

# **The APP PAR Project**

## **An investigation of educational issues related to the attainment gaps of targeted student cohorts**

### Executive summary

Whilst the attainment gaps were identified in Cambridge's Access and Participation Plan (2019), it was not clear which specific learning, teaching, assessment or curriculum interventions might have an impact on student progression and achievement. To this end, the University needed to further investigate the educational issues or practices that might explain the attainment gaps for particular cohorts of students. The Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning (CCTL) was therefore tasked with undertaking the qualitative research and analysis strand of the APP work, and lead the collaborative student-staff partnership work during the academic year 2019-2020 to research and analyse the drivers and intersectionality behind the gaps, as well as the identification and systematic embedding of good practices in both University and College teaching and targeted academic and pastoral support.

CCTL's Access and Participation Plan: Participatory Action Research Project (the APP PAR Project) involved two intersecting strands of qualitative research focused on investigating the educational factors that may underlie the attainment gaps. One strand primarily focused on black British undergraduates and the other on disabled students with declared mental health conditions. CCTL selected participatory action research as an appropriately inclusive research methodology and commenced a first cycle of research in the three-month period between December 2019 and February 2020, with the expectation that future cycles of research will be undertaken in order to further analyse, reflect and refine the project's outcomes. During this first cycle of the research, the student co-researchers identified 31 combined possible educational issues that they felt contributed to the attainment gaps of the two targeted student cohorts, and then selected 10 as priority topics investigate in more detail as small group projects.

The findings of the students' group projects were presented to senior staff in February 2020, and their project reports with recommended actions were submitted to the General Board of Education in mid-March 2020 for consideration and further action; the discussion was delayed as the University focused on shifting to remote teaching and learning as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. This paper summarises the ten topics selected for research by the student partners, their findings and their recommended actions for the University to address the attainment gaps.

### Introduction

CCTL was tasked with undertaking the qualitative research and analysis strand of the APP work to investigate the specific issues or practices that impact the attainment and continuation rates of the two targeted cohorts of students: black British undergraduates and disabled students with declared mental health conditions. CCTL was aware of substantive work undertaken by a number of student societies and has sought opportunities to develop collaborative relationship with these groups to assist in the formulation of a strategic plan which focuses on enhancing educational approaches to close the attainment gaps. CCTL therefore pursued a 'participatory action research' methodology,

which was approved by the APP Drafting Group and the Participation Data Advisory Group (PDAG) in October 2019. CCTL then sought and received ethics approval for the project from the Cambridge Higher Education Studies Research Ethics Committee (CHESREC) in December 2019.

The APP PAR Project sought to understand student perspectives on the barriers that arise in relation to teaching and learning at Cambridge and develop knowledge and evidence that can inform and catalyse meaningful progress and practical steps forward. It pursued qualitative research to explore and develop evidence around which systems, practices and challenges need to be addressed and it aims to explore ways to develop teaching and learning practices that are accessible to, and supportive of all Cambridge students. The starting point of the project was an understanding that the attainment gap is an institutional educational issue, rather than a student deficit or a student capability issue. This is in line with findings from recent UK sector research into attainment gaps (UK Universities 2019), which identifies the 'gap' between a student's predicted outcome and eventual attainment as something that develops during a student's course of study.

The project involved a student-staff partnership, and participatory action research was determined to be the most appropriately inclusive research method for the aims of the research: "Such research involves people who may otherwise be seen as subjects for the research as instigators or ideas, research designers, interviewers, data analysts, authors, disseminators and users".<sup>1</sup>

The APP PAR project outcomes, including student reports, presentations and reflective comments may be found here: [insert URL]

## **Project team**

The staff members of the APP PAR Project involved a research team of two CCTL staff members as well as eighteen student co-researchers recruited from the pool of elected student representatives or office holders in relevant student union or society groups: the BME Campaign, the African Caribbean Society and the Disabled Students' Campaign. The rationale for recruiting student representatives rather than 'average' students was because of ethical issues involved in broaching the topic of attainment gaps during the project: the elected students or office holders were already aware of and in some cases were already advocating for action around the educational and welfare issues impacting their peers. Most importantly, they had well-developed support networks already in place, which CCTL and the ethics review committee considered an essential consideration. CCTL further sought permission from each student co-researcher's Senior Tutor for their work on this extra-curricular project and right-to-work protocols were followed with the Human Resources team in Educational Services.

Throughout the research period, the CCTL team regularly consulted with the Inclusive Teaching and Learning Advisory Group (ILTAG), which was well-placed to provide insight into educational practices across the university, as it is made up of teaching staff and students from Colleges and Departments, as well as members of relevant stakeholder groups, such as the Equality and Diversity Unit, the Disability Resource Centre, the Educational Quality and Policy Office and the Cambridge University Student Union. This additional perspective enhanced the focus of the project's eventual recommended findings, and provided a pool of experts for the student researchers to consult with about their project topics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walmsey J and Johnson K 2003, cited in Nind M, 2014 *What is Inclusive Research?* Bloomsbury Academic, London, p3.

CCTL understood from the outset that the project involved vulnerable student participants who were addressing sensitive topics, that potentially might have an adverse impact on their own individual educational experiences or understanding of the University's processes. To that end, CCTL regularly consulted with the Counselling Service, the Student Union's Advice Service and the Disability Resource Centre about any ethical issues that arose from the student co-researchers' group projects, and provided the participating students with opportunities to seek support.

*Table 1*

*Participants involved in the APP PAR Project*

Co-researchers	2 x staff members from the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning (CCTL)
	18 x student representatives from the Disabled Students Campaign and the African Caribbean Society, Cambridge University Student Union
Key stakeholders	18 x student and staff members of the Inclusive Learning and Teaching Advisory Group (ILTAG) – as both respondents and as an advisory group
	Senior university staff including the Senior PVCE Professor Graham Virgo and the Director of Educational Services, Alice Benton
	Heads of CCTL, the Disability Resource Centre, Student Operations, Educational Quality and Policy Office, Business Information Team and the Equality & Diversity Unit.
	The Access and Participation Plan Operational Group and Steering Committee
Target audience	Staff and students across the collegiate University

## Funding

Funding for the first three-month cycle of the APP PAR Project was secured from the Cambridge Admissions Office (£6000) to allow for the recruitment of up to 20 student co-researchers in two strands of work (one group investigating the reasons for the attainment gap for Black British students and the other group focusing on disabled students with mental health conditions). The funding covered the work of these students to participate in three 2 hour forums between December 2019 and February 2020 and to undertake small project group research work between forums, to a total of approximately 20 hours per student, paid at hourly research assistant rates (\$14.01 per hour).

As the initial funding was not fully spent during the period December 2019 – February 2020, and the dissemination of the project's recommended actions was delayed by the lockdown associated with the Covid-19 crisis, student co-researchers were asked to follow-up with the final reports with their reflections of the impact of the pandemic on their selected research topics, and any new considerations of their recommended actions to address attainment and continuation issues affecting the two targeted student cohorts. Students will be paid for their additional time in either writing or video-recording their reflections for publication on a website rather than the originally planned presentations to the University stakeholders in committees or teaching forums.

Two additional cycles of the APP PAR Project are anticipated, for which funding will be sought, which will involve new groups of student co-researchers. This will allow for further reflection of the first group of co-researchers' findings and recommendations, and evaluation of the impact of actions taken in response to the co-researchers' recommendations. The future project teams will be invited to re-consider the first cycle's identified priority topics to address the attainment gaps and/or to

pursue newly-emerging issues following the Covid-19 emergency shift to remote teaching and anticipated impact on the two targeted student groups. The second cycle is anticipated to run December-February 2020-21 and the third December-February 2021-22.

## Methodology

Participatory action research (PAR) was determined to be the most suitable approach for this work: this methodology starts from the belief that for an inclusive project to be effective and sustainable, it must include those students who are, or will be, most affected. It is an approach that is defined by active involvement of all stakeholders in the research process with the aim to collaboratively solve a problem or improve a situation, and speaks to a broader responsibility that higher education has to influence our students' development through including elements of participation as opposed to doing research 'on' or 'about' them.<sup>2</sup> That is, PAR moves beyond the utilisation of research as a means of simply understanding the inequalities, and towards enabling those who experience marginalisation or privilege to ask new questions and develop their personal and collective agency to make meaningful changes. The inherent motivation of PAR is that "participatory researchers seek to engage in meaningful partnerships with the researched seeking meaningful data for social transformation".<sup>3</sup> In this way, PAR has the capacity to generate transformational change for the participants, by giving them agency in producing knowledge and improving the practices that most affect them, as well as for the University.

The processes for action research tend to be cyclical, with stages within each cycle including co-diagnosing or identifying a problem, collecting and analysing relevant data, reporting and sharing the results for wider stakeholder consideration, taking action or planning an intervention, as well as reflecting on both the process and the recommended actions with an evaluation that leads to another cycle (see Figure 1 above). As Cohen et al note,<sup>4</sup> action research does not have clearly defined endings, as proposed solutions to complex problems – such as attainment gaps – need to be developed, trialled and evaluated, and then refined as needed. The conceptual approach for the APP PAR Project was that it was the first of several cycles of participatory action research that would draw on new groups of students that would reflect, sense-check and extend the findings and proposed interventions of the previous cycle.

