Project 6: Content Notes

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	
	Disability/Mental Health student	√
Topic *The broad educational point that impacts student performance/ attainment gaps*	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	√
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
	Other?	
Specific research question	What are Cambridge student and staff understandings of the role and value of Content Notes in helping students engage with their study materials without risk to their mental health?	
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2. Executive summary

We aimed to ascertain the usefulness of Content Notes at the University, and investigated whether their use could mitigate the attainment and retention gap between students with and without mental health conditions. We further investigated barriers to the widespread use of Content Notes with the goal of resolving student demand with staff reluctance.

We used three data collection methods:

1) a short survey that was sent to disabled students at the University;
2) a more in-depth survey to our student co-researchers to gain richer qualitative information about how Content Notes may be beneficial; and
3) a survey to staff members about their practice and ideology regarding Content Notes.

Our findings highlight how and why Content Notes are useful to students, including their specific impact on students with mental health conditions. We have also identified concerns by staff, both erroneous and genuine, about the use of Content Notes and considered how barriers to their consistent implementation may be overcome to support students with mental health conditions in their attainment and retention at the University.

3. Rationale

There is a gap in retention and attainment between students with and without mental health conditions at the University. We hypothesise that this gap may in part be driven by the increased propensity of students with mental health conditions to be overwhelmed by certain content presented without

warnings (Content Notes). We use surveys and interviews with students to identify the need for Content Notes in teaching.

There is a lively debate in the field of Content Notes, with some academics claiming that the use of Content Notes restricts academic freedom or is requested by a 'snowflake' generation. We use staff interviews to ascertain to what extent this perspective is present at Cambridge, in an attempt to overcome barriers to a widespread Content Note practice. We hope that this can help mitigate the attainment and retention gap between students with and without mental health conditions.

4. Existing evidence

There has been lively debate in the field of Content Notes, outside of the University of Cambridge, termed "never-ending" by Flaherty (2015). It is not simply the case that students support Content Note use and academics do not. As elucidated by Bentley (2017), students are also divided as to the theoretical basis and practical implications of Content Notes.

Sometimes this debate refers to "trigger warnings" - however, we prefer the more neutral term "Content Note" due to stigma around the term "trigger". The debate is also split between feminist literature and disability pedagogy: for clarity, here we discuss Content Notes in a disability pedagogy context as it is directly relevant to the aims and focus of this research. Our research aims to establish a pragmatic basis for the use of Content Notes rather than one based in theory. However, the substantial research in this field cannot be ignored.

This debate is one in which authors with a mixed or nuanced view on the use of Content Notes are in the minority. For example, Beverly, Diaz, Kerr, Balboa, Prokopakis and Fredricks (2018) do not reach a consensus on whether Content Notes should be used. However, their research supports that they *"may represent a teaching tool to facilitate classroom discussions about the severity of trauma-related material and problem-focused coping strategies" (p.5).* This implies that they may be useful as a classroom tool beyond supporting access for disabled students, although from the perspective of our research their use as a disability access tool is primary. Cares, Franklin, Fisher and Bostaph (2018) also present a nuanced case which predominantly supports the use of Content Notes.

Polarised views are a more common finding in this debate. One established critic of Content Notes is Jack Halberstam (2017). He argues that such warnings are demanded by oversensitive students, and goes as far as to discuss that the current generation are *"spoiled, overparented, and overly invested in their own trauma".* This is a view supported by Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) who discuss the contributing factors of *"helicopter parenting, renewed investments in health and safety, over-zealous crackdowns on bullying, and an education that represents the world to students as bristling with dangers that lurk in everything from peanut butter to pedophilic predators".* In other words, opponents to Content Notes frequently cite factors such as a coddled younger generation, who have been wrapped in cotton wool and protected from the 'real world'.

This view is explicitly challenged by Angela Carter (2019), who argues that the relationship between Content Notes and feminist theory has led to considerable confusion and ideological misconceptions. She proposes that we should approach Content Notes from the perspective of enabling educational access for disabled students who have experienced trauma. Furthermore, she discusses that Content Notes do not exist for the purpose of avoiding discomfort or avoiding truths which are "difficult to hear". Rather their purpose is to prevent individuals from *"mentally and physically re-experienc[ing] a past trauma in … an embodied manner"*. Under this conception, Content Notes are a tool for disability access, rather than to prevent people from being offended. The students who are most likely to need Content

Notes are not the cotton-wool wrapped "snowflake" generation, but rather individuals who often have very challenging life stories and histories of trauma.

