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# Inclusive Student Partnerships through the Trinity Ability Co-op

## Background

[The Trinity College Dublin Strategic Plan 2020-2025](#) aims to 'engage the wider university community in empowering students with disabilities' (Objective 1.9).

During the lifetime of this strategic plan, the Disability Service (DS) will be moving to a new state-of-the-art inclusive home, Printing House Square, in 2021. As part of this move, the Trinity Disability Service embarked upon the '[Trinity disAbility IDentity project](#)'. The aims included creating a clear and accepted identity for disability support in Trinity, ensuring that students with disabilities have a say in what the Disability Service will do and how it will function, and ensuring that spaces are student-centered.

The Disability Service in Trinity subsequently launched [a new strategic plan](#) based upon Trinity College Dublin's strategic mission, priorities, and themes. Our people, the core of our staff and students, and our values are at the heart of our plan, while our themes, innovation, and civic engagement, underpin everything we do. As we empower students with disabilities in achieving their potential, we will work together in partnership, co-producing activities that will engage the University community in creating an inclusive transformational environment and supply a platform for innovation and inclusion. The development of the Trinity Ability Co-op is central to our plan.

## Implementing the Trinity Ability Co-op

The Trinity Ability Co-op is a co-operative movement led by students with disabilities that provides a platform for students, staff, and other university community stakeholders to promote and improve inclusion and inclusive practices at Trinity.

### Initial Development

From May – September 2020, the Disability Service employed a full-time student intern, Courtney Mc Grath, to assist with DS operational activities and to provide a student perspective on service development projects. Among the tasks undertaken by the DS Intern was the establishment of the [Trinity Ability Co-op](#) and the recruitment of a student development team.

Inspired by the Trinity Strategic Plan and the disAbility IDentity Project, the early development of the Co-op was built upon values aligned with the Trinity Student Partnership Agreement:

- 1. Participation in the governance of the Student's Union and the University** - ensuring that students' views, values, and needs are formally represented in the DS decision-making process and encouraging and supporting student-led initiatives.
- 2. Participation in Teaching and Learning** - empowering students to take ownership of disability supports and reasonable accommodations that facilitate engagement with teaching and learning and ensuring that student accessibility needs are met.

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3. **Participation in the Wider Community** - students and staff collaboratively work on projects and initiatives that benefit students with disabilities and enhance inclusion in the university community.

These values formed the basis of a series of projects delivered by the founding Trinity Ability Co-op team, including;

- Review of the students with disabilities' experiences of online learning to highlight accessibility concerns and form student-led guidance for academics.
- Development and promotion of student-created media content to inform and raise awareness of the lived experience of disability.
- Contribution to forming a clear, accepted identity for disability support at Trinity and the development of the new disAbility Hub development through the Printing House Square Disability Leaders Project.

### The Trinity Co-op Disability Leadership Team

The Co-op continues to evolve and develop, with the DS Intern role conclusion and the establishment of the Co-op Leadership Team in October 2020. The Leadership Team of nine students represents a diverse range of disabilities and fields of study and is organised into three working teams;

1. **The Liaison Team**, leading on policy development, acting as a formal link to the College formal community and represent the Co-Op in engagements with other groups and areas within the college community.
2. **A Communications Team**, to lead on media activities, content creation, awareness and promotion of the Co-op.
3. **An Advocacy Team** to develop the Co-op membership, induct and support the participation of new members, and lead on projects related to disability education and awareness.

The Co-op Leadership Team meets weekly to raise discussion topics, propose ideas or projects, monitor project updates, and engage in planning and reviewing overall Co-op development objectives.

### The Trinity Ability Co-op Forum

The Forum was set up on Facebook to engage with the broader community, enabling students with disabilities to participate in Co-op projects and discussions regarding inclusion.

### Trinity Ability Co-op Mission, Goals and Strategy

The **mission** of Trinity Ability Co-op:

- To make Trinity an inclusive environment for students with disabilities.
- To raise awareness of the challenges students with disabilities face on a day-to-day basis and how Trinity can best support us as students.
- To create a safe space for students to discuss issues they are having or develop friendships with other students with disabilities.
- To provide opportunities for students with disabilities to develop graduate attribute skills such as communication, project management and teamwork through projects within the Co-op.

Broadly the **goals** of Trinity Ability Co-op are:

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- To ensure Inclusion is widely discussed across campus and is a priority in academic teaching and within the student clubs, societies and unions.
  - To enable students with disabilities to develop skills through the Co-op, which will benefit them in the workforce, and which they may not have previously had the opportunity to create.
  - To enable students with disabilities to be present in University Boards and committees discussions and be included in conversations about change in Trinity.

In 2020/21 the goals of Trinity Ability Co-op are:

- **Tackling online learning accessibility:** automatic captioning is currently not being used by lecturers; the business zoom account has the function to generate closed captioning. If the lecturers do not have access to the zoom business account, we want to lobby to ensure it is made possible to switch to this as it is more accessible for students with disabilities.
- **Creative content:** We want to produce a mini publication, short film, and podcast series with the Equality Fund's assistance. The purpose of this is further to raise awareness of disability and the importance of inclusion. These projects will also allow students with disabilities to work together and develop skills such as teamwork, creativity, and project management.
- **Inclusion Training** for all student clubs, societies, students unions and academic staff: We want to provide inclusion training to all student clubs, societies, unions and academic staff to ensure that they know the importance of inclusion for students with disabilities. For this goal to be completed, we would work alongside the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Unit in Trinity to have the support of college staff.