It was understood when this method was selected that there is an inherent 'messiness' to PAR, so we needed to factor in uncertainty and carefully identify degrees of risk that are not normally encountered by projects using more conventional educational research methods.<sup>5</sup> However, as CCTL initiated and coordinated the project it was at the 'shallower' end of the spectrum of participatory action research: modes of participation in PAR may range from shallow/contractual modes that involve the retention of control and ownership by researchers over the research process, to deep/collegiate modes whereby ownership of research is devolved to the extent that it is controlled by participants rather than by researchers.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this attainment gap project, shallow PAR was considered the most practical, given the need to protect the student co-researchers time working on an extra-curricular project while managing full-time study loads, the short time frames and the clear objective to report findings and recommendations for educational interventions into the

---

<sup>2</sup> Walker M & Loots S (2017) Transformative change in higher education through participatory action research: A capabilities analysis, *Educational Action Research*, 26(1): 166-181, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2017.1286605>

<sup>3</sup> Bryne A Canavan J and Millar M (2009) Participatory research and the Voice-Centred Relational Method of Data Analysis: Is it worth it? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 12(1): 67-77, p.67

<sup>4</sup> Cohen L, Manion L and Morrison K 2018 *Research Methods in Education*, 8th Edition, Routledge & New York, p449.

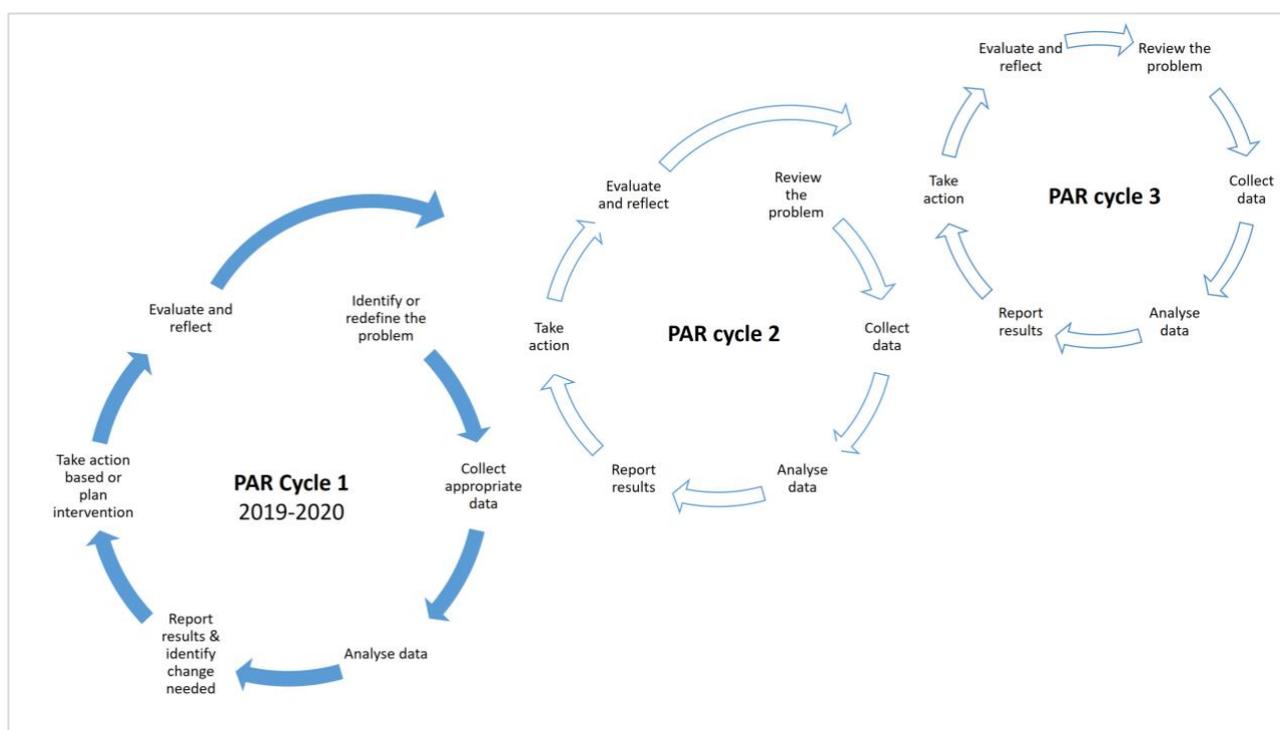
<sup>5</sup> Amaya AB & Yeates N (2015) *Participatory action research: New uses, new contexts, new challenges*, PRARI working paper, Open University, p.11 [https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/prari/files/working\\_paper\\_6\\_en.pdf](https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/prari/files/working_paper_6_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Cornwall A & Jewkes R (1995) What is participatory research?, *Social Science and Medicine*, 41(12) pp. 1667-1676

APP Action Plan 2020-2025. In practical terms this meant that CCTL took the lead in recruiting the student co-researchers, securing funding, seeking ethics review, coordinating events and forums, writing notes, reporting of findings to relevant committees, and finally tracking the take-up of recommended actions.

However, within the overall umbrella of the APP PAR project, the steps taken in the research adhere to an 'ideal' participatory research approach.<sup>7</sup> This means that the full group was responsible for research cycle, including joint design of the research, data collection, analysis, sharing amongst the peer researcher group, and development of change plans that will feed into the APP Action Plan 2020-2025 for consolidation of learning about the factors behind the attainment gaps and implementation of interventions to narrow those gaps across the University.

*Figure 1*  
The APP PAR Project's participatory action research cycle



## Stages of the investigation

The stages of the APP PAR Project were designed around the rhythm of the term calendar and student availability during term breaks to participate in extra-curricular activities involving paid work on top of their full-time study load, as well as to meet the February 2020 deadline for an investigation into the reasons for the identified attainment gaps, as outlined in Cambridge's 2019 Access and Participation Plan submission to the Office for Students. In the limited time-frame of this cycle of participatory action research cycle, this involved identifying the problem (attainment gaps), collecting and analysing relevant data (qualitative research about student perspectives), and then reporting findings with recommendations for educational interventions (actions to address the attainment gaps of the targeted student cohorts). In the period following this first PAR cycle, the University carefully considered and implemented, where viable, the recommended actions. Future cycles of PAR

<sup>7</sup> Tandon R (2005) Participatory Action Research: main concepts and issues, cited in Cohen L, Manion L & Morrison K (2018) *Research Methods in Education*, 8th Edition, Routledge: London and New York p.57

research will reflect on the student co-researchers' findings and evaluate the impact of any educational intervention undertaken by the University.

*Table 2*

*Stages of project activity during the December 2019 - February 2020 PAR cycle*

	Stages	Focus	Purpose	Time per student
<b>Strand 1</b>  Focused on Black British students	Forum 1	Discuss/plan	Student co-researchers to discuss and agree on range of potential teaching and learning issues that impact the AG and identify key areas to explore that relates to improving the situation. Sharing of information from Exam Results Analytics of the attainment gaps identified for the targeted student groups. Establish parameters for the project and timelines.  <i>Activity:</i> Brainstorm possible reasons for the attainment gaps with a focus on educational contexts and experiences within Cambridge, Shortlisting of priority topics for further investigation.	December-January  2 hour forum + 5 hours independent research/consultation
	Forum 2	Observe/analyse	Students undertake mini-research with their peers to develop an evidence base. Based on findings of mini-research projects, develop a trial strategy/initiative to address the agreed issue(s). Student co-researchers tasked with drafting research project (specific question, anticipated action and data collection methods to canvas peer student perspectives).  <i>Activity:</i> Reflection about the emotional impact of discussion of attainment gaps amongst student participants, peer review of project proposals, piloting survey/interview questions before applying to target audience	January-February  2 hour forum + 5 hours independent research/consultation
<b>Strand 2</b>  Focused on disabled students with declared mental health issues	Forum 3	Act/evaluate	Joint forum with both strands of student co-researchers and invited senior staff to review findings and proposal improved or changed teaching and learning approaches using insights gained from students and other stakeholders. Student co-researchers to present their findings and recommended actions for educational interventions the University to address attainment gaps  <i>Activity:</i> Writing up of project findings and actions, evaluation and reflection of work with the APP PAR team and planning for dissemination (presentations, committee papers, future funding support)	February  2-hour forum + 5 hours analysis and writing

The project plan called for a series of 3 forums across the timeline of the project. However, it was decided on consultation with the student co-researchers that the two groups would be separated, at least in the preliminary stages of the project, to allow for more frank discussion of issues impacting the particular peer groups (black British or students with declared mental health conditions). This meant that there were two iterations of Forum 1 and Forum 2, with the two strands meeting in the final joint Forum 3 to present their projects' findings and each-other and invited key stakeholders, including senior staff.

### Evaluation framework

The design of the APP PAR Project closely followed the six core principles for inclusive research set out by Melanie Nind:<sup>8</sup> inclusivity, ethics, authenticity, empowerment, accessibility and sustainability.