Fenner (2018) argues in support of the use of Content Warnings from the perspective of disabled access. She writes *"Trigger warnings may represent a teaching tool to facilitate classroom discussions about the severity of trauma-related material and problem-focused coping strategies".* Fenner (2018) also directly challenges ideas presented by Halberstam (2017) and Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) that Content Notes are requested by the fragile and cotton-wool wrapped, with the following statement: *"[opponents of Content Notes] too often conflate content warnings with broader demands for classroom "safe space" that fail to recognize the distinct features of posttraumatic stress as a form of mental illness".* In other words, students with posttraumatic stress disorder are not fragile and vulnerable in a way which can be remedied by uncontrolled exposure to trauma. Instead they should be viewed as having a legitimate disability, with access needs which can be met in the classroom. Fenner also puts forward the idea that unwarned, overwhelming exposure to trauma content can force students with posttraumatic stress disorder to disengage entirely. On the other hand, *"content warnings help such students get as close to valuable material as they can".*

We expect to encounter views from both sides of this argument to be uncovered by our research. Academics may be concerned about the potential for restrictions to intellectual freedom or "coddling" in the classroom. On the other hand, students with mental health conditions may demonstrate a real need for Content Notes. We hope to go some way to resolving these conflicting opinions to reach a best practice for the use of Content Notes at the University of Cambridge.

References

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5. Generation of evidence

Brief student survey

As part of a broader questionnaire, students were asked three questions assessing the provision and need for Content Notes. This questionnaire assessed whether students had experienced Content Notes being used as part of their course, whether they would personally benefit from Content Notes being used and whether they believed that Content Notes should be used at the University.

73 disabled students (both with and without mental health problems) answered this survey. We also collected demographic information on which year of study the students were in and whether they identified as having a mental health condition.

Staff survey

A survey was sent to teaching staff within the departments of Psychology, Archaeology and Modern and Medieval Languages (MML) at the University of Cambridge. This survey was sent directly to 33 staff within the Psychology Faculty, 38 staff within the French department of the MML Faculty and 111 members of staff within the Archaeology Faculty. 25 responses were received; the low response rate of 13.8% was expected due to very tight time constraints surrounding the project. Results should be interpreted with caution particularly in attempts to establish quantitative facts – e.g. what percentage of teaching staff use content notes – since there will be self-selection bias in those who chose to respond. Responses are more useful to gauge the range of sentiments towards Content Notes and the specific barriers which lead members of staff not to employ Content Notes, rather than to provide accurate quantitative information.

Student email "interview"

These written interview questions were distributed to other student representatives working on different strands of this research (36 students). This sample is both purposive and self-selecting so was not intended to represent accurate numerical estimates across a broader range of students but rather it intended to generate more detailed qualitative data relating to the experiences of disabled and Black British students and gain their opinions on the importance and use of Content Notes. This sample was purposive as it was important to explore the views of those who were part of the Access and Participation Plan focus (i.e disabled student or black british) and it was purposive as these individuals had been approached considering their experience as student representatives. As student representatives the students have considerable involvement with the student populations whom they represent, and that was a central factor in valuing their views in this research: the role of representative will have necessitated that they engage with perspectives and experiences beyond their own personal experiences. Thus the qualitative nature of this method might allow representatives to articulate how, if and why their perspective is informed by the experience of other students beyond their individual experience. We received 3 responses from individuals who had direct experience of the benefits of Content Notes. Thus the staff survey and interview discussions resulted in 28 qualitative discussions/responses which allowed a depth of analysis to unpick some of the complexities of perspectives around Content Notes.

