

# Enhancing collegiate education: inclusive approaches to addressing awarding gaps

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## Summary

The Cambridge Centre for Teaching & Learning (CCTL) has received funding from the Colleges to enable CCTL to extend work in support of commitments on behalf of the Collegiate University from into the collegiate educational environment in order 'to ensure that a representative cross section of society is represented within its student body, who can access the same opportunities and quality of experience, and can expect the same outcomes in terms of completion, attainment and progression' (Access & Participation Plan, 2020-25, p. 19). The funded period is February 2021 to January 2024.

## Project approach

Sector research indicates that students' educational experiences and outcomes are influenced by a range of factors, including: curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment practices; relationships (between students as well as between staff and students), and the extent to which students feel that they 'belong' in their university and in their education. ('Belonging' is usefully understood in terms of 'social and academic integration').

Inclusive approaches have been shown to be more effective than those which assume need for 'targeted interventions'. Taking an inclusive approach does not mean assuming that differences and disadvantages do not exist; rather, it aims to maintain attention to educational environments, experiences and practices.

CCTL's work starts from the premise that collegiate education and experience are central to students' education and outcomes. It takes an appreciative approach, seeking to identify what works well; where barriers or concerns are identified, CCTL's work aims to identify ways of overcoming these. Central to our approach is working with staff and students, in order to develop contextualised understanding of experiences and practices, and in the expectation that changes in practices and processes are more likely to be sustainable when they are co-developed with those involved. Within Cambridge, there are a range of initiatives which address shared or related themes; CCTL aims to avoid duplication and, where possible, to contribute to 'joining up', learning from concurrent initiatives and / or sharing knowledge with them.

A series of principles have been co-developed with staff and student members of the project's advisory group:

- i. There are unexplained differences in the educational outcomes of Black British students and students with declared mental health conditions.
- ii. There is evidence, both in sector-wide research and in research and enquiry in Cambridge, as to what major underlying issues are and how they can be addressed.
- iii. In researching and seeking to address inequities affecting particular 'groups' of students, it is important not to assume that these are a result of students' characteristics or students' 'lacking' characteristics ('deficit models').
- iv. Identities are complex, meaning that 'group identities' are in reality blurred and intersectional. We need to constantly recalibrate between investigating and seeking to address particular inequities experienced by 'groups' and more generally developing more inclusive practices and environments.

- v. In Cambridge, there are fundamental cultural issues which adversely affect the experience and outcomes of students and examples of behaviours which are permitted to continue and are therefore in effect condoned.
- vi. Students' input should be sought on matters that affect them. However, the onus should not be on students who are adversely affected to educate staff or to advocate for institutional responses: institutions and individuals with authority in Cambridge should show that they are serious about addressing inequities.
- vii. Cambridge is a highly devolved collegiate University. There are, though, clear collective responsibilities, including collective responsibilities for students' wellbeing and education.

### Six strands of work (2022-23)

Six strands of interconnecting work will be pursued during the second project phase and two practice sharing events are envisaged (February, late June), with termly progress reports to the Senior Tutors' Standing Committee on Education.

#### Strand 1: first-year academic experience

Outcomes of first-year assessment are strong predictors of final-year outcomes. This strand addresses approaches to academic induction and development; mentoring and supporting peer learning.

#### Strand 2: the educational contribution of direction of studies

Sector research and experience indicate the significant potential of direction of studies to enhance experiences and outcomes. This strand includes exploring DoSs' perceptions of the educational contribution of the process, as well as barriers and opportunities to address these.

#### Strand 3: supervisors' educational development

Supervision is central to Cambridge undergraduate education. Supervisors and students have identified factors which constrain supervision. This strand addresses potential to address barriers, as well as effective pedagogical practices and ways in which supervisors develop expertise.

#### Strand 4: developing academic knowledge and skills through formative feedback and reflective practice

Supervision and direction of studies are potentially 'feedback-rich' processes by which students can become progressively more proficient in disciplinary ways of thinking, reasoning and communicating and progressively more independent in their learning. This strand addresses effective approaches, models and tools.

#### Strand 5: enhancing students' educational experiences and outcomes – collegiate processes and practices

Sector research recommends integrating inclusion into institutional processes and decision making, as well as encouraging and supporting staff and student innovations. This strand addresses practices and opportunities within the collegiate environment.

#### Strand 6: enhancing educational experiences and outcomes – staff-student partnerships

Working with staff and students enables contextualised understanding of complex experiences, involves those affected by initiatives in shaping them and is more likely to result in sustainable change. This strand involves identifying current practices, curating tools and guidance and contributing to awareness raising and practice sharing.

## Appendix: six strands of work, May 2022 to July 2023

Six interconnecting strands of work will be undertaken during the next phase of the funded period. The focus and initial briefs set out in this document will be developed through engagement with students, academic and professional staff of the collegiate University, involving cycles of gathering information; analysis and interpretation with samples of students and staff; identifying, agreeing, and acting on next steps; identifying and reflecting on consequences. Termly updates will be submitted to the Senior Tutors' Standing Committee on Education, and we envisage two events (provisionally: February and late June 2023) which will be used to share findings, raise awareness, and provide opportunities to extend the involvement of students and staff in the project.

