

# *Fairer for All:* Towards a centralised model of admissions and access at Oxford and Cambridge

Charlotte Armstrong



## About the author

---

Charlotte Armstrong is Policy Manager at the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), where she is responsible for managing the HEPI blog and supporting the Institute's programme of policy analysis and engagement. Before joining HEPI, Charlotte worked on issues of access and widening participation as School's Liaison Officer for Queens' College at the University of Cambridge.

# Contents

---

Executive summary	4
Introduction	6
Flaws in the system	13
Why centralisation is the answer	29
Recommendations	37
Endnotes	39

---

# Executive summary

---

The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are two of the most prestigious institutions in the world. One characteristic feature of both institutions is their collegiate system – with individual, smaller and (largely) independent bodies all sitting within the central universities. Both universities have made significant progress in terms of their access and outreach initiatives. However, the current structure of both their outreach teams and their admissions processes is preventing progress from being as effective as it otherwise could be.

This report finds that the current collegiate model, despite being a vital source of community once students arrive at the institutions, damages the efficacy, parity and transparency of both universities' access and widening participation processes and their admissions procedures. At the University of Cambridge particularly, variation between the colleges in terms of their application procedures means that students can have markedly different experiences and receive different outcomes, depending on the course-college combination of their application.

In terms of outreach work, the division of the majority of this to the individual colleges (and the uneven linkage of these colleges to population density), alongside the disjointed relationship with the institutions' Access and Participation Plans, limits the impact of the work. This existing arrangement results in duplication of efforts, inconsistent coverage and varied budgets that unfairly and unevenly affect applicants across the country.

The complexity of both systems makes it difficult for teachers to understand and keep track of procedures – hindering their abilities to provide advice and to support their students throughout the application process. This further disadvantages students attending schools with particularly over-stretched teachers who are unable to dedicate time to learning complicated systems.

This report therefore argues for the centralisation of admissions and access work within both institutions – moving college choice to after the

---

offer stage. This shift would help address many of the issues currently present within the system – improving efficiency, parity and transparency in admissions, access and outreach. Finally, the report concludes by highlighting how a joint approach to access and widening participation training, and increased communication regarding work delivered by the two institutions, would achieve gains for both.

# Introduction

---

The University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge (collectively referred to in this paper as Oxbridge) are the two oldest universities in the UK and for around half a millennium they were the only universities in England. This long dominance of the sector, the wealth of some of the colleges and the notable alumni list that has accompanied it, means that Oxbridge holds a unique place both within the university sector and within the public consciousness.

The two universities have also been slow to change and modernise alongside wider society – something that is perhaps inevitable within institutions of such age. Girton College, the first women’s college at Cambridge, was founded in 1869, and women arrived at Oxford first through a specific lecture scheme that began in 1873. Yet it was not until 1920 that women were granted the right to matriculate (the formal process of being admitted to the university) and achieve degrees at Oxford. Cambridge was even later, with the first women not being granted degrees until 1948 – the last British university to do so. This suggests that the institutions, for all their age and notoriety, have been slow to adapt to our changing society. One of the reasons for the slow pace of change are the institutions’ collegiate structures, as will be explored throughout this report.

The introduction to this report outlines some of the systems currently in place for admissions and access work at Oxbridge. This provides the necessary context for the remainder of the report. It will then explore the flaws created within both access and admissions through the current collegiate system. Finally, it highlights how centralisation would help to minimise these issues. It is important to stress, however, that this report fully recognises the value of colleges to Oxford and Cambridge. The colleges play an important role in the life of students at both institutions, providing a centralised hub for community, accommodation and pastoral care at a scale smaller and more personal than the central Universities can provide. What this report does do, however, is propose moving the role of colleges firmly into the post-admissions space and out of the admissions decision-making process.

## The college system and admissions at Oxbridge

---

The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are both collegiate institutions. This means that, within the wider university, there are several smaller (often independent) self-governed bodies that act as mini-campuses. Undergraduate students at Oxford and Cambridge are members of a college, as well as being members of their academic department or faculty, and the university as a whole. Regardless of which college they are a member of, undergraduate students on the same course study the same content; attend the same lectures, seminars and practicals and sit the same exams at the end of each year. However, the small group teaching component of the course (known as supervisions at Cambridge and tutorials at Oxford) tends to be organised by the college the student is a member of. Colleges also provide accommodation, facilities, community and support for students at both institutions. For this reason, they are often described (in a slightly over-simplified way) as encompassing much of the non-academic life at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

The University of Cambridge has 31 colleges, 29 of which are for undergraduates. Of these 29, three only accept mature students and two are women's colleges.<sup>1</sup> The University of Oxford has 43 colleges. Of these, 36 are independent legal entities and seven are not officially colleges (three societies, which are broadly similar to colleges in practice, and four Permanent Private Halls (PPHs), which were founded by different denominations of the Christian Church and offer a limited selection of course options).<sup>2</sup> Of the 43 colleges, 32 admit undergraduates, and one is for mature students only.<sup>3</sup> All of the Oxford colleges are mixed gender. Colleges across both institutions offer most courses; however, there are exceptions, as some smaller courses (for example, Philosophy) are not offered at all colleges. Confusing? Very.

When making an application to Oxford or Cambridge, a prospective student must either select a specific individual college they wish to apply to or choose to make an 'Open Application'. In practice, this means that when applying via UCAS, an applicant puts the University of Oxford or Cambridge as their institution code, and then additionally fills in the

'Campus code' section of the form with the code of the college they wish to apply to, or the code for 'Open Applications'. Students can only apply to one college or make an Open Application and cannot apply to both Oxford and Cambridge in the same year.

Making an Open Application means that, rather than choosing a college themselves, the student's application will be allocated a college by the university admissions team that has received fewer applications for that subject. Between 2022 and 2024, 10.6 per cent of applications to Cambridge and 16.2 per cent of applications to Oxford were Open Applications.<sup>4</sup> Those who do select a college as part of their application might do so for a variety of reasons. Although by no means an exhaustive list, common reasons for college choice are as follows:

- › a random choice from the list;
- › under the advice of teachers / parents;
- › after research into which colleges offer which courses;
- › through personal preference after an open day;
- › after extensive research of facilities and financial provision;
- › through previous familiarity from family or school connections;
- › studying application statistics; and
- › interactions with the college in access and widening participation outreach schemes.

The college the applicant has selected or been allocated to is then responsible for handling that individual's application. However, this does not necessarily mean the applicant (if they receive an offer) will receive an offer from the college they apply to. The reallocation (at Oxford) or pooling (at Cambridge) process means that, at both institutions, around 30 per cent of successful applicants receive an offer or are admitted to a college different to the one they originally applied to.<sup>5</sup>

An Oxbridge application has multiple stages, and it is the role of explaining these stages to prospective students that frequently falls to access and outreach staff within the colleges. It involves:

- 】 an earlier UCAS deadline (in mid-October and in line with the deadline for Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science at institutions across the UK) for submitting the personal statement and references;
- 】 the choice between applying to a college directly or making an open application;
- 】 the completion of an additional admissions form for applications to the University of Cambridge (known as 'My Cambridge Application' or the MyCAP);
- 】 often an admissions assessment (for many, but not all courses);
- 】 sometimes the submission of excerpts of written work (common for applications to arts / humanities subjects); and
- 】 at least one (but usually two or more) interviews.

All this occurs before the main January UCAS deadline has passed. This information is then compiled and considered together when application decisions are made.

## Access to Oxbridge

Access work, sometimes also referred to as outreach, is organised at Oxbridge both within the central university and within the individual colleges.