<sup>8</sup> Nind, M (2014) *What is Inclusive Research?* Bloomsbury Academic, London pp.20-31

These core principles also informed the evaluation questions that we developed as the self-assessment framework recommended by the Office for Students. However, we adapted Nind’s core principles somewhat: for instance, she identified her first core principle ‘disrupting the hierarchy’, emphasising the challenge of this kind of research to traditional power imbalances between researchers and participants that disrupts ‘the dichotomy between those that teach and research v. those that are taught and researched’ (p21). We chose to foreground ‘inclusivity’ rather than ‘disruption’ as a constructive strategy to engage with our key stakeholders, who would be required to act on the project’s findings. This focus on ‘inclusivity’ also aligned the APP PAR Project with the broader *Inclusive Teaching and Learning Project*, as well as the work of the Inclusive Teaching and Learning Advisory Group (ILTAG), who were consultants to the APP PAR Project. The underpinning self-assessment and evaluation questions, that informed the project’s design, are listed in Table 2 below

**Table 3**

*The APP PAR Project’s core principles and self-assessment/evaluation framework*

1. Inclusivity of project design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did the project design fit with and draw on the knowledge and expertise of the co-researchers?</li> <li>• What opportunities did student co-researchers have to develop their competencies as researchers?</li> <li>• How did co-researchers and key stakeholders value their roles and responsibilities and what would they have changed?</li> </ul>
2. Ethical considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways did the project respect participants and their contributions?</li> <li>• How confident were participants and key stakeholders that research integrity, quality and the risks regarding sensitive topics were carefully considered?</li> </ul>
3. Enhancing authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways did the project draw on authentic insider perspectives, representative of the student groups most impacted by the attainment/awarding gaps?</li> <li>• How responsive were the ways of working during the project to the needs, strengths and expertise of all of those involved?</li> <li>• What comments/reflections do the different stakeholder groups have about the students’ recommended actions/outcomes of the APP PAR Project?</li> </ul>
4. Empowerment/ academic activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which of their roles/identities did the co-researchers feel was strongest during the project: student, activist, representative or researcher?</li> <li>• Are there likely benefits for the people involved e.g. new networks, skills, funds, projects, ideas or aspirations?</li> <li>• To what extent do you think that this project was a valuable use of University resources and student contributions?</li> </ul>
5. Accessibility, authorship and dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways were the project methods inclusive and transparent in terms of accessibility, authorship and involvement?</li> <li>• Is the dissemination strategy effective in reaching relevant stakeholders (e.g. briefing reports, committee reports, student networks, public forum, website, report to Office for Students, journal articles, sub-project funding applications)?</li> </ul>
6. Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways did the project develop capacity (in participants and in the University) to produce on-going benefits?</li> <li>• What factors contributed to or impeded sustainability of the project’s outcomes and recommended actions?</li> <li>• To what extent can and should the models and practices of the research project be developed and/or replicated?</li> </ul>

The reflections of student co-researchers and key stakeholders from the Inclusive Teaching and Learning Advisory Group, in response to these evaluation questions, inform the dissemination of

project findings and the refinement of the project activities in future cycles of participatory action research.

## Findings

### Initial identification of reasons for the attainment gaps

By the second Forum, the two strands of student co-researchers had arrived at a combined 31 potential topics that they felt would explain or would have an impact on the attainment gaps of their peers. They then discussed and agreed on 10 priority topics for further investigation.

The following table presents the full set of 31 topics identified by student co-researchers. The 10 topics highlighted in bold were those selected by the students as priority topics to be pursued for further investigation in their small group research projects.

*Table 4*

*Key topics/reasons for the attainment gaps identified by student co-researchers in Forum 2*

Strand A: black British undergraduates	transition into Cambridge supervision; <b>mentoring programmes</b> ; study skills; curriculum content & delivery; supervisor and university staff anti-racism training; <b>anti-racism glossary and guides</b> ; accessible resources & independent study; support and resources; time costs; flexibility of paper choice/essay topics; transition from Tripos Part I to II; <b>staff and student advisory hub</b> ; complaints system; constructive feedback on assessment; <b>STEM vs Arts/Humanities teaching and learning</b>
Strand B: disabled students w/mental health conditions	<b>time costs for self-advocacy</b> ; transition to university (pastoral support); transition to university (academic support); <b>diagnosis, screening and targeted academic support</b> ; supervisor training re mental health; SSDs and reasonable adjustments; <b>intermission</b> ; scheduling of assessment tasks; <b>extended period of study/'double time'</b> ; peer support networks; college and tutor welfare networks; guidelines for supervisor/student relationships; focused final year student support; mentoring models; feedback and marking practices; <b>alternative/diversified assessment</b> ; implicit bias about mental health; <b>content notes/trigger warnings</b>

### Small group research projects

Once the student co-researchers had agreed on the priority topics, small groups were formed to undertake further investigation. CCTL provided ongoing support with these small group projects, by meeting with student teams outside of the Forums, sharing readings and resources about attainment gaps, facilitating meetings with stakeholders in relevant units (e.g. staff from the Disability Resource Centre, the Equality and Diversity Unit, the Educational Quality and Policy Office).

CCTL and the student co-researchers then co-developed the research question for their selected project (see Table 4), unpacked the cultural and contextual factors and assumptions about those topics, and selected data collection methods appropriate to topic and which fit with the research schedule approved by the ethics committee. This negotiation of research methods was carefully addressed, as the APP PAR Project was alert to sensitivity of the topic around attainment gaps, and the potential vulnerability of both the student co-researchers and their potential participants.

*Table 4*  
*Selected priority topics and research questions*

Strand A: Black British Students	Strand B: Students w/Mental Health Conditions
<p><b>1. Anti-racist Glossary</b>            Does the language used in discussions about race at Cambridge (in teaching and other contexts) negatively affect Black British students' academic performance?</p>	<p><b>5. Double Time</b>            What is the perceived value of 'Double Time' to disabled students with mental health conditions?</p>
<p><b>2. Black Student/Staff Advisory Hub</b>            Would Black British students and staff at Cambridge benefit from a centralised means of educational support, such as an Advisory Hub?</p>	<p><b>6. Content Notes</b>            What are Cambridge student and staff understandings of the role and value of Content Notes in helping students engage with their study materials without risk to their mental health?</p>
<p><b>3. STEM vs Arts/Humanities</b>            Are there differences in the attainment gap between STEM students and Arts &amp; Humanities students?</p>	<p><b>7. Time Costs of Self-advocacy</b>            What is 'Cambridge Time' and how does it penalise Disabled Students at the University of Cambridge?</p>
<p><b>4. Mentoring</b>            To what extent are Black British students adequately supported by mentors or mentoring networks at Cambridge?</p>	<p><b>8. Diagnosis and Screening</b>            How can disabled students with mental health conditions who have co-occurring neurodiverse conditions be identified and supported?</p>
	<p><b>9. AMAs vs Diversifying Assessment</b>            What are disabled students' perceptions of the value of more diverse assessment methods for their academic performance and wellbeing?</p>
	<p><b>10. Intermission vs EPS</b>            What is the relationship between intermission and extended period of study, and which is more appropriate to support the academic performance of disabled students with mental health conditions?</p>

The CCTL team provided the relevant research to each small project team, on the final 10 projects (4 for the Strand A and 6 for Strand B). This included quantitative data prepared by the Business Information Team for the APP or as represented in the Exam Results Analytics, and further research about Cambridge's previous initiatives or activities to address inclusive practices or the attainment gaps supplied by the Disability Resource Centre, the Equality & Diversity Unit, the Cambridge Admissions Office, and Student Operations. Between forums, CCTL also facilitated meetings with student co-researchers and stakeholders in relevant units (e.g. staff from the Disability Resource Centre, the Equality and Diversity Unit, the Educational Quality and Policy Office).

The primary research method involved interviews and short surveys amongst the student co-researchers. The disabled student representatives preferred online to face-to-face interviews with other participants – to ensure some level of anonymity, the interviewees forwarded their answers in text to the CCTL team, who anonymised responses, collated them, and returned them to the project team for further analysis. A secondary data collection method involved the development of surveys to be sent to the wider pool of students. For Strand A, the small project surveys were co-designed with CCTL staff, who built them in Qualtrics to ensure anonymity, and asked the President of the ACS to forward the survey invitation on behalf of the student co-researchers to the African and Caribbean Society (<150). For Strand B, the same protocol was observed, and the survey invitation was circulated by John Harding, the Head of the DRC, to all registered undergraduate students on his database (<2000). In just one project was a separate survey designed and disseminated, to capture staff perspectives of the value of content warnings on course material to support student

mental health. These research methods were reviewed and approved by the Cambridge Higher Education Studies Research Ethics Committee (CHESREC).

### Project outcomes and recommended actions

The full set of ten Project Reports are attached as appendices to this report. Each project report includes a specific research question, description of the context for the investigation of a certain topic, literature review, findings from the relevant survey and interview results, as well as recommended actions for the University to consider in their APP Action Plan (2020 – 2025). The following table summarises the selected topics and research questions addressed by each project group.

At the conclusion of the first cycle of the project in late February 2020, two of the student group projects had immediately actionable recommendations to ameliorate the attainment gaps, accompanied by well-developed plans for resources development and dissemination across the University. One project involved the development of an anti-racist glossary with a guide for students and staff explaining the impact of inappropriate language in educational contexts, and the second relates to Content Notes/Warnings on course material to support student's mental health. CCTL worked with these two project teams in March to submit applications for further funding through the University Diversity Fund (max £1500 each project), and both were successful. The two teams will therefore continue their roles as research assistants to co-create resources for the University until November 2020.

The full set of recommended actions with notes about progress made as at 25 May 2020 is outlined in Table 5 below. This table was scheduled for consideration by the Heads of Educational Services in a meeting that occurred the same week that the lockdown of the University was announced in mid-March 2020. Many of the teams responsible for addressing the recommendations were immediately focused on coordinating the shift to remote working, teaching and learning, which has meant a delay in identifying the resource implications and potential knock-on effects of the APP PAR Project recommended actions.

**Table 5**

**Recommended actions to address the attainment gaps (progress notes as at 20 May 2020)**

The following table lists the recommended actions from 10 student projects in the first cycle of the APP PAR Project. Funding will be sought for two further cycles of the participatory action research, with different student groups from the same two targeted cohorts, in order to further refine the targeted interventions to ameliorate attainment gaps of the two targeted student cohorts. In 2019-2020 the funding was £6000 – further funding is sought for two follow-up cycles in 2020-2021 and 2021-2020 (approximately £12,000).