There are, of course, a range of projects and initiatives underway in Cambridge which have a bearing on students' experiences and outcomes (for example, the development of initiatives by the Black Advisory Hub, with the guidance of the Hub's Steering Group; reforming support for students' mental health and wellbeing; a review of EDI training currently underway across the collegiate University; CCTL's phased introduction of new accredited teaching development activities, and the development during 2023 of the collegiate University's next Access and Participation Plan [2024-28]). The CCTL team will not duplicate project activity but learn from and / or help to inform these, where appropriate.

The six strands of work which are outlined below are necessarily interconnected, as factors affecting students' educational experiences and outcomes and / or opportunities to address these may be identified at one or more levels:

- micro (individuals)
- meso (groups / teams / units / organisations)
- macro (institution, regulations, cultures)

Furthermore, opportunities to address awarding gaps may result in contributions which

- add to the knowledge / evidence base in Cambridge
- aim to share evidence and practice
- form a basis for pilot initiatives

Finally: as project work develops, it is likely that activities will be identified which

- may feasibly be pursued within available resources (time, people, funding)
- are important and more complex, and may be documented and referred to other bodies, where appropriate, or identified as recommendations for future attention

## Strand 1: First-year academic experience

<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>SCOPE</b>	<p>Within the scope of this strand of work are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>activity which is co-ordinated across Cambridge (for example: by the Black Advisory Hub, by the Disability Resource Centre), within Colleges (for example: College orientation, support for academic development), within collegiate subject teaching &amp; learning (for example: academic development activities for subject cohorts, academic development activities which are integrated into direction of studies and / or supervision)<sup>[1]</sup></li> <li>activity which may be described as 'staff-led', 'student-led' or a mixture of both</li> </ul> <p><sup>[1]</sup>Note crossover: formative feedback, direction of studies, supervision</p>
	<b>POTENTIAL OUTCOMES</b>	<p>Potential outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>scoping review: across a sample of Colleges, collation of models of academic induction and development during the first year, including aims, evaluation, resourcing</li> <li>scoping review: across a sample of Colleges, collation of models of peer learning, including aims, evaluation, and resourcing; research-informed recommendations on inclusive and accessible peer learning</li> <li>pilot practice sharing event, including contributions by college educators, staff and students</li> <li>via Black Advisory Hub: pilot and formative evaluation of mentoring for first-years who identify as Black</li> </ul>
	<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<p>Sector- and institutional-level research, as well as students' and staff's reflections, indicates that students' academic experience during their first year of study is strongly associated with academic progress and outcomes and with personal wellbeing.</p> <p>Cycles of student-led action research projects, and responses of college educators to findings arising from these projects, indicate particular interest in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>effective approaches to academic induction and the development of academic knowledge and skills during the first year</li> <li>supporting mentoring for first-years who identify as Black, for example, to contribute to developing social and academic networks</li> <li>supporting peer learning, including developing inclusive peer interactions and accessible peer study groups</li> </ul>

## Strand 2: The educational contribution of direction of studies

<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>SCOPE</b>	<p>College staff, including directors of studies, and students participating in cycles of student-led action research projects, indicate particular interest in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reflecting on the educational contributions of the role</li> <li>identifying barriers to the role, including organisational barriers, and opportunities to address these</li> <li>developing increased cultural proficiency and evidence-informed awareness of how to support students' wellbeing and mental health</li> <li>tools, methods and approaches which encourage students to develop their evaluative abilities (see 'developing academic knowledge and skills')</li> <li>initial professional development and ongoing opportunities to share and extend knowledge and practice</li> </ul>
	<b>POTENTIAL OUTCOMES</b>	<p>Potential outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>scoping review, including focus-group style workshops with DoSes in a sample of Colleges); initial findings from focus groups already completed include potential to update the DoS 'role description', priorities for and approaches to initial and continuing professional development and ways in which direction of studies can be better supported within Colleges and Departments. (An initial analysis of focus groups undertaken by the time of writing is appended.)</li> </ul>
	<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<p>Direction of studies, with supervision, is one of the distinctive aspects of Cambridge undergraduate education. Students and directors of studies identify a range of educational contributions, alongside important organisational ones, which they associate with direction of studies, including helping students to settle into their academic lives and develop their academic aspirations and capabilities, both in general terms and with respect to particular experiences.</p> <p>College staff, including directors of studies, also address factors which constrain this potential, including academic workloads and recognition and reward of the role; interplays / boundaries between academic and welfare roles; in some instances, limited department-based co-ordination between directors of studies (DoSes) and communication with Departments.</p>

