

Higher education has been undergoing transformation everywhere. The three main sources of transformation are the embedding of information technology in learning processes; ever-increasing mobility of people around the planet for education and work; and the importance of university research for economic growth.

This is my last year as Provost of Trinity College Dublin. I was elected in 2011 by academic staff and student representatives, and I'll step down in September 2021. It's been an extraordinary decade to be at the helm of a great university – bookended by global recession and Covid-19. I've found it always challenging, often exhilarating, and ultimately rewarding.

As Provost, there's always a huge amount to get done. Universities today have big agendas – they're drivers of economic growth as well as instigators of critical ideas about societal development. Here, in Ireland's Education Yearbook, I'd like to focus on achievement in education, which is so critical to the research/teaching nexus.

Globally, higher education has been undergoing transformation for well over a decade. I see three main sources of transformation: the embedding of information technology in learning processes; the ever-increasing mobility of people around the planet for education and work; and the importance of university research for economic growth.

Every university has to reckon with, and embrace, these ongoing changes. To do this in Trinity, we took cross-cutting action:

- We created an Office of Global Relations, with a remit to increase our numbers of international students, global academic partnerships, and student exchanges, while ensuring that our campus be a diverse, welcoming place to people of all cultures.¹
- We launched a Strategy for Innovation and Entrepreneurship,² which integrated innovation into the core mission of teaching and research and later led to the manifesto for creating a new Innovation Campus at Grand Canal Dock.³
- We delivered the most far-ranging renewal of the undergraduate curriculum in a century.⁴

Change is the Only Constant

Universities are changing everywhere and in many ways



Patrick Prendergast
Provost and President,
Trinity College Dublin

Curriculum

Curriculum renewal began with a seemingly simple but essential exercise: defining intention. What should a Trinity education achieve? After consulting with the whole college community – including academic staff, the Students Union, graduates, guidance counsellors, industry partners, and employers – we agreed a set of graduate attributes that encapsulate the skills and qualities we'd like students to develop so as to manage complex life challenges in changing environments and contribute effectively to their professions and communities. These attributes are as follows:

- Firstly, we want our graduates to think independently – not easy in an age of incessant media and marketing campaigns designed specifically to prevent it, but more vital than ever.
- Secondly, our graduates should communicate effectively to diverse audiences through different media – orally, in writing, online and in person, through different languages, visually, graphically, and on social media.
- Thirdly, our graduates should have the skills to develop continuously through life – they should leave Trinity with a love of learning, recognising that their education is only starting.
- The final attribute concerns how our graduates should act in the world: we would like them to act responsibly to themselves, their fellow citizens, the environment, and ultimately as active participants in democratic society.

In order to embed these attributes through the redesigned curriculum, we put emphasis on *doing*, not telling – on giving students more independence and responsibility.

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The new curriculum disconnects entry routes from exit routes, enabling undergraduates to combine subjects and select learning pathways. It makes open modules available to all students (except in the Faculty of Health Sciences), and, in perhaps the most far-reaching development, it introduces electives in areas of research strength. There are thirty-nine Trinity electives with titles like Latin; One Language, Many Cultures; Toolkit for a Smart and Sustainable World; and Vaccines: Friend or Foe?⁵

Trinity electives and open modules expose students to ways of thinking outside their core disciplines, which helps build understanding that complex issues yield to a diversity of approaches. This complements deep immersion in a chosen field of study – it is through researching a capstone project related to their core discipline that our students ‘see’ the frontiers of knowledge.⁶

Global

Since 2011, Trinity has more than doubled its number of non-EU students and almost doubled the number of international research collaborations.

We now have dual education programmes with the University of Singapore, Thapar University in India, and Columbia University in New York, which means that, for instance, students can spend two years in Trinity and two

in Columbia, graduating with degrees from both universities. This type of programme is much deeper in scope than traditional student exchanges, involving not the swapping or exchanging of modules but a root-and-branch redesign of whole curricula.

We've also strengthened our connection with global alumni. Trinity has 120,000 graduates living in over 140 countries worldwide. When we began to continuously engage with them – through social media and physical visits to alumni branches in our trips worldwide – we discovered just how much they value their connection to Trinity. I found it moving to discover graduates in far-flung places, who might not have returned to Ireland in decades, meeting up every few months.