Oxford and Cambridge, like all universities that charge fees above the basic level, are required by the Office for Students (OfS) to have an approved Access and Participation Plan (APP). These plans operate at the institutional level rather than the collegiate level and establish the university's access and widening participation challenges and goals as a whole. In the unlikely event of a college choosing to no longer engage in access and participation schemes, the central university and the Office for

Students could not do anything to stop them. The system, at the college level, operates on trust rather than under the legal requirements imposed on other institutions without independent colleges. While in principle this does not necessarily pose a problem, as this report will outline, both Oxford and Cambridge largely leave their access schemes to the individual colleges. As these collegiate institutions are not bound by the wider universities' APP they are not legally required to work towards its goals. This creates a two-tiered system when comparing Oxford and Cambridge to other universities across England.

Both universities organise some access schemes at the institutional level. Cambridge runs:

- › Insight (for pre-16 students);
- › Realise (for pre-16 students);
- › HE+ (organised as a collaboration between the central admissions team and the colleges);
- › neaco (The Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach);
- › Sutton Trust Summer Schools and Target Oxbridge's residential; and
- › Apply Cambridge (both for post-16 students).<sup>6</sup>

Oxford centrally runs:

- › BeUNIQ,
- › UNIQ (BeUNIQ and UNIQ are connected programmes for 14 to 16 year-olds, and Year 12 pupils (respectively)); and
- › Opportunity Oxford (for offer-holders).<sup>7</sup>

At both universities, the central teams also produce supracurricular resources (academic engagement beyond the curriculum) for prospective applicants and work collaboratively with national access and widening participation charities. The central university teams run a small number of schemes that have very large numbers of participants. These schemes also tend to focus on recruiting students from underrepresented backgrounds

to Oxford and Cambridge and are therefore often closely tied to the Universities' APPs.

Many interactions, however, are organised through the individual colleges. The colleges tend to run more access events and schemes than the central University teams, but each event tends to have fewer participants than the larger schemes run by the central teams. The work done by colleges is also sometimes focused on widening participation in higher education more broadly, often concentrating on enrichment and skills-building within their linked communities than on specifically recruiting students to Oxford and Cambridge. It is important that, through the proposed centralisation of access work within both institutions, the widening participation element of college provision is not lost. Freedom of Information request data show that Oxford colleges employ, on average, 2.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff to undertake access and widening participation work, while Cambridge colleges employ an average of 2.4 FTE staff. There are notable exceptions to this, including St John's College at the University of Oxford and Trinity College at the University of Cambridge, both of which employ over 5 FTE staff.

Both institutions divide the country into subsections and allocate responsibility for these sections to their colleges. At Cambridge, the Area Links Scheme divides England into its former Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and assigns each one to an undergraduate college. Scotland is shared by two colleges, Northern Ireland has one and Wales is split into North Wales, and Mid and South Wales, with a college each.<sup>8</sup> On average, colleges at Cambridge have five linked areas, although there is significant variation within this (two colleges have 10 linked areas and seven colleges have only three). Some outreach staff are embedded within their linked area (for example, Queens' College Cambridge has an embedded staff member in its link region of Bradford). This type of work is particularly valuable, as being located within the area they work in allows staff to interact with the community and stakeholders more frequently, building rapport and trust with schools and other institutions in the area. Again, it is important this model of embedded staff remains, even if access work is centralised away from the individual colleges.

In Oxford, the regional outreach scheme is known as Oxford for UK and involves the UK being split into regions. Each area within England, as well as Wales, broadly has between three or four colleges responsible for it, with the exception of London, which is further subdivided into boroughs, each of which has an individual college assigned to it. In some regions (such as Yorkshire and the Humber), there is further subdivision to specify which college is responsible for which part of the region, but in other regions (such as the North East), it is left broad, with the three colleges responsible for the region covering the whole area together. Scotland is supported by Oxford University's Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach Team, as well as 'a number of colleges and departments'.<sup>9</sup> Once more, these systems can be very confusing to follow, particularly for those who do not interact with them regularly.

Both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge currently run Foundation Schemes. This is an example of the positive access and widening participation work currently underway at both Oxford and Cambridge. Both institutions' Foundation Years are fully funded: students who pass the year receive a CertHE qualification and those who pass at the required standard are offered a place on an undergraduate course.<sup>10</sup> At both institutions, the Foundation Year is only offered at a select number of colleges.

## Flaws in the system

---

The collegiate system at Oxbridge and Cambridge is confusing and difficult to follow for those outside the institutions, yet thousands of people are expected to interact with it and understand it each year. Regardless of whether you are a prospective applicant, a parent of a prospective applicant, a teacher looking to help their students or someone else entirely, without prior knowledge or assistance in understanding the process the institutions are opaque and exclusionary. This is often where the institutions' access and outreach teams come in. Rather than spending their resources and time on helping to increase the confidence of people from disadvantaged backgrounds and broadening their knowledge of the options available to them (as is the case in most access and widening participation schemes at other institutions), outreach teams find themselves dedicating significant time and resources to informing prospective applicants and their teachers about how to navigate the confusing collegiate application process. This results in significant inefficiencies that are relatively unavoidable within the current system.

As previously outlined, much of the access work carried out by Oxford and Cambridge is undertaken by the individual colleges. This division of the work creates inefficiencies that reduce the effectiveness of Oxbridge's access efforts. Although offers to Oxford and Cambridge reflect genuine merit, flaws in the current system mean that strong candidates may not progress as far through the process as they otherwise could have.

### Lack of communication between the colleges

---

While the linking of colleges with specific areas of the country should, in theory, reduce duplication within the system, this often is not the case. The webpage about the Cambridge College Area Link Scheme includes the paragraph:

---

*The scheme does not preclude contact with other Colleges.  
Students are not expected or obliged to apply to their linked*

---

*College and the scheme has no influence on the application process and applicants' chances of getting in.*<sup>11</sup>

---

The Oxford for UK webpage contains a similar paragraph:

---

*Please note that getting in touch with a college linked to your region has no influence on students' chances of being accepted to this or any other college. You are very welcome to get in touch with any college for advice about applying or studying here.*<sup>12</sup>

---

The fact that the schemes do not prevent interactions with other colleges is, in theory, a good thing. However, in practice, it often leads to the duplication of outreach work within the universities. In my experience at the University of Cambridge, colleges often continue to work with schools outside of their area based on historic ties (or more recent ones, such as the member of staff responsible for outreach returning to their old school). Current students who are particularly engaged in outreach often also wish to return to their old school to speak to students and deliver sessions about their experiences of the application process. Additionally, schools and sixth forms with historical experience of navigating the Oxbridge systems are often able to utilise this knowledge to gain cross-college support more frequently, and in ways that schools without a history of sending students to Oxbridge may struggle with.

Neither of these are necessarily a bad thing in isolation; however, when combined with the college system, they present problems. The separation between colleges and the inevitable spottiness of communication among them often results in an unnecessary duplication of work, with outreach staff delivering similar sessions to the same students within short periods.

Where colleges do have significant links to a school, whether within or outside their linked geographical areas, these links tend to be established with schools that already have a history of sending students to Oxbridge and are arguably less in need of frequent or intensive support. Thus, targeting significant resources at these schools is not the most effective use.