<p><b>Key:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>confirmed actions in blue</li> <li>commitment &amp; discussion still needed for actions in plain text</li> <li>funding needed/sought to implement actions in red</li> </ul>
---

Recommended actions to narrow the attainment gap for Black British undergraduates				
Number	Topic	Actions (please refer to individual Project Reports for a rationale/more details)	Notes about possible next steps	Actions progress
Project 1	Anti-racist glossary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>That an Anti-Racist Glossary be developed and disseminated to teaching and student-facing staff on the Cambridge website, with integration into teaching online modules, and links in Faculty guides and resources.</li> <li>That the University refines its processes to respond to both constructive feedback and formal complaints about racist language in teaching and learning contexts</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If funded, this could be linked to or integrated into E&amp;D and CCTL initiatives (e.g. to the Effective Undergraduate Supervision programme)</li> <li>The student complaints process was discussed at the March REC SAT meeting, with interest in refining the process – this would be a high priority with E&amp;D to streamline formal and informal racism complaints, accompanied by constructive educational interventions/resources</li> </ol>	<p>CCTL, E&amp;D, OSCCA</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Confirmed: University Diversity Fund has been awarded by E&amp;D to the student project leader to create the anti-racist website &amp; handbook by Nov 2020. Costed at £1455.25 with in-kind support from CCTL.</li> <li>Could the complaints process about racism under review by OSCCA, in collaboration with E&amp;D and CUSU welfare officer to consider how constructive (anonymous) feedback about inappropriate language in educational settings? (to follow up with OSCCA discussion at last REC SAT 24.02.2020)</li> </ol> <p>Link to Project 6 Content Notes</p>

<b>Project 2</b>	STEM vs Arts/Humanities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That the Business Information Team develop a tool within the Exam Results Analytics dashboard that would allow a comparison of attainment gaps by STEM and Arts/Humanities.</li> <li>2. That more research be undertaken about the teaching, learning and assessment experiences within STEM and the impact on students' academic performance and attainment gaps (by ethnicity, disability and gender)</li> <li>3. That welfare support and avenues to find informal or formal academic mentors are clearly communicated and resourced for black British students in STEM.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. BIT have committed to developing this too to compare attainment gaps by STEM vs Arts/Humanities (not ready at the APP PAR Project's completion in Feb 2020)</li> <li>2. A small study about STEM attainment gaps and student activism initiated with CCTL and colleagues at Imperial and Oxford (as at May 2020). Recommendation to contact the Clinical School about possible interest in further work/research in this area</li> <li>3. Faculty/Dept role to allocate mentors to STEM students? Or the Advisory Hub to coordinate?</li> </ol>	<i>BIT, E&amp;D, CCTL (Clinical Medicine?)</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. BIT to build STEM tool into Exam Results Analytics database</li> <li>2. Funding and/or further research partners needed: As Clinical Medicine have an Equality &amp; Diversity team with some funding, could they support this research and/or development of black British STEM student support? (RW contacted tba)</li> <li>3. Mentoring of black STEM students in Faculties: Link to the Project 3 (advisory hub) and Project 4 (mentoring schemes)</li> </ol>
<b>Project 3</b>	Advisory Hub	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That an online Black Student and Staff Advisory Hub be resourced and developed with links to resources, grants, events, mentors and academic advice (This is a short term aim, that will mean the collation of information about existing services and events that support Black students could be located in one place. It would be supported by people trained in issues that impact black British students, including pastoral, academic and financial.</li> <li>2. That a physical space in Cambridge be dedicated to a Black Student and Staff Advisory Hub (This is a long term aim, that there would be a place for face-to-face interactions. It would not necessarily have to be open</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. E&amp;D would value and support this but not currently in strategic plan (student rather than staff facing) and involves resources/time to coordinate, particularly to engage people with expertise in critical race theory</li> <li>2. Covid-19 meant that a physical hub less immediately attractive</li> </ol>	<i>E&amp;D plus CAO and/or Counselling to help resource?</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Funding for development and ongoing coordination needed.</li> <li>2. E&amp;D will take it to the next REC SAT team to discuss (June 2020)</li> </ol> <p>Could Counselling have a role in the development of this advisory hub to support Black British student wellbeing/mental health?</p> <p>Link to Project 1 anti-racism glossary – could be hosted in the Advisory Hub and connect to a series of events/resources</p> <p>Link to Project 2 STEM attainment gaps and 4.3 Race Champions and Equality Networks</p>

		permanently, but perhaps once a week. It should have staff with dedicated workload, rather than relying on volunteers)		
<b>Project 4</b>	Mentoring	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That the current Black student-student mentoring schemes coordinated by student societies be provided with resourcing, professional training and development opportunities for Black student mentors about critical race theory,</li> <li>2. That the University further develop the existing network of Race and Equality Champions or BAME staff to include training and guidance on issues relating to the Black attainment gaps and to encourage and support staff academic mentors of Black students across the collegiate University</li> <li>3. That Schools and/or Faculties build on the existing School Equality Network (2 per school, one on gender equality steering group) to nominate, resource and train staff to mentor Black students in order to better meet their discipline-specific academic and pastoral needs</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Currently student-student mentoring schemes are informal and student organised, could be further resourced/supported via programme of mentoring training</li> <li>2. This links with the development of an 'attainment gap task force' in development with the APP OG (CCTL, E&amp;D, BIT, EQPO, Student Operations) to provide guidance to Schools/Faculties to understand their attainment gaps and to develop educational interventions</li> <li>3. Could the existing School Equality Network be relaunched to include a focus on staff-student mentoring – that is, role includes advising and supporting other academic staff to mentor black students in order to meet their discipline-specific academic and pastoral needs?</li> </ol>	<p><i>CUSU - ACS and BME Campaign, CAO to help deliver and fund mentoring scheme with current students?</i></p> <p><i>CCTL, E&amp;D, EQPO, BIT, Student Operations – 'attainment gap task force' and starter packs</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Funding and/or staff workload to provide supplementary training for the student-student mentoring schemes</li> <li>2. In development – coordinated approach to supporting/consulting with Faculties/Departments on attainment gaps</li> <li>3. Could this be formally aligned to E&amp;D and REC work on BAME staff networks and other mentoring programmes?</li> </ol> <p>Link to Project 3 Advisory Hub, Project 1 Anti-racist glossary and handbook</p>
<b>Recommended actions to narrow the attainment gap for Disabled Students w/Mental Health conditions</b>				
<b>Number</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Actions (please refer to Project Reports for a rationale/more details)</b>	<b>Notes about possible next steps</b>	

<b>Project 5</b>	EPS - Double Time	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That the EPS ('Double Time') application process be reviewed, in order to substantially reduce waiting time; involve student representation in the reviewing process; to provide guidance to staff and students about the process and as EPS as an alternative to intermission</li> </ol>	<p>Note cross-over action with Project 10</p> <p>What would be involved in a review of the EPS and Intermission processes and guidance provided to students and staff? What would the timelines?</p> <p>Overlap with discussion about provision of results at end of year 1 of EPS with Examination &amp; Assessment Committee</p>	<p><i>Student Operations, student representatives</i></p> <p>Could Student Operations conduct a review of the EPS and Intermissions Process?</p> <p>Link to Project 10</p>
<b>Project 6</b>	Content notes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That the University should endorse the guidelines for Content Notes developed by CUSU/DSC and encourage them to be adapted and adopted by Faculties for their staff, with instructions about how and when Content Notes should be used for any material that relates to common trauma (in particular: rape, sexual violence, physical violence, war, racial violence and other offences based on protected characteristics)</li> <li>2. That Faculties should support staff in the development and delivery of Content Notes in their teaching and course material, educating them about the value of Content Notes and correcting misconceptions that students use them to avoid engaging</li> <li>3. That Faculties should provide information to their students about Content Notes, acknowledging that they are a reasonable adjustment that they might request if not provided as a matter of</li> </ol>	<p>A project has been developed with students in consultation with CCTL to further refine existing guidance on content notes – this was awarded UDF funding in May 2020.</p> <p>How can Faculties encourage staff to include content notes in their course material, online or face-to-face?</p> <p>University Libraries have developed a parallel content notes/warning tool for use with digital materials – could this be a model/extended to advise given to Faculty/Dept staff about their course material and not just reading lists?</p>	<p><i>CCTL, University Libraries, DSC/CUSU, DRC, EQPO, Counselling, OSCCA</i></p> <p><a href="#">1. Confirmed: University Diversity Fund has been awarded by E&amp;D to the student project team to create the content notes website &amp; handbook by Nov 2020. Costed at £1366 with in-kind support from CCTL.</a></p> <p>2&amp;3. Could the UDF resources and guidance be endorsed and shared by EQPO &amp; University Libraries in consultations with Faculties/Departments?</p> <p>4. Could Counselling and OSCCA develop a process for anonymous student comments about content notes in the complaint/feedback process, to be fed back to Faculties/Departments?</p> <p>Link to Project 1 Content Notes and anonymous feedback process for an educational intervention</p>

