applicants completed the TAFS application, making 270 unique applications: 61 in History; 187 in Law; and 22 in Ancient and Medieval History and Culture. There were a number of applications, 51 across the 3 courses, that were deemed ineligible by the time that offers were made due to the applicant not sitting the Leaving Certificate (33 applications), identified instances of plagiarism (7 applications), and/or the applicant having dropped their TAFS preferences from their CAO list before the Change of Mind 1\textsuperscript{st} August deadline (11 applications).

Of the application cohort: 23\% came from fee-paying schools, 57\% from non-fee paying state schools, and 12\% came from DEIS/TAP-linked schools. There was no schools data for 20\% of the application cohort due to ineligibility as outlined above. In terms of offers: 38\% of those offered places were from fee-paying schools, 62\% were from non-fee paying state schools, and 19\% came from DEIS/TAP-linked schools. Relative to the application cohort, offers made to applicants from non-fee paying schools and DEIS/TAP-linked schools were both over-represented.

Following offers being sent out, a ‘queries log’ was kept which tracked any queries from applicants about their outcomes. There were 19 total queries lodged, and 1 which resulted in a recheck on the basis that the candidate was having their Leaving
Certificate scores rechecked. Most of the queries in this area were about the maximum possible score for each of the 3 modalities.

Readers were invited to give feedback of the essay scoring process. Overall, they reported that the scoring process was very clear and they generally found SharePoint an easy medium to use for the scoring. They thought there might be room to modify the questions on the application form to capture applicants’ analysis and reflection skills in a more direct way.

Table 1 below provides an overview of offers and acceptances as of the 16th September 2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participating courses</th>
<th>Quota</th>
<th>Feasibility Study Places</th>
<th>Feasibility Study Applications</th>
<th>Offers Round 1</th>
<th>Accepts Round 1</th>
<th>All other offers</th>
<th>Accepts as of 16/9/14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient and Medieval History and Culture</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Applications came from 145 schools across the country: 23% came from fee-paying schools, 57% from non-fee paying state schools, and 12% came from DEIS/TAP-
linked schools. There were no schools data for the cohort of students whose application was withdrawn or ineligible. In terms of offers: 38% of those offered places were from fee-paying schools, 62% were from non-fee paying state schools, and 19% came from DEIS/TAP-linked schools.

Essay Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of Final Scores</th>
<th>TAFS Essay Score</th>
<th>No. of applications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>110</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Essay Score Agreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay Score Agreement</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreed by the first two readers</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 point difference between first and second reader; third reader acted as tie-breaker</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Went to wider panel with greater than 1 point discrepancy between readers</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information on Successful Applicants

The first round of offers made through the feasibility study were made to applicants from schools in Dublin, Carlow, Kildare, Wicklow, Offaly, Donegal, Galway, and Cork. The points score for Law in the first round was 525*. In the first round offers were made to students with points ranging from 465 to 520, with five of the students having points 500+. The points score for History in the first round was 470. In the first round offers were made to students with points ranging from 335 to 465, with eight of the students having points 400+.

Other Points Worth Noting

6 of the students offered places in the first round through the Feasibility Study would have been offered places on the same course in a later round. Thus the new admissions route admitted some students who would have been admitted anyway, just at a later stage. This reflects the fact that a number of students admitted were only a small number of points below the first round total. This is partly an anomaly because of the small number of places on offer, but it is worth examining in later years.
Part Three

Observations on the data collected in the first year

The process worked efficiently and as designed. All three scales (or modalities) were scored equally in the first year, as no judgement was being made in advance about which one was more valuable. Certain things became clear:

1. The vast majority of personal statements were given the same score by the first and second reader, even though they were marked independently. 101 were given the exact same score, and in 89 cases there was only a difference of 1 point. This demonstrates that trained readers are able to assess and score the statements in a consistent and reliable way.

2. All candidates who performed very well in the personal statement element (scoring a 1 or 2) were offered a place on their chosen course (either through the feasibility study or through the regular way).

3. Only 6 applicants scored the highest score – a 1 – and only 6 scored the lowest score - a 6. The bunching of applications in the middle (160 received scores of 3 or 4) could lead to legitimate concerns about whether the process was worth all the time and effort involved.