---

## Varied buy-in and finances within colleges results in varied support

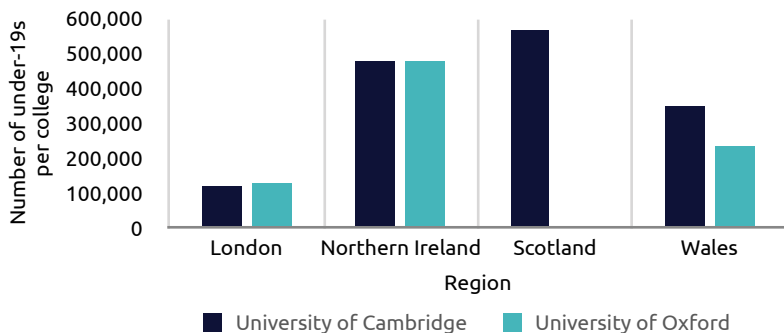
The level of support an area receives is currently determined by the financial situation of the college(s) tied to it and how much those colleges are willing to commit to access and outreach. Some colleges' financial situations mean they do not provide as many (expensive) interventions. This is problematic because some of the interventions believed to be particularly effective, such as summer schools, are more costly.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, a proportion of college funding for access and outreach initiatives come via personal donations. These donations often have strings attached and requirements about what they should be put towards. This can lead colleges to run less well-evidenced interventions to comply with donor demands.

The allocation of colleges to areas is also wildly uneven. At the University of Cambridge, every London borough, as well as the City of London local government district, has a college responsible for its access work (combined total population of under-19s: 2,085,277). In contrast, the whole of Northern Ireland (population of under-19s: 478,416) is covered by a single college, while Scotland (population of under-19s: 1,131,300) and Wales (population of under-19s: 689,700) each have two colleges.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly at Oxford, each borough and the City of London have a college, while the whole of Northern Ireland is covered in collaboration between one college and the central admissions team and Wales has three colleges. The OxfordforScotland website does not list specific colleges responsible for the country's access coverage and instead says that Scotland is covered by 'a number' of colleges.

Therefore, its ratio cannot be calculated.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the colleges responsible for these large regions within the nations also have additional responsibilities for LEAs within England in addition to their responsibilities to the other nations.<sup>16</sup>

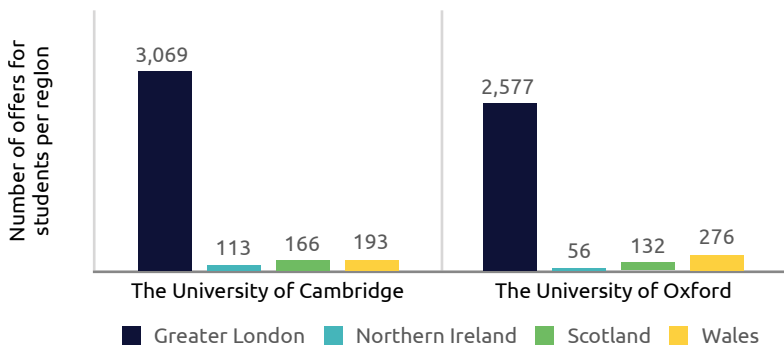
Figure 1: Number of under-19s per college



It is important to note that London’s allocation of access and outreach by colleges is divided into boroughs, each of which has a linked college; these boroughs have varying population sizes (for example, Kensington and Chelsea has 25,726 under-19-year-olds while Croydon has 97,933 under-19-year-olds). Figure 1 uses the total number of under-19-year-olds for the city as a whole, combined with the total number of colleges responsible for the city at each institution. The number of under-19s per college will vary between the boroughs.<sup>17</sup>

Over the last three years, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge have had the following offer statistics (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Offer statistics between 2022 to 2024<sup>18</sup>



There are other factors that influence these numbers, such as free tuition for Scottish students who attend university in Scotland (and the fact that Scotland has its own ancient universities), distance for some Scottish and Northern Irish students and the fact that Welsh schools score the worst for academic performance in any part of the UK.<sup>19</sup> Despite this, the uneven distribution of resources will not help solve the skew in intake.

One quirk of the current college-based system of access and outreach is that the majority of staff responsible for it are based within the college at their university (a small number of colleges, as previously mentioned, have a staff member who is based within the geographical area that college is responsible for).<sup>20</sup> While the majority of other universities across the country also have access staff who are based 'in-house', there is a key difference in that the Oxbridge access schemes have a national focus, while most other universities tend to focus more heavily on students and schools within their local area. This national focus, in my opinion, is an important part of the role of the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge. Oxbridge's reputation, position within the cultural zeitgeist and wealth relative to the wider higher education sector mean these two institutions have a responsibility to undertake national – rather than just local – access and widening participation work.

The geographical distances between a college and its linked area can be considerable, and this can lead schools and students within that area receiving less in-person provision. While the evidence analysing the efficacy of multi-intervention outreach currently focuses more on the effect on raising aspiration than on proving a causal effect on progress to higher education, evaluation of the UniConnect multi-intervention outreach programme shows that high-levels of engagement with the programme increases the likelihood of achieving a place at a higher education provider.<sup>21</sup> When outreach staff have to travel long distances, and colleges have to provide accommodation while they are away, the number of sessions delivered further afield is limited.

The individual nature of a college also means access and widening participation efforts can be beholden to the priorities of the college leadership. The annual college calendar is a busy one – not least due to

short terms – and once the undergraduate students have gone home, there is significant competition for use of rooms in college between the admissions / access teams and the conferencing teams. For some college leadership teams, access and widening participation work is not the top priority and this can result in events losing priority when pitted against conferencing and bursarial teams for space during university holidays. College leadership needs to be sufficiently committed to prioritising the use of beds and rooms in colleges for access schemes over high-paying conference groups. Once more, this leads to varied levels of engagement, schemes and opportunities provided by different colleges. Additionally, the relative power and influence the senior leadership holds over a college's access and participation work means that a change of staffing can have a significant effect on the level and type of access and outreach work a college engages in. College buy-in relies on a very small number of people within the organisation. When combined with the Area Link Scheme or the Oxford for UK scheme, this can result in some areas of the country receiving significantly different levels of provision simply on the arbitrary basis of the college(s) they are tied to.

Lucy Cavendish College at the University of Cambridge has one of the most extensive access schemes among the University. Their Academic Attainment Programme (AAP) is a two-year subject-specific programme that seeks to enrich the skills, knowledge and confidence of Year 12 (S5 – Scotland / Year 13 N.I) and Year 13 (S6 – Scotland / Year 14 N.I) students.<sup>22</sup> The scheme's webpage claims that participants on the scheme have an average offer rate of 38 per cent (nearly twice the standard university-wide average offer rate), and thus it is reasonable to describe the scheme as highly effective. The 2024 admissions statistics show that 94.3 per cent of the students who accept offers at Lucy Cavendish attended a state school. This is significantly higher than the next Cambridge college – Fitzwilliam at 84.3 per cent – and a complete contrast to the lowest college in this ranking – Trinity College at 54.4 per cent. (The mature colleges have been excluded from this analysis due to the majority of their students applying either independently or from an institution other than a UK school or college.)<sup>23</sup>

But there is another side to this story. Lucy Cavendish College is also the poorest of all the undergraduate colleges at Cambridge. The college offers a small Rent Bursary for students eligible for the Cambridge Bursary, providing support ranging from £1,500 to £500. Additionally, they have a 'Making the Most of Cambridge Fund' which supports the co-curricular and extracurricular activities of eligible students.<sup>24</sup> Eligible students, as with all colleges, would still be awarded the Cambridge Bursary scheme, which provides financial support of up to £3,500 a year for full-time undergraduate students, in addition to this money from the college (Oxford runs a similar scheme with a bursary of up to £6,270 per year known as the Crankstart Scholarship, and one with a bursary of up to £4,320 per year known as the Oxford Bursary. Students may only take up one of these bursaries.)<sup>25</sup> It is also important to highlight that the college-provided money alone is still a very generous financial bursary when compared to many other higher education institutions across the country.