6. Small project research findings

Staff survey

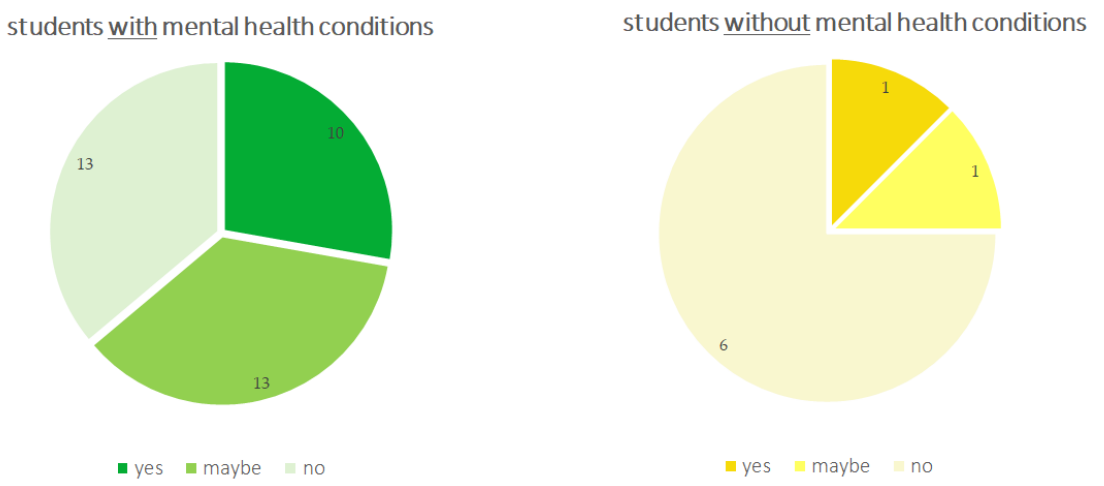
The staff survey revealed inconsistent use of Content Notes in teaching at the University. Half of the surveyed staff used Content Notes and half did not. Content Notes were delivered in myriad ways including at the beginning of lectures (the most common means of delivery), via the learning platform Moodle, as part of lecture summaries or syllabi, attached to reading lists and via email in advance of lectures. Demand from students and faculties was the primary reason given for the use of Content Notes, followed by avoiding student distress. Others said that Content Notes were a useful part of educational framing of topics. The reasons why staff did not use Content Notes tended to focus on the students being adults who should not be "wrapped in cotton wool". Some staff members were concerned that use of Content Notes would not prepare students for the "real world". Several cited ideological and political concerns regarding which topics are deemed "sensitive". One staff member simply had not considered using them.

We asked staff what impact they felt Content Notes would have upon student wellbeing, engagement with course content, academic performance and the academic freedom of both staff and students. Responses to all these questions clustered around "unsure", suggesting that many staff are amenable to various evidence in support of (or against) Content Notes. 77% of staff said that a faculty guide to Content Notes either would or may be helpful, again reflecting that most staff are willing to consider Content Note use as standard practice.

Answers to questions assessing ideology surrounding Content Notes demonstrate the varied opinion and lively debate in this area, tending to be polarised. Some staff members may hold a nuanced belief accepting that Content Notes serve a broadly positive purpose with some negative consequences. Some concerns were practical – e.g. concerning which topics should be deemed "sensitive". Others were political – e.g. concerns that "sensitive" topics were determined more by a political agenda than by actual distress, or that the use of Content Notes is primarily driven by "virtue-signalling" rather than genuine avoidance of distress. Further comments were ideological – focusing on the idea that, as adults, students *should* not require Content Notes as they should be able to engage with all academic material without preparation. Responses in support of Content Notes tended to be milder, focusing on reduction of student distress and allowing students to prepare to engage with difficult subjects.

Student survey

Results from the brief student survey (73 disabled students) again highlighted the mixed current practice regarding Content Notes. It also suggested that most students support the use of Content Notes for sensitive material (73.4%). Those students who identified as having a mental health condition often stated that Content Notes would be beneficial to them, shown in the figure below.



Student email "interview"

These interviews generated a wealth of qualitative data, highlighting that Content Note practice can be extremely beneficial to some students.

Some students highlighted that the use of Content Notes does not hinder their engagement with material but allows them to engage with it in a prepared and more comfortable way.