		<p>course</p> <p>4. That Faculties should develop processes whereby students might provide (optionally anonymous) constructive feedback on Content Note provision, thereby enabling a staff-student dialogue that will mutually develop and improve Content Note provision while also ensuring that students are not forced to disclose information about their specific traumatic experiences under their own name</p>		
<b>Project 7</b>	Time costs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That staff training on inclusive practices include recommendations about managing time costs/penalties experienced by disabled students</li> <li>2. That time saving approaches, such as lecture capture, be standardised in the delivery of course materials</li> <li>3. That increased support for neurodiverse students, such as mentoring and study skills, be provided</li> <li>4. That a more streamlined infrastructure for mental health support be investigated, taking into account student workloads, time costs of self-advocacy, access to treatment and management of medications</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The DRC's new module on Inclusive T&amp;L for Disabled Students online module addresses time costs (note: this potentially has been exacerbated by Covid-19)</li> <li>2. Remote/online lecturing now available/standardised during the Covid-19 crisis – will this be sustained after lockdown, what are the implications for Lecture Capture?</li> <li>3. Role of a DRC neurodiversity officer recommended in Project 8, to further support existing DRC mentoring</li> <li>4. Overlap with the Mental Health Project – encourage them to include a focus on time-costs for students of self-advocacy and medication management</li> </ol>	<p><i>DRC, CCTL, EQPO, Counselling</i></p> <p>Link to Project 8 role of neurodiversity advocate in the DRC</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#">Confirmed: development and launch DRC module on inclusive t&amp;l</a></li> <li>2. Commitment to lecture capture post Covid-19 crisis so standard practice</li> <li>3. Link to Project 8 role of neurodiversity advocate in the DRC. <a href="#">Confirmed: Additionally, a University Diversity Fund was awarded to Helen Duncan to undertake a student-staff partnership project to redesign the transition to university event for disabled students (MH and neurodiversity addressed explicitly)</a></li> <li>4. Could this be integrated into the work of Counselling and/or the Mental Health Project team (Chad Allen &amp; Niall)? Could they provide opportunity for student researcher to present findings of their Cambridge Time/Time Costs investigation?</li> </ol>
<b>Project 8</b>	Diagnosis and screening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That the University provides funding for a specific role in the DRC that integrates both screening and support (a Neurodiversity Advocate)</li> </ol>	Both recommended actions directly inform the role of a Neurodiverse Advocate in the DRC, as neurodiverse students are the largest single category of disabled	<p><i>DRC</i></p> <p><a href="#">Funding from the University sought for a Neurodiversity Advocate (Grade 7, three years) in the DRC to advise and support increasing numbers of</a></p>

		<p>2. That the University also funds the co-development of staff training to better support neurodiverse students</p>	<p>students registered with the DRC – project noted the intersections with the smaller number of declared Mental Health students and the way screening and support techniques targeting neurodiversity would have positive practical impact on all students</p> <p>Self-advocacy can raise distinct barriers and complexities for neurodiverse students and students with mental health conditions, demanding significant organisational and time penalties (Project 7), and necessitating clear guidance around university processes and how to navigate these (Project 5, 9, 10).</p>	<p>neurodiverse students (and therefore those with MH conditions), staff in Depts/Colleges, Study Skills Advisors. A role description has been developed by DRC.</p>
<b>Project 9</b>	Diversifying assessment	<p>1. That AMA processes be made more accessible (it currently requires a great deal of self-advocacy on the part of disabled students who are already overburdened and who need better support in this process)</p> <p>2. That College prizes for those who achieve Firsts be abolished (this privileges white, male and non-disabled students, ignoring the contextual factors and advantages that allow them to succeed in the current examination-based system)</p> <p>3. That Departments/Faculties undertake a review of assessment practices, finding opportunities to offer more choice and flexibility of assessment from first year</p>	<p>Discussion underway with EQPO, CCTL, E&amp;D about Faculty/Dept consultation process re attainment gaps and assessment</p> <p>CCTL's Assessment and Feedback Project (endorsed by the EAC) includes developing Cambridge 'Guiding Principles' on assessment. Is the most effective way to integrate reviews of assessment through Programme Reviews w/EQPO?</p>	<p><i>Student Operations, EQPO, CCTL, EAC (and Colleges?)</i></p> <p>1. Could Student Operations review processes and guidance for applications for AMA to lessen burden of self-advocacy by students? Link to Project 8 Neurodiversity Advocate</p> <p>2. College prizes – could this something to be considered by STEC?</p> <p>3&amp; 4. COVID-19 planning re alternative assessment a good opportunity to review current options and how they may be diversified away from exams (or remote submission of exams)</p>

		4. That the University create an action plan for diversifying assessment so that this is not just a recommendation but a strong commitment		
<b>Project 10</b>	Intermittin g vs EPS	<p>1. That the University explores how it can increase awareness amongst tutors and students of EPS as an option to Intermission. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. A consideration of what steps should be taken prior to encouraging students to intermit, to ensure that this is avoided where possible.</li> <li>b. A requirement that a plan is put in place before a student begins intermission for their return, to ensure that the period of intermission is actually helping the student, and that there will be adequate support upon their return.</li> <li>c. The development of measures to mitigate the negative impact of intermission for those students for whom the process is necessary.</li> </ul> <p>2. That the University consider undertaking the further research into intermission and students' experiences of the process, building on from the CUSU Intermissions project.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. An analysis of the impact of intermission on students'</li> </ul>	<p>Note cross-over actions with Project 5 on a review of EPS and clarification of guidance of steps to intermission/EPS</p> <p>2a During the course of this project the BIT was asked to analyse attainment gap for intermitting/double time students after cross referencing HESA data with DRC data – numbers are too small to make this feasible/statistically reliable</p>	<p><i>Student Operations, DRC, student representatives</i></p> <p>Could Student Operations conduct a review and refresh guidance to students and staff about intermission &amp; EPS application process, timelines, pros and cons?</p> <p>Link to Project 5 on Extended Period of Study</p> <p>Link to Project 7 on clear guidance enabling self-advocacy</p>

		<p>attainment, potentially as compared to EPS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>b. An analysis of Cambridge workload as a whole, and the extent to which it impacts disabled students, particularly those with MH issues</li><li>c. A potential experiment – offering a trial of EPS level workload to a group of students with MH issues, and seeing if this alleviates their symptoms and/or increases their comparative performance as compared to their peers</li></ul>		
--	--	---	--	--

## Project 1: Anti-racist Glossary

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	✓
	Disability/Mental Health student	
Topic	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	✓
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
Specific research question	Does the language used in discussions about race at Cambridge (in teaching and other contexts) negatively affect the academic performance of Black British students?	
Student co-researcher	Rianna Davis, undergraduate student, History and Spanish	

2. Executive summary
<p>The focus of this project was gauging the impact and extent of racist language within educational contexts at Cambridge, and the impact this might have the academic performance and attainment of Black British students. Two qualitative research methods were used: focus group questions with the student co-researchers and an online survey distributed to black British students across Cambridge. I asked participants if they had encountered any racist language in teaching contexts during the course of their studies at Cambridge, what terms were used and in what context, and what might be the key terms to they thought students and staff should be educated about, and what value students saw in a collation of these terms in something like a glossary.</p> <p>Of concern is the large proportion of respondents to this project who indicated they had experienced racist language in lectures and supervisions (approximately 50% of the survey). Respondents speculated that this was to do with the general lack of accountability around teaching practices across the collegiate University. Of the respondents who had encountered racism in the teaching (in content, delivery of lectures, interrelations with teachers), over 60% indicated that it had a continuing negative impact on their academic performances, affecting their self-confidence and heightening feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome. Those students who did not believe they had experienced racist language in an academic context often attributed this to their discipline (for example, as STEM subjects use technical language there is little scope for quoting or using offensive language in lectures). They also suggested that although they may not have encountered “explicitly racist language”, they had experienced an accumulation of implicit or subtle micro-aggressions throughout their studies which had an equally negative impact on their self-image and confidence in their abilities to perform academically.</p>

3. Rationale
<p>The impetus for the topic about racist language and the development of an anti-racist glossary came from my personal experience at Cambridge. As President and student representative for the BME</p>

Campaign, I have had recurring discussions with other Black students who have also noted racist incidents in lectures and supervisions, but who have been uncertain about their ability to articulate to non-Black supervisors and lecturers why these incidents were racist or otherwise offensive. For example, drawing on my own experiences, I was asked in a Spanish Literature supervision if English was my native language because “another language is interfering with [my] syntax” – this was based on an assumption that, as a Black student, I spoke an African language despite being of Caribbean heritage and having English as my first language.

Other students have reported to me occasions where their non-Black supervisors using the n-word in supervisions and lectures, both in quoting material and in casual discussion, which made them wildly uncomfortable. We found it difficult to address these incidents - for example through informal feedback or formal complaints to supervisors, lecturers or Faculty staff, largely because the burden then fell on students to explain why the terms used were offensive, and why it had a negative impact on the student. This would inevitably lead to a discussion that required some background knowledge into how race functions and manifests itself in an academic context, as well as the different forms of racism and how they work.

Additionally, I noticed a lack of consideration of the power and impact of language in University-wide discussions about the attainment gap and racism in Cambridge. The investigations of racist incidents in the university that do take place – however few and far between – tend to pay attention to incidents of explicit discrimination, for instance when a student or staff member in Cambridge is directly addressed with a racist slur, or are the victim of a violent attack. In this way, the cumulative impact of every-day racism in choices of language in teaching and learning contexts is overlooked, or considered as less significant.

I felt it would be somewhat futile to ask about experiences of general racism, because the wide majority of Black British students here have experienced it in some capacity and are open about it these encounters (e.g. with Porters, university staff, other students). My project therefore investigated the ways in which language and its use or misuse in teaching and learning contexts had an impact on Black students and their engagement with their studies at Cambridge, and then analysed institutional racism from this lens.