Trinity College Cambridge's students are also eligible for the Cambridge Bursary scheme; however, in addition to that, they provide the Trinity Maintenance Grant, which provides an additional £3,000 annually to students eligible for the Cambridge Bursary Scheme and £1,500 annually for any student who took their GCSEs and A-Levels at a non-fee paying UK school.<sup>26</sup> On top of this, the College offers:

- a book and study equipment allowance;
- language bursaries for intensive language courses over the summer vacation;
- a Summer Studentship Scheme to fund internships, work experience or education projects during the summer vacation;
- a Projects Fund for expeditions, plays, publications or travel abroad;
- the Dunlevie Fund for students to undertake 'life-enhancing activities'; and
- other prizes for essays, music performance and exam performance.

There are explanations for this disparity, not least that Lucy Cavendish is a modern college, originally founded in 1965 to educate mature women

who may have had no other opportunity to attend higher education (it began admitting men and non-mature students in 2021).<sup>27</sup> This history has meant it does not have as high an endowment as other Cambridge colleges. In contrast to this, the college with the lowest number of state school students, Trinity College, has an endowment that generates an annual income of around £45 to £55 million and owns the Cambridge Science Park, Felixstowe Docks (the UK's largest container port) and (until 2025) the lease to the O2 arena.<sup>28</sup>

A similar level of wealth disparity between the colleges also exists at the University of Oxford, with the endowment of one wealthy college, Christ Church (£758 million), being worth about 17 times that of the poorer St Anne's College (£44 million) in 2024.<sup>29</sup>

Bursaries are an important element of access and participation work, not least because, as the 2025 HEPI / TechnologyOne *Minimum Income Standard for Students* found, the maximum maintenance loan covers just half the costs faced by freshers.<sup>30</sup> When the financial disparity between colleges is traced through into bursary offers for students and combined with the statistics for state-versus-independent school students (please note this is a crude method for this analysis, as wealthy parents may send their students to state schools and independent students may be on considerable bursaries), it highlights the problems it can cause. Now add to that the reality that Lucy Cavendish College has one of the most extensive outreach schemes of all Cambridge colleges, and that students often choose to apply to a college they have previously interacted with, and the insidious nature of the problem becomes clear.

There are also wildly varying budgets for access and widening participation work between colleges. Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge show that the largest college-level budget for this work is about 12 times larger than the smallest. This is the case for both Oxford and Cambridge. There is a small caveat here, as not all colleges responded to our FOI request with budget details, and of those that did, not all had a separate / specific budget for access and widening participation. The majority of colleges at both institutions did provide data.

## Long-term interventions through specific schemes that are not tied to regions break the system

---

The devolution of access initiatives to colleges on a regional basis makes the organisation of interventions that are not regionally focused more complicated. Such schemes require significant collaboration and communication between the colleges, as well as the management of varied budgets and levels of buy-in referenced previously.

Yet the irony is that neither Oxford nor Cambridge's Access and Participation Plans (APP) for 2025 to 2029 refer to broad geographical regions within the key risks they identify. Instead, Oxford states they will focus on:

- 】 *Admitting more students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds*
  - 】 *increase the proportion of entrants from IMD quintiles 1 and 2 to 23.0% by 2028 (IMD stands for Index of Multiple Deprivation, a measure of relative deprivation assigned to geographical areas. Q1 and Q2 are the most deprived areas)*
  - 】 *increase the proportion of entrants to Oxford with free school meal (FSM) eligibility to 10.7% by 2028*
- 】 *Support students with certain characteristics to achieve good degree outcomes (ie classifications of 2:1 or higher)*
  - 】 *increase the proportion of students with eligibility for free school meals awarded good degrees to 94% by 2028/29*
  - 】 *increase the proportion of disabled students awarded good degrees to 94% by 2028/29*
  - 】 *increase the proportion of Black students awarded good degrees to 94% by 2028/29<sup>31</sup>*

The University of Cambridge APP For 2025 to 2029 also includes a focus on students from the most deprived IMD quintiles and the degree classification awarding gap for Black-British and British-Bangladeshi students. It also

---

identifies the following aims:

- ▶ *We will seek to increase the proportion of students from Black-British, British-Bangladeshi and British-Pakistani ethnicities.*
- ▶ *We will support students with mental health conditions to achieve positive educational outcomes.*
- ▶ *We will address progression to postgraduate study at Cambridge amongst undergraduates from other universities, particularly from certain groups.*
- ▶ *We will address the gap in progression to further study, managerial or professional employment or other positive outcomes for students with a declared disability.<sup>32</sup>*

Thus, despite the access systems at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge being largely centred on a geographical system, this runs contrary to the stated goals for both institutions. Regional-based work and socio-economic / ethnicity-based targets are not necessarily incompatible. Indeed, they can work together well if schemes are targeted effectively, but the difference between the structuring of access work across the two institutions and the stated goals and targets under the APP is notable. When combined with the fact that colleges are not beholden to the APP in the way that the central university is, the fragility of the current system becomes even clearer.

## **Opacity for schools and applicants**

---

The collegiate system is difficult to navigate from the inside; but it is a nightmare for those trying to do it from the outside. From the perspective of schools and teachers it is difficult to determine which colleges they should engage with. This complexity and confusion results in schools slipping through the cracks, which is particularly common for schools with high levels of teacher turnover.

Anyone who has worked at or volunteered for an Open Day at either institution will be able to attest to the endless questions from teachers, applicants, parents and carers asking what colleges are, which courses they can do at which colleges, which is the best college for a specific course (or sometimes simply which is the best college overall).

The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine shows that, sometime between December 2023 and May 2024, the University of Cambridge removed 'Application Statistics – choosing a College that attracts fewer applications or making an open application won't increase your chance of being made an offer' from their list entitled 'How NOT to choose a College'.<sup>33</sup> This removal suggests a tacit acknowledgement that college choice does, in fact, influence the likelihood of receiving an offer – even if the University would rather not admit it explicitly.

## Applying to Cambridge – it varies by college

---

On the University of Oxford's webpage about choosing a college, the University proudly states that 'All colleges have signed up to a Common Framework for admissions, which means the same application process for your course at every college'.<sup>34</sup> This Framework, ratified in July 2006 in response to a consultation across the collegiate university, seeks to standardise admissions across both colleges and departments. It means that procedures for shortlisting applicants are agreed upon in consultation between faculty and college subject tutors, and that this procedure and criteria should then be applied by all colleges.<sup>35</sup> The Framework seeks to ensure standardisation of interview shortlisting, interview procedures and final offers across all colleges. Colleges remain the admitting body within the process outlined by the Common Framework. Of course, it is not a perfect system. In particular, interviews for the same subject can vary widely (in terms of tasks set and questions asked) between colleges. While candidates are not supposed to discuss their interview questions with others, this kind of variation is the type of knowledge that schools with more experience of students applying to Oxbridge may hold and are better able to advise on.

This is not the case at the University of Cambridge. Depending on the college to which an applicant applies, an applicant may have a completely different experience and final offer than a similar candidate at a different college. As a consequence, applicants are required to go to the course page for their subject, select the 'Entry Requirements' tab and then view the College entry requirements. Figure 3 is an example of the variation that can be found, with English BA (Hons) as an example.