4. The RPR score enabled applicants who came in the top 5% of their class (or similarly well), but just missed out on the points score for their course) to be offered a place. Thus without knowing the name of the school, the name of the
individual, or any identifying information, it was possible to recognise the context in which the results were achieved.

5. Taking Law as an example, it is possible to see the benefits of RPR if the wider principle is accepted. Half the students offered places through the feasibility study had 500 points or higher, and were in the top 5% (or top 20% of their school. These were students who would just miss out on a place in Law, but who had clearly performed very well in the Leaving Certificate nationally, and even better when ranked against other students in their school. It was precisely this kind of applicant that the study was designed to identify and admit.

6. Experts in the School of Education in Trinity have volunteered to assist with the analysis of the project in the second year, and this will enable a broader analysis of the data and trends.

7. In the first year of the process the TAFS was scored separately by different Readers for every course applied. This worked well, but is costly and impractical if scaled-up. It has been agreed that in future years of the project a single team of Readers will review and score the applications, with the wider panel reviewing them in the event of disagreement.
Part Four

Reactions to the First Year of the Feasibility Study

Media Reaction

Immediate reactions to the running of the feasibility study in the first year were positive. On 18 August 2014, the day the Leaving Certificate results were published, the Irish Independent published a story: ‘Trinity offers groundbreaking entry system,’ and an article by the project sponsor: ‘Innovation and fairness can end college points race’.\(^2\) It also ran an editorial on the same day supporting Trinity’s work in the area, entitled ‘Alternatives to points race worth exploring’ which noted that:

‘The study offers compelling evidence that the Leaving Certificate exam does not need to be the only gateway to gaining entry to college... the Trinity feasibility study confirms what we already know, that the Leaving Certificate does not necessarily capture the full essence of a young person’s academic ability and potential... We cannot afford to lose that potential to a crude points total’.\(^3\)


\(^3\) [www.independent.ie/opinion/comment/innovation-and-fairness-can-end-college-points-race-30514773.html](http://www.independent.ie/opinion/comment/innovation-and-fairness-can-end-college-points-race-30514773.html).
On 18 August 2014 The Irish Times ran a supportive story ‘Students access TCD courses below CAO entry level’. The Irish Examiner had a similar piece, ‘Students with lower points get Trinity College places’. The online news agency – The Journal – published a story: ‘How 25 places in Trinity this year show points are not the only important factor’, which was viewed 16,590 times, and which used the hash-tag ‘Trinners for Everyone’.

There was also coverage on RTE Radio and Television (including the 6.01 and 9 o’clock news), BBC Radio Ulster, and on the independent national radio stations.

In an interview with Trinity’s student newspaper, the University Times, on 21 September 2014, the Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O’Sullivan, said:

‘I like the new thing that Trinity have done as well with the twenty-five students that have come in in a different way, where your ranking in your own school as well as your Leaving Cert results [are included] – all of those’ but that the sector would wait to see how the process worked.

The first piece of hostile commentary was published on 14 October 2014 in the Irish Times, when John McAvoy, the former general manager of the CAO, wrote a story which

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4 www.irishtimes.com/news/education/students-access-tcd-courses-below-cao-entry-level-1.1899716.
6 http://www.universitytimes.ie/?p=28469.
was given the headline: ‘Students are the guinea pigs in Trinity’s experiment’. In it he described the feasibility study as ‘an outrageous experiment’, the use of professional readers to assess the personal statements as ‘mumbo-jumbo verging on voodoo’, and the process overall as ‘infantile’, ‘a charade’ and an ‘exercise in futility’.

There followed a heated debate in the Letters pages of the *Irish Times* for some days. Dr. Brendan O’Halpin of the Department of Sociology in the University of Limerick had a letter published on 16 October 2014 in which he said that although McAvoy’s language was ‘inflammatory’, he was also ‘right’. He was critical of the use of personal statements as it would ‘increase the social exclusivity of their student body, benefiting the academically underperforming child of well-networked, affluent parents much more than the bright kid who needs a break’. However he did praise the RPR element of the process, although he wondered about a ‘fair implementation’. Another letter writer the same day called McAvoy’s piece ‘an appalling refusal to consider alternatives to a challenging problem’. A third writer said ‘John McAvoy is right’.