#### 4. Existing evidence

In the UK sector, BAME attainment gap reports indicate that the largest attainment gap is between Black and white students, with the 2017-2018 statistics indicating the largest attainment gap in subjects was ‘Education’ (20.1%) followed by ‘Combined subjects’ (19.7%). This is often a continuation of A-Level and BTEC results, the figures of which demonstrate that white students outperform students of all other ethnicities. This, of course, goes beyond merely suggesting that white students are the smartest sitting exams or that ethnic minority students are incapable, but rather highlights a wider problem of various barriers which prevent or impede BAME students from achieving their potential. One of said barriers is institutional culture; with only 16% of all academic staff in Higher Education Institutions identifying as BAME, and within this only 0.6% of professors being Black (as of 2017-2018), “discussions on race and ethnicity can be difficult conversations to have.” As a result, conversations about race have played a large part in BAME student life in terms of feelings of belonging, and even the issue of lumping together BAME into one category without considering how this is far from a homogenous group, as it encompasses every ethnicity which is non-white effectively, and fails to consider the different intersections of identity within this overarching and often unhelpful misnomer.

Another problem identified was that of the curriculum; content, design, and delivery. “42% of BAME students said that they did not feel that the curriculum reflects issues of diversity, equality, and discrimination” and thus problems regarding content and Tripos emerge; if students do not feel understood or adequately represented in specific relevant content, this disengages them from learning and being an active participant in learning environments. Curriculum delivery was noted by 82% of institutional respondents as the second most relevant contributing factor to ethnic attainment gaps at their respective institutions.

The literature about the power of language in the hands of white teachers is extensive. For instance, Bree Picower recognised how white teachers’ life experiences inform their understanding of race, and how these ideas are hegemonic. Whiteness and its inherence in scholarship has implications for the “role white teachers play in creating patterns of racial achievement and opportunity.” In other words, the impact of white teachers and their influence can have profoundly negative and long-lasting effects on Black students. Although Picower was using American society and culture as an example of how racism is engrained into everyday life, institutional racism and its manifestation in higher education in Britain works in a functionally-similar way, which means it is easy to draw comparisons between the two: “in a white supremacist society, many of the privileges that flow to whites are invisible, unearned and not consciously acknowledged.” As such, with race not a real or common consideration amongst white academics, the needs and realities of Black students are not taken seriously, and the white experience is assumed to be a universal one; when Black students voice their concerns and experiences, they are disregarded not for being invalid but for not matching the assumed universal experience of their white counterparts and academic or teaching staff. As Ladson-Billings adds, “typically, white, middle-class prospective teachers have little to no understanding of their own culture. Notions of whiteness are taken for granted. They rarely are interrogated.” Thus, a lack of understanding or the necessary interrogation of ideas of whiteness, how it functions, and how it manifests itself in an academic environment is often sorely lacking in British institutions.

Within a British context, a review of work carried out at the University of Leeds regarding racism and higher education also identifies the underlying problem of the need to interrogate whiteness and contemporary processes of “racism, whiteness, and Eurocentrism that operate in universities around the world, and particularly in the UK.” Once again, problems arise of the focus of educators (seeking to promote multi-culturalism, which is not, as Law notes, an effective aim or solution, or focusing on individual cases and interpersonal relationships).

In order to understand the impact of racial language on students, the quality of dialogue and discourse on race needs be enhanced. However, a universally agreed language on issues relating to racism is non-existent as even the most frequently used words in any discussion on race can easily cause confusion, which leads to controversy and hostility. For a start, what it means to be “racist” is still very much contested and, as this project’s findings foregrounds, the concepts of “whiteness” and “white privilege” are still inadequately understood within a Cambridge educational context. . But it is essential to achieve some degree of shared understanding, particularly when talking about issues of race, as a common vocabulary is essential to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations. To that end, a number of institutions have begun to set up anti-racist glossaries to respond to the language needs of different people (UCL, SOAS, Goldsmiths). As the Scottish Association for Minority Ethnic Educators observes:

Unless a group seeking social justice comes to a shared understanding of key terms, such as “race” and “racism,” it is difficult to be very productive. When key terms are explicitly shared and agreed upon in a group, there is a powerful foundation for knowledge and action (The Anti-Racist Education, 2019)

#### References:

1. Anti-Racist Educator (2019) Glossary <https://www.theantiracisteducator.com/glossary>
2. Picower B (2009) The unexamined Whiteness of teaching: how White teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 12:2,197-215, DOI: 10.1080/13613320902995475
3. Law I (2017) Building the Anti-racist University, action and new agendas, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20:3, 332-343, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2016.1260232

### 5. Generation of evidence

Two stages of data collection were used for this project:

1. A focus group discussion with participants in the second forum of the APP PAR project. This involved 8 student co-researchers. The focus of the discussion was on: the kinds of language by students while at Cambridge; the contexts where the language was used and the students' responses to it; whether the racism was overt or implicit; the impact on wellbeing and academic performance; and the co-researchers impressions about whether encounters with racist language was widespread across the black British student community in Cambridge.
2. A survey was then developed from the focus group discussion, as this was determined to be an appropriate method of developing an evidence-base of black British student experiences in different educational contexts across the collegiate University. The questions were developed from the initial discussion and disseminated via a Qualtrics survey which was set up to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of respondents, and was circulated to the members of the African and Caribbean Society and the BME Campaign, this was determined to be the most effective way of reaching black British undergraduate students. There were 38 individual hits on the survey; in the current academic year, there are 230 black British undergraduate students enrolled in Cambridge, so this makes a response rate of 16.52%. While this is not a large or statistically significant number of respondents, the responses generate do indicate patterns in experience across the black British cohort, from ten different STEM and Arts/Humanities courses. The survey was a combination of multiple choice and short/long answers; students were asked 'yes/no' questions about if they had experienced racist language in teaching and learning contexts, and were also given the option of responding to questions with a more detailed answer. The final question asked about whether students thought an anti-racist glossary of terms made available to academics would be useful, and what terms they think should be included, in order to gauge specific understandings, they believed were lacking.

Additionally, at the final forum for the APP Project, I reported on my project to my fellow student co-researchers and senior staff members of the University (including the PVCE for Education, the Director of Educational Services, the Head of Equality and Diversity, the Head of the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning, as well as other key staff from Cambridge Admissions Office, Student Registry, Colleges and Departments/Faculties. Their responses to the survey findings and proposed anti-racist glossary have informed this report and the recommended action.

### 6. Small project research findings

### **Prevalence of racist language in teaching and learning contexts:**

Of the 38 survey respondents, who were all current Cambridge students, 63% said that they had encountered racist language or terms in a teaching and learning context (7 of these mentioned the use of explicit terms such as 'blacks', 'nigger', 'negro', and/or 'kaffir' by lecturers or supervisors). These results indicate that encounters with racist language in teaching and learning contexts is prevalent at Cambridge, and needs urgent attention.

### **Impact on Black British students:**

Of importance for the University's commitment to narrow the attainment gap for black British students, it is worrying to find that 65% of the respondents believe this language has a negative impact on their academic performance. Respondents explained the various impacts on academic performance:

- Racism and the use of racist language *"provokes the feeling of imposter syndrome"*
- *"It creates a sort of hostile and uncomfortable environment that just makes me want to not speak up and interact with - this means that I am less likely to want to take part in discussions or conversations with my supervisor/lecture because I know that that is how they think."*
- *"[racist language] undermines our learning environment"*

One student noted how even in writing essays and preparing materials for supervisions that questions and material used is racist; having to encounter this and draw upon it with no support, understanding of the psychological impact this can have or a lack of space for critical analysis is challenging:

- *"I think that unconscious bias is one of the main reasons for black students not doing as well overall. Not just the support they might get from supervisors, but the support they get in their dissertations. And what happens when the examiners mark dissertations or exams that refer to critical race theory or challenge the centrism of the Empire?"*
- *"I've been warned to 'play the game' and avoid topics that give away my blackness if I want to do well. I've even been told what papers to avoid. I think the university has work to do to become less racist, rather than black students having to find ways to avoid racism."*

### **No racist encounters**

Eight survey respondents indicated that they hadn't experienced direct racism themselves. This was attributed to the discipline:

- *"The academics that my degree attracts and in particular that supervise students from my college (one of the least prestigious) tend to be very self-reflective, anti-racist etc"*
- *"I do a STEM subject so it shouldn't be up from a content point of view although from an informal discussion with teaching staff it could"*

It was also attributed to the quality and awareness of the teachers:

- *"Academics have been sensitive and empathetic on how they discuss race"*

However, even when students answered 'no' to the question about whether they had encountered racism in teaching contexts, there were some 'weird' interactions:

- *"Because nothing has been explicit. I've had conversations with my supervisor who assumed I was mixed heritage, because of my skintone, and then I've had conversations about my hair, but they all took the form of the recipient being extremely interested in my culture, maybe to a weird point, but I've not experienced anything from my lecturers or supervisors that has had racist undertones to my knowledge."*
- *"There's a lot of well-meaning racism that comes out of ignorance, which is ironic when the users of racist language are often the ones teaching classes about race."*

### **Cambridge encounters:**

The most notable form of racism that respondents encountered in teaching and learning environments was the use of slurs and otherwise inappropriate terms in lectures and supervisions. A number of students agreed that there was a slight difference in the racist language and incidents encountered in

Cambridge and elsewhere. Comments about this difference noted that at Cambridge the use of racist language include:

- *"I think the racist language in Cambridge is different in the sense that it is seen as valid and legitimate and unquestionable because it is apparently substantiated by knowledge and academia. Thus, they feel that they CAN say it and not receive any backlash because they are supposed academics who speak in such a way as a result of their research.*
- *"I feel as if the use of racist language is deemed more acceptable and normalised at Cambridge than elsewhere. I also think that academics here are not held accountable for their actions and there is little students can do if they are made uncomfortable by the language used."*
- *"It is more insidious here. People are clever and polite and can make you feel worthless without being outright rude. It is still racist to be told that your interest in 'race' means that you have a one track mind. It colours everything I do and read, and the way people interact with me. Why I should I perform as if it doesn't?"*

### **Challenges in responding:**

It can be a challenge to find ways of responding to racist language or engagements, whether explicit or implicit. Some students indicated that they don't respond:

- *"At this point I'm used to racism"*
- *"I've encountered microaggressions from my Director of Studies but you learn to accept that racism will manifest itself differently and get on with your studies, unfortunately"*
- *"I don't want to be known as a trouble maker"*

Other respondents noted some challenges to responding in the Cambridge context:

- *"In Cambridge, people that do say offhanded slight remarks do so almost ignorant of the effect, and then calling them out is harder. Back home in South London, I encounter less racist interactions, maybe due to the people I converse with or the multicultural nature of the city. But in Cambridge, a lot of people just do not have that exposure to a wide variety of cultures, and as such they make jokes or comments that are racist but they've never been called out on it before."*
- *"I think the use of such language fosters an uncomfortable environment for Black students and undermines our learning environment. It also means that those of us who want to engage with race academically are hindered from doing so, as our lecturers do not have the range to engage with."*

Some students noted they had raised the issue to their lecturers or supervisors but were told by these academics that they had been "quoting material" and this did not reflect their own personal views.