Figure 3: English BA (Hons) admissions criteria at the University of Cambridge

To apply to any of our Colleges for English, you will need:

- A level/IB Higher Level (or the equivalent) in English Literature

or

- A level (or the equivalent) in English Literature and Language (not accepted at all Colleges)

The following Colleges will not accept the combined Literature and Language A level:

- Corpus Christi
- Queens'

### College entry requirements

The following Colleges usually set offers at the minimum offer level. They may sometimes ask for higher grades or an A\* in a particular subject:

- |               |                 |                  |
|---------------|-----------------|------------------|
| ▪ Clare       | ▪ Magdalene     | ▪ St Catharine's |
| ▪ Emmanuel    | ▪ Newnham       | ▪ St Edmund's    |
| ▪ Fitzwilliam | ▪ Pembroke      | ▪ St John's      |
| ▪ Girton      | ▪ Peterhouse    | ▪ Trinity        |
| ▪ Homerton    | ▪ Robinson      | ▪ Trinity Hall   |
| ▪ Jesus       | ▪ Sidney Sussex | ▪ Wolfson        |

The following Colleges set additional conditions for some or all offers. For example, they may make a higher offer or specify an A\* in a particular subject. For more information check the College websites:

- [Christ's](#)
- [Churchill](#)
- [Corpus Christi](#)
- [Downing](#)
- [Gonville & Calus](#)
- [Hughes Hall](#)
- [King's](#)
- [Lucy Cavendish](#)
- [Murray Edwards](#)
- [Queens'](#)
- [Selwyn](#)

Colleges set additional offer requirements for a range of reasons. If you'd like to find out more about why we do this, [check the information about offers above the minimum requirement](#) on the entry requirements page.

Source: University of Cambridge website<sup>36</sup>

As Figure 3 shows, different colleges require different A-Level subjects – Corpus Christi and Queens’ Colleges differ from the rest in not accepting the combined Literature and Language A-Level. This discrepancy means a strong applicant taking English Literature and Language would get a rejection if they applied to either of those colleges, when they may have received an offer – or at least an interview – if they had applied to a different college. Additionally, the grades that the college may expect the applicant to get varies, with 18 of the colleges ‘usually set[ting] offers at the minimum offer level’ – for English, this is A\*AA, while 11 of the colleges ‘set additional conditions for some or all offers’.

Similar webpages with complicated and varying requirements exist for all courses at the University of Cambridge. Even where the qualifications accepted are the same, the colleges that make the minimum offer or a higher offer may differ. It is also important to note that Figure 3 only outlines the case for A-Level students. There is also variation in what colleges accept regarding the myriad international qualifications, as well as Scottish Highers and BTECs. This information is even harder to find as it is not advertised on each course’s admissions pages. In terms of the detail of the application criteria, Oxbridge provides more information than many other institutions. It is important to acknowledge that this level of detail is a good thing – prospective applicants need to be aware of what admissions teams use when assessing applications. However, providing this detail does not excuse, nor does it mitigate, the complicated nature of the system currently present at the University of Cambridge. Even with the information provided it is difficult for prospective applicants to follow. Furthermore, it raises legitimate questions about why the variation exists for the same courses. Following the aforementioned example of English, why is the combined Literature and Language A-Level not considered sufficient preparation for the Cambridge English degree at two colleges, when students from those colleges will be studying on the same course and sitting the same university exams as students from other colleges, who may have taken the combined Literature and Language A-Level?

Where this system really falls down, however, is for teachers and careers advisers at schools. These staff members will be interacting with multiple

applicants applying to different courses at different colleges, often over a lengthy period of time. The decentralisation and individualisation of the application process makes it virtually impossible for a teacher to keep on top of all of the necessary information without dedicating significant time and energy to researching online – time that most teachers do not have.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problems of an already disparate system. Prior to the pandemic, the majority of interviews were conducted in person, with some interviews with prospective international applicants conducted online or in person, depending on where the applicant is based. The pandemic forced Oxford and Cambridge, like most organisations and institutions, to move online. This is not necessarily a problem, but the aftermath of the pandemic really highlights the issues present within the system at Cambridge.

Since the pandemic, all interviews at Oxford have been conducted online. The University of Cambridge has not taken such a unified approach. Interviews can be online or in person, depending on both the college and the course a student is applying to. As of the 2025 admissions cycle, 17 Cambridge colleges are interviewing all applicants online; two are interviewing all applicants in person; and 10 are interviewing both online and in person, depending on both the country of the applicant and the course they are applying for.

There are numerous problems with this scattergun approach. First, it is very difficult for prospective applicants to understand a system as complicated as this – particularly when tracking down the relevant information involves visiting multiple websites. Secondly, it is difficult for access and outreach staff to explain to applicants. Staff are often speaking to a room of five to 100 students at a time, and it is challenging to explain the interview system concisely and in sufficient detail. Finally, as with many of the other flaws identified, the system's complexity further entrenches the idea among students from widening participation backgrounds that Oxbridge is an unattainable and inaccessible place to study. A judgment of whether in-person or online interviews are better is not in the scope of this report. Instead, the key point to emphasise is the importance of clarity and a long-term approach to this issue. This will allow students to fairly prepare

for their interviews and help to ensure teachers are informed and able to advise their pupils.

One way an applicant may choose a college is through prior interactions with or familiarity of widening participation and access schemes. At face value, this does not appear to matter; however, when combined with the varied entry criteria and expected offer level, clear problems begin to emerge. I know of one state school, successful at sending pupils to Oxbridge, that (rightly or wrongly) advises prospective Maths students not to apply to Trinity College, Cambridge, due to a perception that it is a harder college to get into for that subject. Similarly, students from West Yorkshire and parts of Berkshire who have interacted with Selwyn College through the Area Links Scheme may find themselves more inclined to apply to this College. Yet Selwyn is listed as offering above the minimum offer on almost all subjects – potentially making it a harder college to get into. This contradicts the text present on both the Area Links Scheme and the Oxford for UK scheme websites, which both state that links with the schemes have no effect on a student's chance of getting in.

Other students may review admissions statistics in an attempt to 'game the system' and apply to colleges that appear to have had fewer applications for that subject. On the whole, this tactic is not particularly effective – admissions staff at the universities say they often have no idea why one college has received a spike in admissions for a particular subject that year.

One element of Oxford's Common Framework is the expectation of:

---

*a high degree of coordination by the relevant faculty and amongst the colleges. This should include robust arrangements for redistributing candidates between colleges before interview and at the final offer stage, so that the strongest candidates are able to find a place somewhere in the system.<sup>37</sup>*

---

This Framework serves to ensure that, to the best of everyone's ability, strong applicants receive an equal chance of being interviewed regardless

---

of the college they applied to. A lack of such a framework, and the discrepancies between colleges, mean this cannot be assured at Cambridge.

At the University of Cambridge, redistribution of candidates between colleges happens after the interview stage in a system known as the 'Winter Pool'. This means candidates are first shortlisted and interviewed at the college they either selected or were allocated through an Open Application. Colleges then create a list of the applicants they wish to offer a place to, and an additional list of strong applicants they do not wish to offer a place to. This second list goes to the Winter Pool, where colleges with space for that subject can offer places. As previously mentioned, roughly 30 per cent of offers are made through this system.

Oxford has a similar system known as the reallocation process (also sometimes colloquially called The Pool). Unlike at Cambridge, however, this process occurs at the interview stage, meaning that at Oxford it is not uncommon for a student to be interviewed by more than one college.

Colleges limit the number of applicants they interview for each subject due to time constraints. One consequence of the Pool happening at the post-interview stage is that a strong applicant who applied to an oversubscribed college for that subject may not be invited to interview when, if that same applicant had applied to an undersubscribed college for that subject, they might have been. Not being interviewed means the applicant does not have a chance to be placed into the Pool for redistribution.