On 22 October 2014 the Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Harvard, Dr. William Fitzsimmons (who had advised on the project) had a letter published which argued that for the past thirty years Harvard:

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8 http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/tcd-s-alternative-entry-scheme-1.1964751
‘like other major universities in the United States – has used a holistic admissions system, involving many of the same elements Trinity is testing in this study. Far from being “mumbo jumbo”, and an arcane practice “verging on voodoo”, this approach is recognised as providing a more reliable way of admitting talented students who will excel in their studies and in all their endeavours during college and beyond.’

On the same day the Irish Times published an editorial on the subject under the heading: ‘Beyond the CAO points race: Irish colleges need to address issues of access and diversity’. It recognised that ‘The debate [on issues around access and diversity] has intensified in recent months as reflected in commentary in this newspaper’ and had led to ‘forceful disagreement’. Closing the debate in the paper, it argued that:

‘This two-year project addresses inflexibility and social bias by broadening admissions criteria while retaining anonymity and freedom from external influences. Rejecting the exercise now fails to recognise the need to respond to evolving social demands and circumstances. There are concerns that changes to the admissions system could open university doors to the influence of money and personal influence, as happens in the US. That is not what the Trinity project is about. It has been designed to recognise the importance of CAO exam

9 http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/tcd-s-alternative-entry-scheme-1.1971577
points, while taking personal and social factors into account within a process of guaranteed anonymity’.

Public Reaction

General commentary from people who contacted Trinity was positive. A representative letter, for example, was from a mother in Donegal who contacted Trinity on 16 October 2014 to say:

‘I am saddened by the same response to post primary teachers and the new Junior Certificate. Believe me parents despair the points system. It’s the “not broken why fix it” attitude, with no thought to the thousands of euros wasted on students in wrong courses. Keep up the work.’

There were also letters from parents whose children had narrowly missed out on courses in other colleges because they didn’t get the points, but who had an aptitude and passion for the course that had not been measured.

Commentary on message boards and blogs was mixed. It was largely positive in the first phase (pre-McAvoy article) and was more divided in the second phase (following publication of the article). Tweets were also monitored in the period August to December 2014.
Student Reaction and Views of Students Admitted Through the New Route

Internally there was much support for the feasibility study from Trinity students. In October 2014 the University Times ran an editorial entitled ‘Praise for Challenging the College Admissions System’ which had as its subheading: ‘We shouldn't shrink from change, and regardless of the outcome, investigating it is worthwhile.’

In January 2015 the students admitted through the new route were emailed and invited to give anonymous feedback (administered through a SurveyMoney) on the feasibility study and get a sense of how they experienced the process and how they were finding first year. The students were asked a range of questions and 18 of the 22 students admitted responded. Interestingly, 50% of the students who responded said that neither parent had been to university. The results provide an impressionistic snapshot of the views of a number of the students six months after being admitted. To summarise the results:

1. All of the students found the process a positive one and worth continuing.
2. 16 said their experience of 1st year so far has been excellent, 2 said it has been mixed so far or a challenge.
3. 16 said the media coverage had ‘no impact’ on them; 1 student said it had positively impacted on them, 1 student said it had negatively impacted on them.

http://www.universitytimes.ie/?p=30535.
4. 8 say they happily tell classmates they were admitted under the new route; 4 prefer if classmates do not know.

5. When asked if either or both parents or guardians had gone to university: 9 students said neither; 6 students said one; 3 students said both.

Comments on how they found the process

Most students found the process exciting, or a nice break from studying, and only two students said it was intimidating or time consuming. The specific comments were:

1. It was nice to be able to prove my capability in a fashion relevant to the course. The scope for failure to meet the requirements due to lesser proficiency in subjects of no relevance to the course in question was, I felt, a major flaw in the design of the CAO system.

2. It wasn't particularly time-consuming- it required a level of effort but nothing particularly strenuous.

3. Had very direct questions so it was not intimidating.

4. It felt more like an extra part of my application to Trinity, but not as intimidating or time-consuming as something like an interview or the HPAT.
Comments on why the Students Opted-In

1. I felt the methods of assessment offered by the study were something I could perform well in, and was excited that I could finally utilise my strengths.

2. It made sense; it was the chance to have another way to gain access to my top course. For the reasonable level of effort required, it potentially had very worthwhile results.