- *"It creates a sort of hostile and uncomfortable environment that just makes me want to not speak up and interact with - this means that I am less likely to want to take part in discussions or conversations with my supervisor/lecture because I know that that is how they think."*

Those who said they have not encountered explicit racist language/terms in a teaching and learning context did still mention having experienced racism in other forms or commented on the impact everyday racism had on their wellbeing.

- *"Perhaps not huge one but it can knock me for a couple of days and then I need to bounce back."*

### **Attainment gaps and academic performance**

Students made persuasive connections between the racist language they and their peers encounter in educational contexts and the attainment gaps between Black British students and their white peers:

- *"When you live a life that uses certain terms and also express yourself in a certain way, but then enter an environment where none of that is recognised, accepted or legitimised, it makes it extremely difficult to be yourself and perform at 100% of your potential."*

- *“We deal with racism all the time, we just don't bother taking note. It colours everything we do. It's not a surprise that it feeds into why we don't do as well”*

One student indicated the overall impact of inappropriate language:

- *“I think that people underestimate how the misuse of language pertaining to race in an academic context has an alienating impact on Black students and makes us lose confidence in our place in institutions like Cambridge, as well as our academics' ability to engage with topics surrounding race with nuance (particularly concerning with those of us who wish to study race in any given context). Furthermore, being on the receiving end of racist language is a very hurtful experience and is detrimental to the emotional well-being of black students, which in turn undermines our ability to perform academically.”*

#### **Value of an anti-racist glossary for teachers and fellow students across Cambridge:**

All students who responded to the survey agreed with the value of the development of such a glossary (100%). Additionally, the participants and audience members in the final Forum for the APP Project agreed with the proposal for the development of such a glossary, including:

- *“Would be a brilliant thing to see an example of this spread around the university (Faculties and Colleges)”*
- *“Totally necessary as an addition to anti-racism training [though] should not replace it”*
- *“Great idea – would be really useful for academic/non-academic staff alike, + students”*

Some further comments with additional recommendations included:

- *“Is a glossary sufficient? E.g. would guidance on best practice for handling racist teaching and learning be useful? Not just defining microaggression/white guilt but support/guidance for removing these from teaching and learning?”*
- *“The only barrier would be getting people on board with taking this anti-racist glossary seriously”*

#### **7. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.** Please identify any application or outcomes of your research project and detail the implications for policy and practice for different stakeholder groups

Overall, respondents were unanimous in the value of developing and disseminating an anti-racist glossary for teachers and students across Cambridge. It was accepted that this would be an invaluable resource for teaching staff who were interested in understanding how to navigate language choices, and could serve as a resource to refer staff and students to when they challenged Black student's responses to offensive language. Mandatory training of all supervisors within Colleges, and lecturers within Departments/Faculties, about would be ideal.

Beyond the development of the glossary, there is a need for targeted interventions and guidance. A discipline-specific focus is needed in implementing changes or further investigation; the findings from my research highlight how Arts and Humanities students are most impacted by this linguistic racism. The majority of student co-researchers as well as respondents to the survey read Law, HSPS, History, PBS, English, or Education. These subjects tend to rely on interpersonal and subjective engagement with content and materials in supervisions.

The one clear outcome of the research is that most students, regardless of subject, feel there is a fundamental lack of understanding of race and how it functions, which creates longer-term issues regarding imposter syndrome, feeling inadequate, constant self-doubt, and feelings of isolation – as such they are unable to express their concern as they worry they are not taken seriously or feel intimidated by the positions of, or limited by the understandings of, those who they seek to correct.

This highlights the need for a shift away from the focus on individual intentions and interpersonal relationships between and amongst teachers and students. What is needed is a perspective that critically examines educational experiences within a framework of race and ethnicity.

## 8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. That an Anti-Racist Glossary be developed and disseminated to teaching and student-facing staff on the Cambridge website, with integration into teaching online modules, and links in Faculty guides and resources.

The university should promote an anti-racist glossary with teaching and other student-facing staff on a central website, and this be linked to in supervisory training modules and handbooks. The glossary would be compiled using a combination of pre-existing materials (some American institutions have very similar resources which could be drawn upon) and further investigation into UK-specific understanding and applications for these terms and their various manifestations and impacts. Most students who responded in the affirmative that they had experienced racism mentioned that they were often assigned reading materials or had to listen to things which were triggering in nature from a racial standpoint (hearing the n-word in a lecture, for example, without any warning can be shocking and cause flashbacks or remind a student of a particularly traumatic encounter with this word) – any materials provided with slurs, triggering statistics or facts should be noted just as with any other sensitive materials.

2. That the University refines its processes to respond to both constructive feedback and formal complaints about racist language in teaching and learning contexts

Ultimately, discussions need to be fostered around the reality of having lecturers, academics, professors, and other faculty using certain terms especially slurs; students noted that there is a casual attitude towards the reading of these racial terms in material, which make them uncomfortable. This should not be the case. The focus is also not on the 'accusation' but rather the victim; in other words, the concern of faculty should not be about being called racist, which is often the case, but rather they should be concerned about the wellbeing and achievements of the impacted student demographic here. There should be more care taken by faculties in vetting the content of lecturers and supervisors to ensure it is genuinely appropriate, something which is otherwise impossible without taking the complaints of students seriously. In addition, certain students have expressed their constant frustration with racist incidents in which specific names of faculty members have mentioned, and the problem which several noted in the survey was that there were little or no levels of accountability. This must be addressed; named faculty members should be consulted outside of the circumstance with specific students, as students do not want to feel singled out or that a certain academic will believe they are creating issues.

## Project 2: STEM vs Arts/Humanities Attainment Gaps

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	✓
	Disability/Mental Health student	
Context	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	✓
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
Specific research question	Are there differences in the attainment gap between STEM students and Arts & Humanities students?	
Student co-researchers	James Simkins, third year undergraduate, Chemical Engineering	
	Natanim Fekadu, second year undergraduate, History and Politics	

2. Executive summary
<p>This project aimed to investigate differences in attainment gaps between black British students studying STEM and Arts/Humanities courses. This was in response to a perceived variation in educational experiences encountered in STEM subjects, with a shared understanding amongst student co-researchers that there would be fewer opportunities for racist encounters in the delivery of the subject content, more practical assessment tasks that do not require subjective critical arguments, and therefore less opportunity for unconscious bias in assessment marking. The key method of data collection for this project was a survey distributed to Black British student committees within Cambridge, which asked for student perspectives about the attainment gap in STEM disciplines, and the identification of any factors that might impact the students' academic performance. This was followed by an analysis of the attainment gap data available currently available on the Exam Results Analytics dashboard, comparing the gaps course-by-course. The findings from the survey found that the majority of student respondents agreed with the perception that there would be narrower attainment gaps for STEM subjects. However, the initial and limited findings from the Exam Results Analytics dashboard were a surprise, indicating that the attainment gaps in STEM subjects were similar across the disciplines. This was unexpected, as many possible explanations for attainment gaps referred to poor handling of sensitive issues relating to race, but the subject matter of STEM subjects is considered 'neutral' and 'objective'. The preliminary findings from this project indicate that more research needs to be undertaken to explore the different educational experiences of STEM students, and what educational interventions might address the attainment gaps.</p>

3. Rationale
<p>During the first APP PAR forum, the student co-researchers were asked to discuss and identify the possible reasons for the attainment gaps for Black British students, and to speculate about possible educational interventions that might narrow those gaps. The majority of the student co-researchers in the Black British strand are studying Arts/Humanities subjects, and so the majority of possible teaching</p>

and learning topics tended to focus on their experiences. Many points raised related to poor handling of sensitive subject material relating to race in the curriculum design and the delivery of teaching in Arts/Humanities subjects, which was thought to take a toll on black students. It was also considered more difficult for students interested in certain topics relating to race and identity to find supervisors/material relevant to these topics.

However, the issues canvassed in this first forum are not those that STEM students face, as the subject material is considered neutral and research topics would be easier to research, without encountering explicit or unconscious bias by supervisors. This prompted the questions: is there an attainment gap for black students studying STEM? If there is not, what is it about STEM educational experience that supports black students' academic performance? And if there is, what are the reasons for the impact on the academic performance of black STEM students?