The Pool also relies on the academics responsible for selecting students (Admissions Tutors and Directors of Studies within each college) buying into the system. I knew of, and have been told of, numerous academics from certain colleges and subjects who did not like to make offers to students they had not interviewed. This negates the fundamental purpose of the Pool and therefore the basis on which the system is organised. The fact that buy-in from academics can affect a student's chances of getting an offer only further highlights the unfairness of the current system.

# Why centralisation is the answer

---

The problems baked within the current system are numerous and have been exacerbated since the COVID-19 pandemic. They run contrary to both the institutions' widening participation ambitions and their Access and Participation Plans. Additionally, they create inefficiencies and waste resources, sometimes leading to staff being overworked. For all the institutions' claims to be fair and open, the discrepancies built within the application process – particularly at the University of Cambridge – give an advantage to students who have the time and support to study application statistics and 'game' the system.

While it cannot resolve all the problems within universities' application processes, centralising admissions away from individual colleges and into the control of the central university would be a step in the right direction towards solving many of these issues.

## How would centralisation work in practice?

---

The colleges provide an important aspect of university life at both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge. They build community and help students have a place within the institutions where they can feel at home. For this reason, it is important to stress this paper is not calling for the abolition of the colleges. Rather, it is highlighting how the colleges' control over both applications and access work is confusing and often less effective than if the process was organised by a centralised admissions team.

This report proposes a staged admissions process. It recommends that the institutions initially focus on ensuring standardisation across the colleges before moving towards centralisation. It therefore recommends that institutions focus initially on developing a long-term, consistent approach to interviewing, thereby allowing schools to be more certain when advising their pupils about their applications. Then the institutions should focus on consistency around admissions requirements. This would involve more standardisation in the interview process itself, as well as the removal of

varying subject requirements for the same course at different colleges. While it is recognised that interviews will not, nor should be, completely identical, as interviewers will have follow-ups and supplementary questions that will vary between candidates, standardisation can occur around the type of task interviewees are expected to complete (for example, all History interviewees receive a visual primary source they must discuss in the interview).

Once standardisation across the colleges within each institution has been achieved, this report recommends that both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge move forward with a process of centralisation.

Rather than have colleges oversee the application process, admissions would be handled centrally by the University. The academic staff of each college would still be required to participate in the interview process, but these interviews would be centrally organised. In practice, this centralised approach could mean that, on average, academic staff would participate in a smaller number of interviews each – thus reducing their workload – while ensuring that staff retain control over which students are admitted to the course overall. Centralisation in this way would make admissions a more collective effort across a course and within a department, rather than an individualised college-based one.

There should be a goal to ensure each interview involves academics from different colleges, to improve the standardisation of the experience and also maximise the number of applicants each college sees. A total number of offers could then be made for each subject across the University. This centralisation would help ensure all strong candidates receive an interview. While this is what the Reallocation and Winter Pool processes currently seek to achieve, it is difficult to ensure within the current system. This is because, currently, if one college receives an unprecedented number of strong candidates they may be physically unable to interview all of them. This leads some candidates – who would have received an interview if they had applied to a college with a smaller number of candidates that year – missing out on progressing to the next stage of the application process. A centrally organised admissions and interview process would mitigate

this risk as all applicants would be considered at once, rather than just those who had applied to an individual college.

After the offers have been made, students could then rank their top five colleges in order of preference. A system similar to the Winter Pool could then occur, with colleges getting first dibs on those students who ranked them first, and then for those that ranked them second, and third, and so on. Five colleges would be a reasonable number for applicants to rank, as the University of Cambridge currently already advises on its website that students create a shortlist of five colleges to view on the open day before deciding on their final college choice. It is also the maximum number of universities a student can apply to through UCAS. By retaining a college preference system, but simply moving it to after the application process, the character of the individual colleges could be maintained. While not all applicants would receive their first-choice college, this is (as previously highlighted) often the case already.

This proposal would bring the undergraduate admissions system closer to the current postgraduate admissions process at Cambridge, where applicants select one or two preferred colleges, but their application is considered by the relevant academic department, not the college. Only after the department offers a place are postgraduate students considered by the colleges (with the preferred college considering first and passing the application on to another college if it is full).

Admissions to the Medicine course at the University of Oxford provides another example of how this proposed model of centralisation would work. While Medicine admissions at Oxford are not entirely centralised, the system is relatively similar to the centralisation proposed in this report. The shortlisting of Medicine applications at Oxford is currently done centrally by a cross-college shortlisting committee that reviews admissions assessment results and contextual factors, among other application data, when deciding who to interview. As the process is currently college-blind rather than fully centralised, candidates are distributed among colleges according to their preferences (except for oversubscribed colleges, which may be redistributed). As each shortlisted candidate is interviewed by two colleges, a second interviewing college is then assigned to each candidate

through a system that aims to ensure the strengths of all candidates interviewed at each college is equivalent. This system shows an effective college-blind shortlisting process in operation. Under the proposed system of centralisation, candidates would not need to be assigned to a college until after an offer, and interviews would instead be conducted by a cross-college panel.

The fact that both institutions currently have processes with similar elements, as outlined in this report, illustrates that centralisation across the two institutions is possible.

It would also be beneficial to run access and widening participation efforts centrally, with the current central university access teams expanded to include staff currently employed by individual colleges. Some of these staff would then be responsible for running the various long-term and multi-intervention projects that the universities organise. The remaining staff could be linked to geographical areas, but the number of staff associated with each area should be tied to the proportion of students who fulfil the criteria identified in the APP for each region. When moving staff from college teams to the central university, efforts should be made to assign them to similar areas to those in which they previously worked, to maintain links and connections that long-term staff may have fostered. Colleges should also be required to make a financial contribution to the central university budget to account for both the higher number of staff and the large number of schemes and interventions they will be running. This contribution should be as a proportion of total college income to account for the varied assets of the different colleges.

It is worth highlighting here the importance of maintaining, and possibly even expanding, the number of access and outreach staff within this process. Centralisation should not be taken as a reason to shrink teams working on this issue.

Centralising access and widening participation work to the central university would allow for increased career progression and a more standardised pay structure within the institution. Across the country, the widening participation sector functions partly because young, enthusiastic staff

are overworked and underpaid. Oxbridge is no exception to this rule. Indeed, the current decentralised process means that staff in the same role at different colleges with similar levels of experience may be on quite different levels of pay. The centralisation of this work would help remove this variation, as all staff working within the sector at the institution would have the same employer. This therefore allows for the development of standardised pay structures, and potentially also increased career progression within the institution.

## **Increasing communication between the colleges**

---

The problem that centralisation can most obviously solve is the lack of communication between the colleges about their access schemes. Centralisation would enable easier communication between the colleges and a more efficient targeting and tracking system for the schools the universities interact with. This would prevent duplicate work and ensure resources are used more effectively. Additionally, the impact and effectiveness of these schemes would be centrally tracked, meaning that individual colleges do not have an incentive to target schools with an existing record of sending students to Oxbridge, in the hope that interaction persuades them to apply to that specific college.

## **College contributions and pooling resources**

---

Centralisation, especially when combined with the proportional financial contributions outlined above, would reduce the impact of varied college finances on access and outreach initiatives. With centrally managed budgets, targeted spending could be more effectively managed to ensure maximum effect. Additionally, colleges should be required to make their spaces (bedrooms, dining areas, conference rooms, and so on) available for a minimum number of days throughout each academic year. While colleges should still be free to commit their spaces to use beyond this minimum level, if the central university mandated a minimum number of engagements each college should host, it would ensure all colleges contributed at least a baseline amount towards the wider University's access events and prevent colleges from constantly choosing conference income over access events.