3. As I wished to demonstrate to Trinity that I was interested in law and why I was interested in law. I have always intended to do law and I wished to show Trinity that I was a suitable candidate by my essays, not points.

4. I knew I wouldn't get the points.

5. For a better chance of getting into my course in Trinity.

6. To get in if didn't get points.

7. I have a huge love for history.

8. Sorry, I can't remember.

9. I felt that by opting-in I would have a better chance at getting the course that I wanted, as I thought that the points would have been too high without entering through this route. I also felt that it would be a good opportunity for me to write about the topics which interested me and which I would be studying in College.

10. The study allowed students such as myself to have a chance at a course in Trinity regardless of their second level academic merit or intellect. It allowed me to
have a chance to study a subject that I felt very passionate about regardless of my prowess in an unrelated subject at which I might not have excelled in.

**Comments on whether the Personal Statement was Fair**

All 18 supported the use of the personal statement. The specific comments were:

1. In theory yes, somebody else could write your personal statement so I suppose to an extent that part of it comes down to morality. However, seeing as the feasibility study also looks at things like your relative rank performance score and your actual leaving cert grades, I would like to think this limits the chances of somebody who didn't write their own personal statement capable of actually gaining a place. A well written personal essay will often stand to the testimony of acceptable or above average grades.

2. I welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate my own convictions for wanting to do Law.

3. For the 2015 applicants of the feasibility study, I think it may be open to abuse due to its popularity.

4. Gave you an impression of what kind of student I am.

5. It was simple and required a bit of thought which was good.

6. It allowed me to understand why I was choosing the course.
Comments on whether the use of RPR was Fair

14 students thought the use of RPR was fair; 2 thought it was unfair; 2 had no opinion.

The specific comments were:

1. I think it is both fair and unfair: It works well in the context of somebody who attains 500 points in a school where this result is unprecedented. For somebody who comes from a year with some incredibly smart people (two people in my year received 625 points, a further 3+ received over 600). This is somewhat daunting because 500 points looks far less impressive in this scenario, even though that may have been the maximum they could achieve. It entirely depends on the background. It is important yes, but should never be taken as a domineering factor I don't think.

2. I was in a year of high achievers, I was lucky my personal statement brought me up but it definitely affected my mark, unfairly.

Comments on how they are Finding First Year

16 students say they are having an excellent time in first year; 1 is finding it a challenge academically; 1 is finding I mixed. The specific comments were:
1. Have thoroughly enjoyed my time in Trinity Law thus far. I really enjoy the course material, though I think there are few (feasibility study entrants or not!) who could say there aren’t times where it is challenging.

2. I have thoroughly enjoyed my course so far, I was only 5 points behind the required entrance and to miss out on my top course by such a small margin would have been awful. I have been able to keep up as well as anybody else.

3. I find the course content very interesting.

4. I am really enjoying my course and my time in Trinity.

5. While I am enjoying my course, there is obviously an increase in my workload which has been a challenge, but an enjoyable one. I feel that this is the right course for me.

Comments on Media Coverage

16 students said the media coverage had no impact on them; 1 said it had a positive impact; 1 said it had a negative impact. The specific comments were:

1. I only stumbled across some of the more negative opinions voiced in the media in October/November. I thought more or less nothing of it. I would rather focus on capitalising on the opportunity handed to me by the study.

2. It was interesting to read about the Study afterwards.
3. The media coverage made me feel somewhat inadequate and uncomfortable regarding the feasibility study.

4. Not enough media coverage.

**Comments on whether they tell other Students they came in through the new route**

8 students are happy for other students to know they came in through the new route; 4 prefer in people do not know; rest mixed. The specific comments were:

1. No one has really asked and I only know of one other person on the course who got in through the feasibility study. If they do ask I wouldn't really want to admit it unless I have to. They might think it’s unfair for the people who actually got the points.

2. I have told my friends within the course how I was admitted. I take pride in the fact my study was deemed adequate for entry.

3. I don't openly say it in the same way most wouldn't openly talk about their grades or the points they received. However, if somebody asked I wouldn't feel the need to keep it a secret.

4. It is not an issue.

5. I tell some people but it's not an issue.

6. I never mentioned it to any of my classmates.

7. I also got accepted through my points, so I generally tell them about both.
8. I will only tell people if it comes up or I am asked.