> *"[A prescribed text on my course] includes extremely graphic sexual descriptions (including non-consensual), suicide, and murder. These were **noted in the reading list for the module**, and an **alternative text was suggested if necessary**. I would have been extremely triggered by reading the text without any warning, but **as I was given the warning, I was able to read the text in a prepared frame of mind** and having known to scan the wikipedia plot summary first to prepare myself. I also felt **much more comfortable engaging in discussion** of the text in my seminar […] I also appreciated that an alternative text was given, even though I **didn't need this myself because the CNs were enough** for me."*

Even those who could not engage with the material without distress reported that warnings about sensitive material allowed them to put support in place to avoid this distress becoming unmanageable.

> *"Certain lecturers and supervisors would, upon request, inform me of sensitive material **in advance so that I could best prepare myself to engage** with this content. This meant that, for example **if I needed to ensure a friend could accompany me** to a lecture or that I would **ask for the lecture to be recorded and listen to it in my own room where I felt safer**, I could prepare in advance."*

Some students felt more comfortable engaging in material with Content Notes since their use demonstrated a level of understanding (from the staff member) that students had varied experiences and some have experienced trauma.

> *"[A warning in-lecture re: discussion of sexual harassment/violence in schools] was actually very good because **even people who hadn't directly experienced it could recognise the ways that it had happened** in their schools […] Lots of people in our class had actually experienced sexual harassment, touching, etc in school so it had the **potential to bring back some negative (and generally repressed) memories** that people don't tend to think about often, so warning was good and actually **led to rich conversation**. People were able to prepare themselves to talk and, generally speaking, content notes also give a topic validation/kudos i.e. **we respect that this may bring you trauma**, rightfully so, and we are trying to avoid this happening so **you can bring it productively to the table if you choose**."*

> *"[When CNs were used] I felt a lot **more engaged** and could practice controlled recall of the related incidents/memories and actually they then converted to 'lived experience' and **became very useful in discussion**. The traumatic incidents weren't a barrier [but] became opportunities for insight […] [CNs] allow people to find strength in what they've been through and **be respected as learners who exist in the real world**, not just in abstract."*

> *"I felt **much more comfortable** discussing personal experiences and how they relate to academic concepts in modules where CNs had been used, as I was reassured that if I did need to leave or disengage at any point, the lecturer/class leader would be understanding of this. This **improved***

significantly *upon my wellbeing as well as on my academic engagement and eventual performance (**my best CN'd module at undergrad was by far my highest exam mark**)."*

*"I feel much **more comfortable discussing difficult topics** academically with staff who have CN'd texts, regardless whether I find those texts triggering or not […] it lets me know that they are **beginning from a place of good intentions**, and that goes a long way."*

On the other hand, students were able to provide examples where the lack of provision of Content Notes led to disruption to their education because they did not feel safe or comfortable attending certain lectures.

*"I am prone to **avoiding lectures or classes altogether on the off-chance** they may be triggering, even though this is frequently not the case. Content noting would help me feel **empowered to make choices about attendance**, regardless of whether they successful mitigated the impact of PTSD on me."*

*"I **stopped attending** [one consistently triggering] lecture series and would **ask a friend to record it and warn me about traumatic material**. This was **obviously detrimental to my engagement**. Inability to immerse myself in the lecture as I normally would, I am sure **my academic performance was affected**. I also have auditory processing problems and without the ability to lipread alongside the audio it would take me **2-3 times longer to go through the lecture audio** than it would have taken for me to attend the lecture itself."*

*"I **stopped attending lectures** given the persistent lecturer who treated very dark topics as if they were entirely theoretical i.e. as if a great deal of his class, statistically speaking, wouldn't have known about an incidence of suicide [and I felt] constantly on edge with regards to what he's going to discuss next […] I **had to teach myself essentially the whole module** after that which was time I just didn't have."*

Other responses discussed the potentially devastating effects to wellbeing where Content Notes were not provided.