## **Long-term interventions made more practical**

---

Centralisation would also help ensure that institutions can effectively organise long-term interventions and specific schemes are not tied to regions. Long-term schemes currently organised by colleges could become the sole responsibility of designated outreach staff. The allocation of specific staff would mean more time and resources would be available to run the schemes. In the current system, where access and outreach staff are frequently trying to organise schemes in addition to working with linked schools and organisations within their geographical regions, long-term and non-geographically focused schemes get left behind. Giving staff more time to focus on the delivery of these schemes (which are often more aligned with the institutions' Access and Participation Plans) would help both Universities improve the access and widening participation work within the institutions, as well as increase alignment with their APPs. Regional work could still be undertaken, but it would be of a different character. One possibility is that regional work could be done in collaboration with universities local to each region to collaborate with their outreach and supporting them in relevant ways.

## **Clarity for schools and applicants**

---

Perhaps the most crucial benefit of centralising access work and application processes at Oxbridge is the simplification for both schools and applicants. From the access side centralisation would mean one clear point of contact, improving ease of access to these institutions.

On the applicant side, centralisation would help standardise and clarify the application process. As the websites of both institutions say colleges provide support, facilities and community to those studying at Oxbridge, an applicant's choice of college should not affect their likelihood of being admitted to the institution.

## **Applying to Cambridge – a more standardised process**

---

Particularly in the case of the University of Cambridge, centralisation would help reduce the variation and inequality currently present in the

system. It would introduce a higher level of standardisation, which would also help prospective applicants, their teachers and family. They could see colleges as something separate to study and instead understand them as the community-providing bodies they aim to be. At the very least, the colleges at Cambridge should sign up to a centralised agreement that aims to standardise and improve parity within the application process. There are already strong examples of where centralisation and standardisation occur and are successful within the system – for example, contextual considerations which are consistent across the board within the University. This report is asking the University to build on this work through further standardisation and centralisation.

### **Collaborative training and communication for outreach staff**

---

As previously highlighted, despite the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge being separate institutions, they are often viewed by those external to them as a single entity (Oxbridge). This becomes particularly pertinent for access and outreach work.

Schools, if they have more than one student interested in applying to Oxbridge within an admissions round, will frequently group those pupils together into an ‘Oxbridge Group’ that visiting access and outreach staff will speak to collectively, regardless of whether the staff member works for the University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge. This is entirely understandable from the school’s perspective – the small numbers applying to either institution, and the relative similarities in the admissions processes between Oxford and Cambridge, make it sensible for schools to group those students together. Most prospective applicants (particularly those from younger years) have either considered themselves or been identified by teachers as potential Oxbridge candidates. Right up until midway through Year 12 (the penultimate year), most applicants have no preference between Oxford and Cambridge. Furthermore, Oxford and Cambridge have more in common with one another than they do with most other institutions.<sup>38</sup>

It also means that access and outreach staff working with a school need to be able to provide accurate information about both institutions. Indeed,

---

the sessions delivered by access teams already tend to include details for applying to both Oxford and Cambridge. Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) sessions tend to cover how applications, interviews and offers work within both institutions. However, this is also where the problem lies. The lack of standardisation within applications and interview processes is hard enough to keep track of for one institution. Access and outreach staff need to be prepared to talk about and accurately answer questions on applying to every single course at every single college at the Oxbridge institution they work for and the one they do not. This is a monumental task.

For this reason, it would help the access and widening participation at both institutions to run regular, joint training sessions for their staff. This would help keep access and outreach staff at both institutions informed of processes and changes, and ensure the schools these staff work with receive the most up-to-date and accurate information possible.

The two institutions should also endeavour, within the framework of competition law, to establish more open lines of communication between them to limit the duplication of information and sessions for the same pupils. Where the sessions they deliver differ, students interacting with both Oxford and Cambridge is a positive thing. But within the current system, it is all too common for their content to overlap. Applicants can only apply to either Oxford or Cambridge within one admissions cycle, so competition between the two universities already looks significantly different to competition between other institutions. Increased communication regarding their access and outreach initiatives would demonstrate that the two institutions take widening participation seriously and are truly committed to it.

# Recommendations

---

- 1. Standardise admissions processes across the institution:** Both institutions should work to standardise internal admissions procedures and processes. The University of Cambridge, specifically, should adopt a framework that standardises the accepted qualifications, entry requirements and typical offer levels across all colleges for each course. This work would ensure parity and clarity throughout the system. Both institutions should also agree on long-term (a minimum of three years) and cross-college-wide plans as to whether interviews will be fully online, in person or a combination of the two (and if the latter, what the details of this combination will be). This will remove disparities and confusion caused by the current system and improve clarity for applicants.
- 2. Centralise undergraduate access work across the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge:** Access and outreach staff from the colleges should be combined into a central university team. This would reduce duplication, improve communication and ensure more consistent interventions that align closely with both Universities' Access and Participation Plans. The individual colleges should be required to contribute financially to access work by paying the central universities an amount proportional to each college's total income. This would then produce a shared budget for the central team to use. College involvement should be further ensured by establishing a minimum number of days each year during which colleges must provide accommodation and facilities for access initiatives.
- 3. Centralise undergraduate admissions across each of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge:** Once standardisation has been achieved, both Universities should adopt centralised admissions systems, where shortlisting, interviews and offers are coordinated centrally rather than by individual colleges. Academic staff should retain control over admissions decisions, but through their departmental, rather than their collegiate, roles. During the interview process, efforts should be

made to ensure academic staff from multiple colleges are present in the same interview. This will improve consistency across the interview process. College preference should then occur after an applicant has received an offer, not before – minimising variation in the application and decision-making process while ensuring the maintenance of the collegiate experience.

- 4. Collaboration between Oxford and Cambridge for the training of outreach staff and increased communication regarding work undertaken:** Both institutions should organise and deliver joint training sessions for their access and outreach staff. This would ensure staff can accurately and effectively deliver admissions information at both institutions, as schools often require. They should also communicate with one another about the work they undertake to prevent duplication of information to the same students.

# Endnotes

---

- 1 University of Cambridge, College A-Z, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.cam.ac.uk/colleges-and-departments/college-a-z>
- 2 University of Oxford, What is an Oxford college?, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/colleges/introducing-colleges>
- 3 University of Oxford, Harris Manchester College, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/colleges/college-listing/harris-manchester-college>
- 4 University of Cambridge, Undergraduate Admissions Statistics, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrJoiOTFhZGUwMDItMWIzMy00NDNkLTgzZDQtNGZjODM4MzY3MzNwYWIiwiwidC16ljQ5YTUwNDQ1LWJkZmEENGI3OS1hZGUzLTU0NDI0Zj-M5ODZlOSIsImMiOjJh9>  
  