Overall Comments and Feedback

1. I think it's a good idea and I'm really enjoying the course. The media coverage made me feel somewhat inadequate and uncomfortable regarding the feasibility study.

2. I think it is a fantastic scheme. It is nice to see students with different strengths rewarded. For example the 25 bonus points awarded to Honours Maths students is an unfair advantage if they are competing for spaces in courses such as Law where their mathematic capability will not see them any greater prepared than others applying without it.

3. This is a brilliant second option or back door in to your preferred course. You never know when or why you may need this kind of security. Somebody in my family was quite ill in the two weeks coming up to exams and passed away the weekend just before they were due to start; I was never to imagine this would happen and if my points suffered at all because of this, the feasibility study gave me a welcome second approach to my course. For the time it takes to complete the study, the potential rewards far outweigh the effort required.

4. Thank you for giving me this chance.
5. I think it is an excellent process to have as it ensures that the candidates who are successful are suitable to the course and less likely to drop out.
6. I didn't come across anything about it until my friend who is also a student here told me about it, very little publicity about it.
7. I would like to thank you for the opportunity of getting into Trinity and my course.
8. I think it's a good idea and I'm really enjoying the course.
9. I think the feasibility study is a great idea as it gives students the opportunity to study what they enjoy and are good at even if they don't get the points in the leaving cert.
10. Maybe lessen the influence of the RPR.
11. I don't think I would have gotten the necessary points for this course, so without the feasibility study I could have been studying something else.
12. needs to full integrated as the primary route to get in Trinity College, it would allow the college to reap more suitable candidates for the course and to evaluate to students before they begin to study. Hopefully the feasibility study will at some point phase out the CAO point system.
13. Thank you for giving me this chance.
14. It gives you a second option to attain your course if mere points don't work out the way you had hoped. In my opinion you would have to be crazy not to partake. You can't tell how the exams will go - it's always very comforting to increase your chances by providing another option of entrance.
15. I would very much like to see this process continued in the future as it gave me an opportunity which I appreciate immensely.

16. I think it’s a great thing, although it would be great if it spreads to other courses as well.

17. It allows students to be evaluated on their interest in their chosen subject, rather than solely on their exams.
Part Five
Postives and Negatives

Reviewing the Criteria for Success or Failure

1. **Operations.** The ‘machinery’ worked smoothly and efficiently – there were no system problems during the review process, and the anonymity of all the applicants was maintained.

2. **Resources.** There were sufficient resources to implement the study, but it could be prohibitively costly to greatly expand the route.

3. **Public Trust.** There was a good reaction from the media in the first phase of the scheme, but some criticisms developed afterwards. It is clear that change should be gradual, as any attempt to introduce a new scheme without it being fully understood and supported would lead to uncertainty and erode public confidence.

4. **Matching Students to Courses.** It will take a longer time to assess whether the new route admitted students to the right course, and identified students with greater ability and potential.

5. **Meaningful Results.** The three modalities produced important data and allowed for offers to be made to applicants. Further work needs to be done on the ratio of the three scales, and whether one is a better indicator of ability and potential than another.

6. **Legal Challenges.** There were no legal challenges.
Costings and Work-Load

Readers were paid €9 per individual application read and scored. There was also a cost of €20,000 for the CAO to develop and administer the new system. The project was very labour intensive, with numerous review meetings, and time spent reviewing applications and ensuring the process worked as designed. 18,500 students apply to Trinity each year. If the new admissions route was used for every course, and each application was read twice, then it would cost approximately €360,000 to read and score each application based on current costs, though it would be considerably less if the job was performed by salaried readers whose responsibility was to read and score the applications.
Part Six

Assessing the different parts of the study

The Personal Statement

Advantages

1. Encourages the applicants to reflect on their course choices, and why they want to do them.
2. Identifies students who are prepared to do this extra work, removing applicants who choose to opt-out.
3. Enables colleges to get a sense of the applicants, and their interests, and attempt to assess whether they are a right fit for a particular course.
4. Works on a small-scale to help identify potential.
5. Plagiarism detection software enables colleges to identify applicants who submit work taken from another online resource, and thus disqualify them.
6. Is an approach used successfully in international contexts, for example across the United States.