The strategy of Trinity Ability Co-op:

- To work with Trinity to provide inclusion training for the student clubs, societies and unions and academics in college, and for this training to be mandatory (A funding application to the Trinity Trust to develop inclusive training, checklists and guidelines was submitted by the deadline – awaiting an outcome).
- To grow our social media presence to ensure that people become more aware of the importance of inclusion of people with disabilities (An Equality Funding Application 2020-21 was successful – the social media platform to release valuable videos that have highlighted the real lived experiences and the impact of being a student with a disability).
- To create media campaigns to raise awareness, and these projects will also help develop graduate attribute skills of students with disabilities.
- Exploring how the Co-op could influence inclusion in higher education nationally by demonstrating how an Ability Co-op could be useful in every higher education institution through providing opportunities to create a wider community of students with disabilities, and raising awareness of the issues faced by students with disabilities on a National Level and lobby to ensure that we are supported in higher education.

## Review and Ongoing Development

A review of the Trinity Ability Co-op was conducted at the end of 2020 to evaluate progression, highlight any challenges emerging and identify actions to support continued development. This review aimed to establish clear objectives to consolidate the operational systems and structures of the Co-op and introduce measures to ensure sustainability.

The review process involved collaborative meetings between DS staff and each working team within the overall

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leadership team. Co-op members were invited to complete an online feedback survey in advance of these meetings to prompt reflection on achievements, challenges and future needs, and to inform the review meeting agenda.

### Emerging themes from the Review:

- **Motivation:** the dedication and passion for participation in the Co-op, existing and potential achievements were noted.
- **Skills Development:** a reflection on the individual abilities and competencies acquired through engagement with the Co-op.
- **Workload Management:** a need for systems to plan and monitor project work, ensure equal opportunity to contribute and build a portfolio of achievements.
- **Communication:** challenges presented by varied platforms and methods of communicating within the team.
- **Training:** a need for training sessions and workshops to support the development of key skills and graduate attributes.
- **Support:** formalisation of a link between each working team and a DS staff member to act as a key contact, and a resource to provide knowledge and skills to assist projects.
- **Sustainability:** a need to expand the Co-op membership, engage the Forum more actively and create a pathway for future leadership team members.

### Next steps for the Trinity Ability Co-op

A review feedback meeting will take place in January 2021 to address these themes with the overall leadership group, to agree a series of specific actions to continue the development into 2021 and beyond. The leadership team will continue to work on the aims outlined above and campaign for 'radical inclusion' in Trinity. A graduate intern with a disability from the Trinity community will be employed in semester 2 (2020-21) to develop further the Trinity Ability Co-op aims and act as a key resource to this student partnership.

Do keep in touch with our developments via the social media platforms listed below.

Email: [abilitycoop@gmail.com](mailto:abilitycoop@gmail.com)

Website [www.abilitycoop.com](http://www.abilitycoop.com)

Facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/Ability-Co\\_op-108998600831478](https://www.facebook.com/Ability-Co_op-108998600831478)

Instagram: @abilityco\_op

Twitter: @abilitycoop

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/trinity-ability-co-op-9a20981ab/>



### **Clare Malone**

Occupational Therapist & Disability Officer, Trinity Disability Service

Claire is an occupational Therapist and Disability Officer who joined the Disability Service in November 2017. Clare graduated from Trinity College Dublin with a B.Sc. in Occupational Therapy in 2014 and has since worked in a range of healthcare areas including Adult Intellectual Disability, Acquired Brain Injury and Mental Health. Clare is the Disability Service lead on Pre-Entry to First Year Experience Activities and has also worked on initiatives to promote student partnership with the Disability Service, including leading the Disability Student Ambassador Programme and collaborating with the Trinity Ability Co-Op.



### **Courtney McGrath**

Co-founder, Trinity Ability Co-Op, TCD

[@cmcgrr](#)

Final year Business and Sociology student studying at Trinity College Dublin. Courtney is profoundly deaf and has bilateral cochlear implants. As a student with a disability, this has inspired her passion for the inclusion of people with disabilities. She is the co-founder of Trinity Ability Co-Op, a co-operative led by students with disabilities towards radical inclusion. Projects by the co-op can be found here: [abilitycoop.com](http://abilitycoop.com). Courtney is also a board member of AHEAD Ireland and student associate at the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Education.



### **Declan Treanor**

Director Disability Service, Trinity College Dublin; Chair of DAWN

Declan has been working in Trinity since the Disability Service was set up in June 2000. He has responsibility for ensuring that the College embeds disability related issues into the core of all thinking and delivery to ensure that the College environment is as accessible to people with disabilities as possible. Declan has an extensive educational history which includes a B Sc. in Science for NUI Galway, a Master's in Social Policy and Administration from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a Post Graduate Diploma in Education, Trinity College Dublin. Declan is the Disability Officer for staff in College and for students who are D/deaf and Students with Autism Spectrum and Asperger's Syndrome. Declan completed the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule Generic (ADOS-G), a direct observational assessment used to assist in the diagnosis of autism, and the Advanced Postgraduate Certificate in Autistic Spectrum Disorder at Queen's University Belfast.