Our alumni are willing to serve as ambassadors for the university by promoting Trinity to friends and colleagues; they help foster global academic and industry partnerships and provide philanthropic support. They mentor our students and provide internships. We have redefined the Trinity community to include alumni alongside students and staff.

There is indeed such a thing as a global citizen, and we should find no contradiction between that and national or local loyalties. We stand with the great European humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, who never went further north than London nor further south than Geneva: 'Ego mundi civis esse cupio' – 'I long to be a citizen of the world'.

Innovation

Everybody knows that taking on leadership roles outside the classroom helps to develop the graduate attributes. In recent years we've put particular emphasis on fostering entrepreneurship and innovation as a way to create positive change in the world.

Our student accelerator programme, LaunchBox, provides student teams with incubation space, funding, and mentoring to develop their business ideas. It has proved to be transformative, supporting 80 start-ups and over 200 students since its establishment in 2013. These start-ups have gone on to raise over €69 million in funding and investment, creating over 200 jobs in the Irish economy.

Engaging in innovation and entrepreneurship develops the graduate attributes and strengthens the connectivity between them. 'Thinking independently' is where original ideas come from – students then learn to act on their ideas and communicate them to investors and through marketing. Every year, a high number of LaunchBox projects are social enterprises – for some students, entrepreneurship is about finding pragmatic solutions to environmental or societal challenges: the very essence of 'acting responsibly'.

Inclusivity

We can't ask students to 'ask responsibly' if the college leadership isn't taking steps to combat societal inequality. If universities only enrol

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students coming from certain communities, regions, and schools, then they will only get conformity on campus – conformity of social background and conformity of thought. How can students learn to ‘think independently’ if their environment does not expose them to different experiences and mindsets?

The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) is increasingly recognised as a global success story. Our numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds coming to college through TAP’s alternative entry routes has increased eightfold since 2000. In recent years, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge have launched pilot schemes for a foundation year directly modelled on that of TAP.

Another initiative to value diversity is around Entrance Exhibitionerships, which reward the academic achievement of undergraduate entrants to Trinity. Traditionally, students with the highest CAO points in the country became Entrance Exhibitioners – often they all came from a handful of secondary schools. We’ve now changed the criteria to award students who gain the highest points in their schools – if you’re best in your school, you’re a trailblazer. This simple change amplified diversity: we now have Entrance Exhibitioners from hundreds of schools spread throughout all thirty-two counties.

Future

These are some of the initiatives we’ve taken over the past decade to develop and renew the Trinity education. I’m proud of all we’ve achieved.

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We’ve created an environment that is more global and entrepreneurial, more diverse and flexible. I hope we’re preparing students better for twenty-first-century lives, without losing sight of what has made the Trinity education so distinctive over four centuries.

I believe that the changes we’ve made have helped prepare us to weather the current shock of pandemic and lockdown. Like all universities, we’re finding it difficult. The challenges of keeping our community and city safe, while delivering an education that is transformative for each student, are not easily reconciled. Much that is essential in the Trinity education suffers when students can’t meet in person with each other and with their professors.

But we’ve developed the tools and mindset to get through this. I was delighted at how well our LaunchBox teams survived lockdown and not meeting together in person. They transitioned smoothly to online, and a month ago the ten finalised teams presented to judges with projects that were as strong as ever. We look forward to LaunchBox continuing online this year.

Articulating our values has helped us cleave to them. Trinity is the only university in Ireland not to have shut down the Erasmus programme this academic year. We’re leaving it up to individual students to assess the risk and take responsibility for themselves and their learning. This is about us keeping faith with the graduate attributes. Learning a new language and culture is key to ‘communicating effectively’, and how can we expect

students to learn to ‘think independently’ and ‘act responsibly’ if we tell them what to do, without giving them choice or agency in their own lives?

This points to a wider truth, which is that all our initiatives are about imbuing students with the resilience and creativity they will need to adapt to change and withstand adversity. I believe our approach will stand to our students, during the current pandemic and throughout lives that will be independent, communicative, adaptive, and responsible.

ENDNOTES

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Kevin Fraser and Linda Ryan of the EDGE programme receive the 2019 Engineering Education Award from Hilary O'Meara, Accenture.

EDGE is Marie Skłodowska-Curie COFUND Action, led by Trinity College Dublin on behalf of 10 academic institutions from across Ireland.