Disadvantages

1. Time-intensive. Much time is spent reviewing and scoring the applications, ensuring that there is a consistency in the scoring, and inputting all of the scores.
2. Costly. While it might be feasible to operate this system on a small-scale, it could be prohibitive if attempted on a larger scale.
3. There is no way of knowing for certain if the work is the applicant’s own, leading to doubts about the integrity and fairness of the process.

4. A short amount of text (1,000 words approximately) only allows for a limited assessment of an applicant’s ability and potential.

5. In the first year, the majority of applicants scored in the middle range (score 3-4) meaning the modality did not do enough to distinguish between applicants.

6. Many applicants ticked the box to opt-in to the study before 31 January 2014 but then never submitted a personal statement by 1 March 2014. This number indicates (and this is confirmed from taking to students who were admitted to the three courses through the regular way) that completing the form was time-consuming and seen as a distraction from studying for the Leaving Certificate. Some students confident of getting the required points decided not to take part.

Suggestions

1. The personal statement has been shown to have some value on a small scale, for a small number of places. It is worth exploring whether the personal statement element might become part of the system – either as something that is submitted at school, or administered centrally as part of the state examination process – so that questions about authorship could be addressed.

2. In years 3 and 4 it would be interesting to change the weightings of the three modalities, and give the RPR a higher value than the personal statement.
Relative Performance Rank (RPR)

Advantages

1. Enables an assessment of the performance of the applicant in the Leaving Certificate compared to other applicants from that school, and allows for a value to be attached to that ranking. If a College would prefer to admit a student with 500 points who was in the top 5% of her school, rather than a student with 510 points who was in the top 30%, then this provides a mechanism to do so.

2. Is easy and cost-effective to administer, with the process operated independently by the CAO, and the data provided to Colleges.

3. Advantages students from schools where not many people go on to third-level.

Disadvantages

1. Could lead to unhealthy competition between students in a school.

2. Could lead to students switching schools to attempt to game the system.

3. Disadvantages students from schools where a large number of people go on to third-level.

Suggestions

1. In future years the RPR could be given a greater weight, compared to the personal statement, as a way of testing a different way of gathering data, and to test what difference prioritising RPR makes.
Part Seven

Recommendations

1. It is too soon to make a definitive assessment of whether the new admissions route works after only a single year of operation. At least a second year of data, and further testing the operation of the process is required. Since the two year trial period ends in the summer of 2015 and a decision about 2015/16 will have to be made before the second year is finished, in time for the prospectus and other promotional materials, it is recommended that the feasibility study continues in the three existing courses for a further two years (2015/16 and 2016/2017) with a final decision on the project made at the end of the the third year (summer of 2016). One option would be to let the project rest after the end of the second year, to allow for the analysis of the data, but in practical terms this would bring the project to a halt, and there would be clear difficulties in reviving it at a later stage.

2. It would be worthwhile exploring whether other courses in Trinity might be interested in using the new admissions route in years 3 or 4, especially if a course from outside Arts and Humanities was willing to see how it might worth in a different context.

3. As the feasibility study is testing the validity of different scales to be used alongside Leaving Certificate results, it would be worthwhile experimenting with the weighting of these scales. Might the RPR be used with a greater weighting? How would the results look without the use of the personal statement, or if the
personal statement was only used when scores were level? These are just some areas which would be exploring.

4. The new admissions route was designed and tested to see if it could work across the sector not just in a single college. If another university or institute of technology was interested in testing the new admissions route it might be possible to identify a course subject that could be used to run the feasibility study across the sector. This would enable a broader range of data to be collected, and also see if the new route would work for different colleges and in different contexts.

5. The personal statement form should be revised for year 3 so that it asks both a self-reflective question and an analytical question, thus requiring applicants to give two different kinds of answers, and allow for greater comparison and consistency.

6. The feasibility study team ran a smooth, efficient operation in the first year – one that was monitored by external experts and praised highly. The feasibility study team should be supported with resources in the second and later years so that this level of efficiency is maintained, and should be encouraged to continue to innovate in the design and operation of the study.