*"Some of the conversations and attitudes around consent **upset me on a deep level**, and to have to answer questions about brutal content offhand [with no CNs] in a supervision **often made me zone out**. This made me cry once I got back to my room."*

*"After a lecturer described content relating to neglect and abuse of children, including playing a video of an interview of an adult describing (in detail) the abuse she suffered as a child, I had a flashback due to having PTSD from similar trauma. When someone with PTSD has a flashback they **relive the traumatic event to the extent that they feel like it is happening again**, with accompanying behavioural change. I often look like I am having a seizure during flashbacks. This happening during a lecture was **disruptive to the teaching of the lecture itself and required individuals to step in** and help me and therefore take time away from their lecture. I also found **it incredibly distressing that a lecture hall filled with people who I knew to varying degrees had seen me in that state** – behaving as if I was experiencing the most horrifying events of my life."*

*"Having **flashbacks provoked by un-warned traumatic material** was very damaging to my personal wellbeing. [The medication I needed for these] would leave me **sleepy and unable to complete much else** that day. Even when medication was not needed I would often be so unwell after these events that I **could not function** for some period afterwards."*

Students also discussed their own attempts to implement Content Notes within their faculties, and the arguments they had experienced against their use. Some responses highlighted that the attitudes expressed by lecturers and other staff could themselves be very harmful to students' sense of wellbeing and safety.

> *"Most lecturers did not provide warning about distressing content. Sometimes such content was included **gratuitously** in an attempt to make lecture material less "dry". When asked to provide content notes, one lecturer told me that "suppressing information because a student has PTSD would be the same as not teaching about the harmful effects of cigarette smoke in case a student smoked". **I was not asking him to suppress material, only to warn about it**."*
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> *"In first year [Law] a compulsory paper is Criminal Law, which includes Sexual Offences. We tackle in detail issues of consent, rape etc. This involves lecturers going into **immense detail about historical cases**, often in a narrative fashion. This comes with **no warning or content notes**, and often (male) lecturers can have an incredibly blasé attitude to very upsetting stories."*

7. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.

Our research highlights the disparity between student need for Content Notes and the attitudes of some teaching staff which hinder the application of a consistent practice. Disabled students broadly support the implementation of Content Notes, and the qualitative data highlights the severe disruption which can be caused for some students when exposed to un-warned traumatic material.

Certain staff responses give good insight into specific misconceptions. For example, one staff member discussed that students should be exposed to the world "beyond the ivory towers," implying that those who request Content Notes are students who have been sheltered from the "real world" beyond academia. Contrary to this, students who request and require Content Notes are more likely to have mental health conditions and to have experienced significant trauma. These students have invariably been exposed to things "beyond the ivory towers" – this is why they have trauma sufficient to require warnings about certain material. Other staff members highlighted that students "are adults" – suggesting that adults should not be vulnerable to traumatic content.

Staff education about the impact of trauma and mental health conditions on students may help to reduce these attitudes. Students answering our interview questions reported having diagnoses of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a condition which causes flashbacks and emotional disturbance when confronted with material reminiscent of trauma. Of course, those with PTSD are also adults, and their adulthood does not make them any less vulnerable to consequences of their condition. Our data highlights the importance of educating staff about this.

Most staff members suggested that they either would or may benefit from faculty guidance on the use of Content Notes for teaching and learning. As well as providing "myth-busting" education to extremely ideologically resistant staff, faculties should prepare guidance on how and when Content Notes should be used. They should also provide practical support to staff who are struggling with elements of their implementation. Ideally this would enable the University to move towards a consistent practice of Content Note provision. Our data suggest that this would facilitate the prepared engagement of students with all manner of course material, and that this effect may be particularly strong for students with mental health conditions. This is likely to mitigate the attainment and retention gap between students with and without mental health conditions at the University.

8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. That the University should endorse the guidelines for Content Notes developed by CUSU/DSC and encourage them to be adapted and adopted by Faculties for their staff, with instructions about how and when Content Notes should be used for any material that relates to common trauma (in particular: rape, sexual violence, physical violence, war, racial violence and other offences based on protected characteristics)

2. That Faculties should support staff in the development and delivery of Content Notes in their teaching and course material, educating them about the value of Content Notes and correcting misconceptions that students use them to avoid engaging

3. That Faculties should provide information to their students about Content Notes, acknowledging that they are a reasonable adjustment that they might request if not provided as a matter of course

4. That Faculties should develop processes whereby students might provide (optionally anonymous) constructive feedback on Content Note provision, thereby enabling a staff-student dialogue that will mutually develop and improve Content Note provision while also ensuring that students are not forced to disclose information about their specific traumatic experiences under their own name