### Strand 3: Supervisors' educational development

<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>SCOPE</b>	<p>Supervisions are at the core of the educational provision of the Cambridge Colleges. The supervision process is a central means by which students learn to work autonomously, argue and present arguments, handle problems, learn with and from others, question their own assumptions, and manage themselves. Students value the potential of supervision to serve as personalised learning experiences, to learn from and with peers, and with supervisors' academic guidance and mentorship.</p> <p>College educators and students identify factors which constrain supervision, including communications between departments and supervisors concerning summative assessment expectations, which may lead to supervision content and activities which are unintentionally unaligned; limited sharing of students' feedback on their experiences of supervision; pressures on academic time and an undervaluing of the role of supervision; limited opportunities for supervisors to develop their expertise; expectations of the role of supervisors and boundaries between academic and welfare roles.</p> <p>Note: there is some overlap between this strand of work and Strand 4 (developing academic knowledge and skills through formative feedback and reflective practice), Strand 5 (enhancing students' educational experiences and outcomes: college processes and practices)</p>	<p>A scoping review could include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a snapshot of current supervisors, by role / affiliation, subject, and supervision hours</li> <li>• across a sample of departments and colleges: mapping current patterns of participation in introductory and continuing educational development opportunities</li> <li>• a review of aims and formats, including CCTL's cross-Cambridge provision</li> </ul>
	<b>POTENTIAL OUTCOMES</b>	<p>Potential outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identification of models of development, including aims, resourcing, and evaluation, for new and more experienced supervisors</li> <li>• input into wider reviews of training and professional development (e.g., EDI, Wellbeing)</li> <li>• creation and curation of educational development content, including tools, methods, and reference resources for new and more experienced supervisors</li> </ul>	

### Strand 4: Developing academic knowledge and skills through formative feedback and reflective practice

<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>SCOPE</b>	<p>Cambridge's undergraduate education, in particular the processes of supervision and direction of studies, is potentially rich in personalised formative feedback and in encouraging students to develop reflective practices so that during their undergraduate education they become progressively more independent, self-regulating, and prepared to direct their own future learning.</p> <p>Cycles of student-led action research projects, and responses of college educators to findings arising from these projects, indicate particular interest in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College processes and practices which encourage students to reflect on their own learning progress and priorities, in dialogue with their director of studies</li> <li>• tools and methods which may be used in supervision, so that students develop their evaluative abilities through practising self- and / or peer- assessment and feedback</li> <li>• improving communications with supervisors regarding summative assessment criteria and aligning formative assessment of supervision work</li> </ul> <p>Note: there is some overlap between this strand of work and strands on the first-year academic experience (above), supervision and direction of studies (above).</p>
	<b>POTENTIAL OUTCOMES</b>	<p>Potential outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• scoping review: across a sample of Colleges, collation of models of termly student evaluations of teaching &amp; learning, including aims, perceived educational benefits</li> <li>• across a sample of subjects: a curated selection of formative assessment and feedback tools and models, trialled, and formatively evaluated by supervisors / DoSes and students</li> <li>• case studies and / or content for educational development activities (within Colleges and / or CCTL's provision)</li> </ul>

## Strand 5: Enhancing students' educational experiences and outcomes: collegiate process and practices

<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>SCOPE</b>	<p>College staff and students indicate interest in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• examples of mechanisms for capturing and responding to students' experiences of and / or concerns about collegiate education and environments where these mechanisms move beyond 'complaints' to students' recommendations or suggestions</li> <li>• examples of or opportunities for investigating or tracking students' experiences with reference to equality, diversity, and inclusion</li> <li>• examples of ways in which students' feedback on their experience of collegiate education may be shared constructively with supervisors, directors of studies, etc</li> <li>• examples of ways in which concerns about supervision quality may be pursued and where appropriate shared with other subject-based DoSes</li> </ul>
	<b>POTENTIAL OUTCOMES</b>	<p>Potential outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scoping review across a sample of Colleges</li> <li>• case studies and / or content for educational development activities</li> </ul>
<b>BACKGROUND</b>		
<p>Across collegiate Cambridge, there is a range of models and mechanisms for understanding and enhancing students' educational experiences and outcomes and for identifying and addressing individual and systemic inequities. Anecdotally, it appears that there is a tendency for 'education' to be considered separately from 'equalities, diversity and inclusion'.</p> <p>Recommendations arising from sector research for institutional action include embedding priorities of addressing awarding gaps and developing inclusive practices into institutional processes and decision making, as well as encouraging and supporting staff and student innovations</p>		

## Strand 6: enhancing educational experiences and outcomes: staff-student partnerships

<b>BACKGROUND</b>	<b>POTENTIAL OUTCOMES</b>	<p>Potential outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• collation of current models of partnership working across a sample of Colleges, Departments, and institutions</li> <li>• a curated selection of tools and guidance</li> <li>• awareness raising / practice sharing event</li> </ul>
<b>BACKGROUND</b>		
<p>Sector research highlights the importance of actively involving students and staff in investigating lived experiences and in designing and formatively evaluating initiatives designed to address inequities and enhance educational experiences and practices. CCTL's approach to this Levies-funded work starts from the premise that initiatives that are co-created with staff and students are more likely to have a lasting impact.</p> <p>This strand of work identifies and formatively evaluates different models of partnership and aims to contribute to increased awareness of and confidence in partnership models within the collegiate University.</p>		