7. A revised communications strategy should be developed to encourage more students in schools who would never have considered Trinity to think about applying, and to ensure that every school is aware of the new admissions route.
Appendix A

TRINITY ADMISSIONS FEASIBILITY STUDY APPLICATION SCORE SHEET 2013/2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Random number:</th>
<th>Course applied for:</th>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scoring the Application - Please score the application within the range of 1 to 6 using the criteria and headings in the scoring guidelines:</th>
<th>Notes/evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i) originality of ideas/creativity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) potential for academic achievement/critical thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) academic ability as demonstrated by ideas expressed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iv) enthusiasm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(v) suitability for course and college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(vi) self-reflection/reflective capacity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other relevant comments:

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<tr>
<th>Total score (1-6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Name of Reader: ___________________________

Signed (Reader 1) __________________________
*Ratings: 1 = Excellent, 2 = Very Good, 3 = Good, 4 = Average, 5 = Below average, 6 = Poor

**Scoring Guidelines**

Trinity is looking for students with the academic ability and potential to thrive at third-level, who are the right fit academically for the selected course and college.

The essays should be marked under the following headings: (i) originality of ideas; (ii) evidence of potential for critical thinking; (iii) academic ability as demonstrated by ideas expressed; (iv) enthusiasm; (v) evidence of suitability for course and college; (vi) evidence of self-reflection. Do not score for vocabulary, grammar or spelling.

Note especially that evidence for criteria (iv) enthusiasm and (v) evidence of suitability for course and college should be drawn from the essays in the application as a whole. In other words, scorers should not limit their evidence of these two criteria to any particular section of the application and should note in particular that the applicant may evidence these criteria even in Section B of the application.

In the overall schema a score of 1 or 2 could be colour coded ‘Blue’ – or an application which stands out and would be a good selection; a score of 3-4 could be considered ‘Green’ – or an application which is good, but does not really stand out from the others; a score of 5-6 could be considered ‘Yellow’ – or an application which is below average, and which overall would appear to be a poor fit.

**1* = Exceptional.** In exceptional cases, perhaps one out of two hundred, an application might stand out as exceptional, and receive a score of 1*. This very rare achievement is for an application that excels in all headings and is some distance ahead of the other applications.

**1 = Excellent**

This application impresses in all respects, and is the equivalent of a first-class essay in college. The applicant displays clear evidence of academic ability and potential, and from what is presented would be an excellent academic fit for the course they have applied for.

**2 = Very Good**

This application impresses in most respects, and is the equivalent of a 2.1 class essay in college. The applicant displays evidence of academic ability and potential, and from what is presented would be a very good academic fit for the course they have applied for.

**3 = Good**

This application impresses in several respects, and is the equivalent of a 2.2 class essay in college. The applicant displays some evidence of academic ability and potential, and from what is presented would be a good academic fit for the course they have applied for.
4 = Average

While not bad, this application does not really stand out in any area, and might be seen as the equivalent of a 3rd class essay in college. The applicant displays some evidence of academic ability and potential, and from what is presented would be a good academic fit for the course they have applied for.

5 = Below average

This application lacks originality and does not display any real evidence of academic ability or potential. From what is presented would not appear to be a good academic fit for the course.

6 = Poor

This application is poor, and would be the equivalent of a clear fail in a college essay. It does not display any real evidence of academic ability or potential, and from what is presented the applicant would not appear to be a good academic fit for the course.
Appendix B

Attendance at Feasibility Study Final Review Meeting, 13 August 2014

Externals
Judge Yvonne Murphy (chair)
Professor Áine Hyland
Dr. Jim Murray (IOTI)
Lewis Purser (IUA)
Kevin Donoghue (USI, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Quality Assurance)
Clive Byrne (NAPD, Director).
David Duffy (TUI, Education and Outreach Officer)
Tony Donohoe (IBEC)
Ferdia Kelly (Joint Management Board)
Philip Irwin and Gerry Breslin (ASTI)

Internals
Senior Lecturer/Dean of Undergraduate Studies
Academic Secretary
Admissions Officer
Patrick Geoghegan (Project Sponsor)
Cliona Hannon (Project Manager)
Dr. Megan Kuster (Project Team)
Dr. Oran Doyle (Law)
Dr. David Prendergast (Law)
Katie Byrne (SU Education Officer)
Some Directors from the Undergraduate Studies Committee.