

# Building a culture of interdisciplinarity

The **Trinity Long Room Hub** was founded by Trinity College Dublin in 2006 as its flagship research institute dedicated to advancing Trinity's Arts and Humanities. It represents a research community spanning over 20 disciplines, along with the university library. It supports research excellence at all levels with a focus on advancing high impact and high-profile interdisciplinary research.

This case study presents highlights and lessons from its ongoing journey towards **building a supportive culture for inter- and transdisciplinary research**. Some of its programmes and supports have brought steady, incremental change. Others have been game-changers in accelerating the transformation process.



“ Interdisciplinarity is complex and the myriad of factors that create the optimum conditions for it require ongoing innovation and evaluation of programmes, supports and incentives.

The vision for the Trinity Long Room Hub (TLRH) dates back to 2004 when the Arts and Humanities community at Trinity successfully lobbied the university for a unifying research infrastructure to overcome its fragmentation. Trinity secured state funding for the building that is now home to the institute. The physical infrastructure was designed to cultivate an environment for interdisciplinarity. It provides a dedicated study space for early career researchers, offices for fellows and research teams, and meeting spaces for the community to convene to discuss their research outside of their disciplines and with the public.

Having a mission, a state of the art infrastructure and an active research culture does not automatically create the conditions and environment for interdisciplinarity. Disciplines and individuals juggling ever growing demands need dedicated programmes and supports to incentivise experimentation with new approaches. The active support and engagement of the community being served by the institute is critical. A **focused and energised team of people who can drive change** in communication and support capacity building for public engagement, research funding applications and research impact is also required. External contexts, funding and political forces matter. The institute needs to be a pioneer in leading new research approaches so that it in turn can be an advocate and an influencer for the change that its community needs to excel in a rapidly changing research environment and world.

## Good Practice Tips

- 01 Culture change takes time – allow for incremental change
- 02 Build a team that is innovative and agile
- 03 Consult with your core stakeholders and build community at all career levels
- 04 Build on academic strengths and interests and seek funding strategically
- 05 Create a virtuous cycle – pioneer, engage, enable, transform, amplify

Listen to our interview with Trinity Long Room Hub Executive Director, Dr Caitriona Curtis



**EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS & FELLOWS** | Enabling inter- and transdisciplinary engagement at an early career stage is pivotal to longer-term culture change. Working with its 9 partner schools, each year the Trinity Long Room Hub hosts over 40 ECRs who have expressed an interest in experiencing and contributing to its interdisciplinary environment. In addition to quality study space and common meeting areas, **regular and structured informal community building is provided** from the outset. Initiatives like weekly coffee mornings with diverse researchers, visiting fellows and practitioners, reading groups, workshops, and public engagement activities prompt researchers to engage with contemporary global challenges and address why their research matters.

The institute's short-term visiting fellowship programme comprised of scholars, artists in residence and public policy fellows enriches the environment and creates a non-hierarchical forum to explore a wide range of disciplinary and career perspectives, **fostering collaborations and openness and curiosity about diverse approaches and concepts.**

“Community building creates a space for nurturing dialogue and collaboration. It unleashes sparks capable of transforming research outlooks and directions. An institute should be a bridge builder.

TLRH Executive Director Dr Caitriona Curtis

**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT** | The Trinity Long Room Hub has been an advocate for driving transformative change in the **communication of Arts and Humanities research** by articulating its value to wider audiences. As well as providing the infrastructure for its community to host over 300 research events a year, often public, its signature activities connect diverse communities to create a space where informed discussion can take place and perspectives can change. Researchers are actively involved in public debate and work to influence public thinking and public policy not just through research dissemination but through engaged and meaningful discourse.

The **Behind the Headlines** programme has been one of the key drivers of change in how the TLRH community engages with topical societal issues, giving researchers a platform to provide a research-informed view on contemporary issues. This platform puts the Arts and Humanities on an equal footing with STEM disciplines and raises awareness of the value of Arts and Humanities research in public debate, as well as stimulating future collaborations.

## Profile: Early Career Researcher



Amelia McConville is an interdisciplinary PhD researcher working towards her doctorate on visual poetics, poetry, and Neurohumanities at Trinity College Dublin. She is funded by the Irish Research Council Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship.