University of Oxford, Undergraduate Admissions Statistics – Applications by College, Accessed 2 December 2025 [https://public.tableau.com/views/UniversityofOxford-AdmissionsStatistics2024ByCollege/ApplicationsbyCollege?%3Aembed=y&%3Adisplay\\_count=yes&%3AshowTabs=y&%3AshowVizHome=no](https://public.tableau.com/views/UniversityofOxford-AdmissionsStatistics2024ByCollege/ApplicationsbyCollege?%3Aembed=y&%3Adisplay_count=yes&%3AshowTabs=y&%3AshowVizHome=no)
- 5 University of Cambridge Admissions Office, Winter Pool, July 2025, Accessed 2 December 2025 [https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publications/guide\\_to\\_the\\_winter\\_pool.pdf](https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publications/guide_to_the_winter_pool.pdf) and University of Oxford, Do you choose a college?, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/colleges/do-you-choose-a-college>
- 6 University of Cambridge, Widening participation, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/find-out-more/widening-participation>
- 7 University of Oxford, Increasing access, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/increasing-access>
- 8 University of Cambridge, College Area Links, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/area-links>
- 9 University of Oxford, Oxford's Regional Outreach: Oxford for UK, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/oxfordforUK>
- 10 University of Oxford, Astrophoria Foundation Year, Progressing to undergraduate study, Accessed 30 March 2026 <https://foundationyear.ox.ac.uk/#collapse3675801>  
University of Cambridge, Foundation Year: Progression opportunities, Accessed 30 March 2026 <https://www.foundationyear.cam.ac.uk/course/progression-opportunities>



- 19 Nick Hillman, 'Higher education policy: the lie of the land in England and Wales on the cusp of England's post-16 white paper', HEPI, 17 October 2025 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/10/17/higher-education-policy-the-lie-of-the-land-in-england-and-wales-on-the-cusp-of-the-post-16-skills-white-paper/> H
- 20 University of Cambridge, Queens' College Access and Outreach, Accessed 3 December 2025 <https://www.queens.cam.ac.uk/applying-here/access-and-outreach/>
- 21 Adrian P Burgess et al, 'Optimising the impact of a multi-intervention outreach programme on progression to higher education recommendations for future practice and research' *Heliyon*, Volume 7, Issue 7, July 2021 [https://www.cell.com/heliyon/fulltext/S2405-8440\(21\)01621-2?\\_returnURL=https%3A%2F%2Flinkinghub.elsevier.com%2Fretrieve%2Fpii%2FS2405844021016212%3Fshowall%3Dtrue](https://www.cell.com/heliyon/fulltext/S2405-8440(21)01621-2?_returnURL=https%3A%2F%2Flinkinghub.elsevier.com%2Fretrieve%2Fpii%2FS2405844021016212%3Fshowall%3Dtrue)
- 22 University of Cambridge, Lucy Cavendish College, 'Support for prospective applicants and schools', Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/study-us/undergraduates/outreach>
- 23 University of Cambridge, Undergraduate Admissions Statistics: 2024 cycle, June 2025, Accessed 2 December 2025 [https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ug\\_admissions\\_statistics\\_2024\\_cycle.pdf](https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ug_admissions_statistics_2024_cycle.pdf)
- 24 University of Cambridge, Lucy Cavendish College, Help with the cost of your studies, Accessed 4 December 2025 <https://www.lucy.cam.ac.uk/study-us/undergraduates/scholarships-and-awards>
- 25 University of Oxford, Oxford bursaries and scholarships, Accessed 14 April 2026 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/fees-and-funding/oxford-bursaries-and-scholarships>
- 26 University of Cambridge, Trinity College Cambridge: Financial Support, Accessed 4 December 2025 <https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/finance/financial-support/#1648474460954-ba4b92d3-027b>
- 27 BBC News, 'Women's college at Cambridge University to accept men', 13 March 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-47560631>
- 28 University of Cambridge, Trinity College Cambridge Endowment, Accessed 4 December 2025 <https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/about/endowment/>
- 29 Enrique Normand Velarde and Joseph Munn, 'The hidden Oxford experience: Transparency in college disparities', *Cherwell.org*, 12 May 2024, Accessed 30 March 2026 <https://www.cherwell.org/2024/05/12/the-hidden-oxford-experience-transparency-in-college-disparities/>
- 30 TASO, 'Financial support (post-entry)', Accessed 3 December 2025 <https://taso.org.uk/intervention/financial-support-post-entry/>  
Katherine Hill et al, *A Minimum Income Standard for Students*, HEPI / TechnologyOne, 12 August 2025 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/A-Minimum-Income-Standard-for-Students-2025.pdf>

- 31 University of Oxford: Summary of 2025-2026 to 2028-2029 Access and Participation Plan, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/sitefiles/university-of-oxford-app-2025-26-v1-10007774-summary.pdf>  
Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, English indices of deprivation 2019, Accessed 3 December 2025 <https://imd-by-postcode.opendata-communities.org/imd/2019>
- 32 University of Cambridge, Summary of 2025-2026 to 2028-2029 access and participation plan, Accessed 2 December 2025 [https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/publications/university\\_of\\_cambridge\\_summary\\_of\\_2025-26\\_to\\_2028-29\\_access\\_and\\_participation\\_plan.pdf](https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/publications/university_of_cambridge_summary_of_2025-26_to_2028-29_access_and_participation_plan.pdf)
- 33 Internet Archive Wayback Machine, Choosing a College University of Cambridge webcapture, 7 December 2023, Accessed 4 December 2025 <https://web.archive.org/web/20231207155406/https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/colleges/choosing-a-college>  
Internet Archive Wayback Machine, Choosing a College University of Cambridge webcapture, 15 May 2024, Accessed 4 December 2025 <https://web.archive.org/web/20240515021141/https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/colleges/choosing-a-college>
- 34 University of Oxford, Do you choose a college?, Accessed 8 December 2025 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/colleges/do-you-choose-a-college>
- 35 University of Oxford, Common Framework, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/decisions/common-framework>
- 36 University of Cambridge, English, BA (Hons): Entry Requirements, Accessed 3 December 2025 <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/courses/english-ba-hons>
- 37 University of Oxford, Common Framework, Accessed 2 December 2025 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/decisions/common-framework>
- 38 Juliet Chester and Bahram Bekhradnia, 'Oxford and Cambridge – how different are they?', HEPI, 19 November 2009 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/44-Oxford-and-Cambridge-full.pdf>  
Charlotte Freitag and Nick Hillman, 'How different is Oxbridge?', HEPI, 24 May 2018 [https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HEPI-How-different-is-Oxbridge\\_Report-107-FINAL.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HEPI-How-different-is-Oxbridge_Report-107-FINAL.pdf)

## **President**

Bahram Bekhradnia

## **Trustees**

Professor Dame  
Sally Mapstone  
(Chair)

Mary Curnock  
Cook CBE

Professor Dame  
Julia Goodfellow

Professor Sir  
Chris Husbands

Professor  
Nick Pearce

## **Director**

Nick Hillman OBE

## **Advisory Board**

Alison Allden OBE

Professor Sir Nishan  
Canagarajah

Anne-Marie  
Canning MBE

Andy Forbes

Professor Julie  
Sanders

Professor David  
Sweeney CBE

## **Partners**

Advance HE

Browne Jacobson

Cambridge  
University Press &  
Assessment

Duolingo

Ellucian

Elsevier

Huron

iQ Student  
Accommodation

Instructure

Interpath

Jisc

JS Group

Kaplan

Kortext

Lloyds Bank

Research England

Studiosity

Taylor & Francis

TechnologyOne

Times Higher  
Education

Unite Students

UPP Foundation

In this report, Charlotte Armstrong, HEPI's Policy Manager, examines the current access, widening participation and admissions systems and practices at both the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge. Highlighting a number of issues with the current system, she proposes a move to a centralised system to ensure fairness and parity for all applicants.

---

HEPI was established in 2002 to influence the higher education debate with evidence. We are UK-wide, independent and non-partisan.

April 2026  
978-1-915744-63-0  
Higher Education  
Policy Institute  
99 Banbury Road,  
Oxford OX2 6JX  
[www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)

Printed by Windrush  
Press, Witney  
Typesetting:  
Steve Billington,  
[jarmanassociates.co.uk](http://jarmanassociates.co.uk)