

How might liberal educational outcomes be achieved for large numbers of students?: a case study of planned curriculum reform at Maynooth University.

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University educators seek to ensure that students graduate with a set of fundamental intellectual skills and dispositions which are tacitly accepted as primary outcomes of a university education, such as the capacity for analysis, reflection and critical thinking and an appreciation of different intellectual and cultural perspectives. The massification of public undergraduate education, with growing enrolments, diverse objectives and constrained resources, presents challenges to the development of such attributes across a large undergraduate student body. While disciplinary knowledge content can be effectively learned in this setting, there are concerns that students have less opportunity to develop deep intellectual skills or broader perspectives. This has led to renewed interest in the value of liberal education in developing such skills and perspectives.

While Newman defined liberal education in the broadest terms as “the cultivation of the intellect”, our concept of what constitutes a liberal education has, at least until recently, been coterminous with the practice of liberal education in liberal arts colleges or the colleges of arts and sciences in larger universities. One approach to give students greater access to liberal education is to increase the provision of liberal arts or liberal arts and sciences programmes, including the development of new programmes and colleges. Another approach is to reform the structure and pedagogies of existing universities to allow all students across all programmes to pursue the outcomes of a liberal education, albeit within different curricular structures and constraints.

Maynooth University is a medium-sized research university of almost 10,000 students (7,700 undergraduate and 1,900 postgraduate) pursuing programmes in humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, computing and electronics, business, law and teacher education. The University has embarked on an institution-wide reform of the undergraduate curriculum with the objective of achieving the learning outcomes associated with a liberal education across the entire undergraduate student cohort. The principal components of the curriculum reform are

- the adoption of new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment to focus on the development of fundamental intellectual skills through engagement with problems and threshold concepts the students’ primary discipline(s)
- a revision of the structure of the first year programme to promote deep learning;
- interdisciplinary ‘grand challenge’ elective streams comprising modules that engage students with the approaches of different disciplines to significant global challenges;
- the development of new interdisciplinary joint majors, including joint majors between arts and sciences disciplines
- the inclusion of strong co-curriculum and service learning component;

The University also seeks to further diversify its already diverse student body to create the optimal learning environment for a liberal education.

The reform is to be implemented from 2015-2017. The motivation, objectives, structure, implementation challenges, proposed practical solutions and overall progress will be reported.

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