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“As an interdisciplinary researcher working on visual poetry, poetics, and Neurohumanities, the Hub provided me with so much more than just a desk space at a crucial point in my studies. Whether it was learning about the nuances of someone else's doctoral project during our weekly Coffee Morning 9-minute presentations, striking up a chance conversation in the Ideas Space over lunch, founding a Reading Group, or spontaneously attending an evening lecture each week, the opportunities for collaboration and enriching my own perspective were frequent and many. I think of the Hub as the optimum environment for any early career researcher -- an atmosphere of focus and opportunity with room for the informality and chance conversations that can take your research -- and life! -- in new and exciting directions.”

Watch Amelia's [SHAPE-ID webinar](#) presentation.

## Profile: Public Policy Fellow



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As part of the TLRH's commitment to raising awareness of the relevance of Arts and Humanities research to addressing grand societal challenges, it appointed its first Public Policy Fellows in 2019 to help address the potential of Arts and Humanities research and expertise to influence and inform policy development. The policy research interface is also a new area of focus for Trinity and for Ireland and has highlighted in particular the importance of supporting individuals across both communities to develop and sustain longer term relationships. Mary Doyle's experience of working with the TLRH community led her to engage with national funders and academics and her 2021 paper [Research for public policy and society: building a stronger architecture for Ireland](#) is now being considered collaboratively across a range of stakeholders including Government, the Irish Higher Education system and Research Funders. Mary has also contributed to a [SHAPE-ID webinar](#) and the [SHAPE-ID blog](#).



**FUNDING |** Securing strategic large-scale funding is critical in building capacity for interdisciplinarity and raising the international profile of the institute for partnerships. In 2017, supported by a dedicated research programme officer, the TLRH secured funding for its first MSCA COFUND programme. It enabled the appointment of 9 fellows for 12-month periods with interdisciplinary proposals addressing the university's Arts and Humanities led themes **Digital Humanities, Creative Arts Practice, Identities in Transformation, Making Ireland and Manuscript, Book and Print Cultures**. The fellows brought momentum to the themes, built community and networks and explored the challenges – including publication and funding routes – of building collaborations in these areas as well as the emerging areas of neurohumanities and environmental humanities.

This experience also informed the development of the **Human+ COFUND programme**, funded in 2020. Small-scale initiatives can also initiate larger projects. In 2016, the TLRH organised a workshop on **Interdisciplinarity for Impact** (funded by the Irish Research Council), which became the first step in the successful **SHAPE-ID** H2020 grant proposal. Hosting SHAPE-ID has accelerated interest in inter- and trans-disciplinarity in the Hub and across the wider university community.

**ARTS & HUMANITIES LEADERSHIP |** While many factors are outside the control of an institute, it can be an agent of change by actively influencing discussions at a university, national and international level and as part of networks of similar institutes driving the pace for change. Since the beginning, the TLRH set out to actively lead in **spearheading Arts and Humanities-led research approaches and methodologies which position humanity, creativity and culture at the centre of measures to tackle complex societal challenges**. These build on areas of strategic interest to its research community. For instance:

- >** In 2014-17, the TLRH secured EU funding for an international research exchange programme on Cultural Trauma (SPECTRESS), with 9 partners around the globe.
- >** In 2018-19, it built on the [SPECTRESS network](#) to secure a CHCI A.W. Mellon Foundation Grant for a Global Humanities Institute on the Crises of Democracy.
- >** In 2020 the institute secured philanthropic funding to establish a Democracy Forum that will bridge the divides between academia, government, civic society and the media by translating Arts and Humanities research into real-world practice and activity.



I was able to ask new questions about the direction of my projects. The Hub's focus on the place of the humanities in larger conversations allowed me to think about the kinds of conversations I want my work to be involved in.

2018-19 MSCA COFUND Fellow Dr Katherine Zieman

## Enterprise Engagement

**Start with an honest conversation on values and build a collaboration with small steps initially.**

In 2018 the Trinity Long Room Hub organised a workshop with enterprise organisations to begin a conversation about how the humanities and enterprise could develop meaningful partnerships. On foot of this the Hub and the Dock, Accenture's global research and innovation hub in Dublin, collaborated on a public lecture series, "What does it Mean to be Human in the 21st Century?" This series explored technology developments and their impact on all aspects of individual and societal well-being.

The success of this collaboration led the Trinity Long Room Hub to develop, with the **ADAPT** SFI Research Centre for Digital Media Technology, the Human+ fellowship programme 2020-25, co-funded by the European Commission with enterprise partners including Accenture. 18 fellows will work with multidisciplinary supervisory teams across the Humanities, Computer Sciences and enterprise on diverse aspects of how to develop human-centric approaches to technological innovation.