#### 4. Existing evidence

While there is an increasing amount of literature on black or BME student attainment gaps in the UK Higher Education sector, there is relatively little that more narrowly focuses on attainment gaps in STEM disciplines. For this project, a review of literature was undertaken through the library catalogues, and also through a review of presentations and resources produced in UK BME attainment gap conferences.

Recent sector-wide analysis and discussions about BME attainment gaps agree that that it is a UK-wide problem, and that the gaps are not removed by controlling for other factors such as differences in entry qualifications or socio-economic status. This is borne out in Cambridge's Business Analytics Team analysis of the gaps. However, commentators from other universities discuss how the gaps "can vary widely between subjects, with gaps often being lower in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects" (University of Nottingham, 2019). In fact, University College London showed some of their data broken down by subject area, and showed stark differences in BAME student attainment between different subject areas, with BAME students actually outperforming their white counterparts in some areas (UCL 2018). This research underscores the importance of gathering the right data and carefully analysing where attainment gaps are present so that positive actions can be appropriately targeted and prioritised. The topic of STEM attainment gaps is the focus of an ongoing research project at the University of Reading (2019), although findings from this project are not yet published.

However, currently it is difficult to gain an accurate insight into the differences in attainment for black British students in STEM and Arts/Humanities subjects. This is because there are such small numbers of black students overall (only 230 altogether in 2019/2020), that statistically significant data is hard to extract. Additionally, although the Exam Results Analytics dashboard currently allows researchers to examine attainment gaps by course or college, and by ethnicity, gender and disability, it does not currently have a tool to further drill down to attainment gaps by STEM vs Arts/Humanities. This is not unusual - the Office for Students attainment gap dashboards also do not show this picture. This causes challenges for initiatives such as the APP PAR project, that seeks to further investigate the reasons for attainment gaps, speculating that they causes may be related to curriculum design, assessment practice and other teaching and learning experiences that support students' academic performance.

A report from the recent Being BME in STEM conference (University of Bristol 2019) points out that in the STEM community, finding up-to-date data is tricky. The report cites a study that looked at the 2012-13 student cohort studying STEM subjects and found that 21% were from a BAME background, and that the majority of BAME students tended to attend universities with large BAME communities. More recently, the Royal Society looked at diversity in the scientific workforce, finding that BAME graduates in 2014

were less likely to progress to scientific jobs than white students: “The relatively high proportion of BAME students in HE should mean there is a secure pipeline of talent coming into STEM subjects...This is not universally the case across the disciplines and there is scope for more proactive support to draw students in to rewarding STEM career pathways.”

The data that we do have about STEM and black British students at Cambridge includes the overall numbers of black students by course, provided by the Business Information Team at the start of this project.

- In the current academic year there are 230 black British students (or 1.84%), within a population of 12,480 undergraduate students across Cambridge.
- Of these 230 students, 104 are studying STEM subjects (45%) and 126 study Arts/Humanities subjects (55%)
- NOTE: if, for the purposes of analysing attainment gaps by third year course results, we exclude Medicine, Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Vet Medicine (which all have a fourth year Masters or pass/fail outcome), then only 25 black British students are studying STEM subjects in ways that count for the attainment gaps reporting to the Office for Students.

#### **A quick note:**

There is more literature about race and STEM disciplines from the United States. Given the uncertainty of the findings for this project, which started with assumptions about the ‘neutrality’ and probable narrow attainment gap for black STEM students, it is worth noting the following insights into mathematics education, which is typically considered completely objective, race-neutral, and culture-free:

“The reality of learning mathematics in White institutional spaces requires that Black students take two sets of notes. The first must be used to pass the test; the second must be used to deconstruct and challenge the faulty mathematical knowledge that has been presented as objective, true, and culture-free.” (Martin 2008 cited in Davis 2018, p69)

As Todman (2019) from Kings College London notes, we need to “think about staff as well as students when designing behavioural interventions to address the BAME attainment gap”

#### **References:**

- Burke M (2019) Minding the attainment gap for BAME students (2019) Feature article in Education In Chemistry.
- Davis J (2018) Redefining Black Students’ Success and High Achievement in Mathematics Education: Toward a Liberatory Paradigm, *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*, Vol. 11, No. 1&2, pp. 69–77
- University of Bristol (2019) Report on Being BME in STEM Conference, 6 February, University of Bristol
- University College London (2018) Closing the undergraduate BME attainment gap at UCL, BME Conference Presentation
- University of Nottingham (2018) The Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) Attainment Gap: learning from the student experience, Equality and Diversity in Biosciences, Blog Post by Langley-Davis.
- University of Reading (2019) Student experiences in STEM, BME Attainment at UK Universities: Case studies, Universities UK and NUS, pp25-27
- Todman V (2019) Think about staff as well as students when designing behavioural interventions to address the BAME attainment gap, What Works Department: Social Mobility & Student Success, Kings College London

## 5. Generation of evidence

### **Stage 1: focus group discussion amongst black British student co-researchers**

The student co-researchers in the black British strand of the APP PAR Project spent time in the first and second forums discussing the reasons for attainment gaps and possible educational interventions. Much of the discussion was centered around Arts & Humanities student experiences due to the backgrounds of the students: of the 9 student co-researchers, only one is studying a STEM course. Students discussed difficulties in interpersonal relationships between students and teachers, and the delivery of course content in supervisions and lectures, which all were considered to have racialised overtones and could lead to lack of confidence amongst black British students, if not conscious or unconscious bias by teachers and marker. At this stage, James pointed out that these issues did not appear to him to arise in STEM teaching and learning contexts. He argued, and the rest of the team agreed, that where ideas about race, class, and other sensitivities have the potential to come up often in the learning experience of Arts & Humanities students, the STEM students' practical and technical content means that there are differences in exposure and experiences.

### **Stage 2: analysis of Exam Results Analytics**

The student co-researchers were provided with a breakdown of black student numbers by course across the last 5 years from the Business Information Team. This allowed us to examine where black students were clustered in different courses. We asked for this table to be updated with % to show not just the number of black students per course, but the % of black students per total student population in each course. This allowed us to concentrate on a comparison of STEM and Arts/Humanities courses with the largest proportionate clusters of black British students.

When the co-researchers on this project examined the data visualisations of attainment gaps available to us through the Exam Results Analytics, we discovered that the attainment gap was actually wider for STEM subjects. This shocked us, and challenged all of our assumptions about the 'neutrality' of STEM. It was important to us to find qualitative data that reflected students' understandings of the attainment gap issues in STEM subjects and their own perceptions of where they have encountered racial bias in teaching and learning contexts, or encountered academic tasks or challenges that they felt negatively impacted their academic performance.

We had to manually pull up the attainment gap picture course-by-course to compare the gap between black British and white undergraduate students, as there is currently no tool to allow us to compare the attainment gaps between STEM and Arts/Humanities courses. We understood that the data visualisation we came up with was not necessarily accurate or statistically significant, given the tiny number of black British students in each course.

### **Stage 3: data collection via an online survey**

The student and staff co-researchers on this project co-designed a survey with 10 closed and open questions. The survey did not just include 'yes/no' questions, but ones that had answers that ranged from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' allowing us to have a wider range of perspectives and to not rule out certain assumptions just because an individual response only agreed or disagreed slightly. It also allowed for comments so that we might collate a variety of student perspectives.

The survey was sent to the members of the African and Caribbean Society, as the social network with the most direct access to the black student community at Cambridge. Overall there were 21 responses (the lower than anticipated rate of response was attributed to the fact that the targeted group were engaged with the BME campaign elections and were overloaded with email notices). Not every respondent

answered each question. Out of these responses, students came from 6 different STEM disciplines (medicine, computer science, engineering, natural sciences, chemical engineering, geography, psychology) and 3 different Arts/Humanities disciplines (Education, HPS, History). The majority of respondents were male (53%) although we were unable to find data to indicate if this matched the overall gender distribution across STEM and Arts/Humanities students.

The following questions were asked in the survey:

- *Do you believe that the way Cambridge positions your black British identity has impacted on your wellbeing or welfare?*
- *Do you believe that issues related to your black British identity has affected your academic performance?*
- *Do you think that the attainment gap is better or worse for black British students in STEM subjects than in Arts and Humanities subjects?*
- *Do you believe that there are significant differences in the teaching and learning experiences for students in STEM and Arts and Humanities courses?*
- *Do you believe that any differences in the teaching and learning experiences would explain the differences in the attainment/awarding gaps between black and white students?*
- *Where do you think racial bias may appear in STEM teaching and learning?*

## 6. Small project research findings

Every student respondent agreed that there are significant differences in the teaching and learning experience for STEM and Arts/Humanities students at Cambridge. However, there was more variation in the discussion about black British students' experiences and whether their race had an impact on their wellbeing or academic performance in STEM subjects.

Overall, the 21 survey respondents did not believe that subject content was an issue for black British students in STEM subjects, in line with the discussion in the earlier focus group with the student representative discussion. The majority of respondents felt that black students would have better (narrower) attainment gaps in STEM subjects than in Arts/Humanities (53.84% with 15.38% uncertain). The overall rationale for this belief was due to the assumed 'neutrality' of subject material and educational experiences in STEM. For instance:

- *I think STEM subjects overall have more neutral content and have more practical elements, so are less likely to have a negative impact on black students. They are also assessed in different ways - less about personal opinions and arguments that can be marked badly by examiners.*
- *Technical supervisions and lectures - Minimal raising of political and social issues related to blackness*
- *STEM subjects are less likely to have issues surrounding a disregard for the specific academic interests that black students have. The subject area in STEM means that the work that black students do is not devalued if they, say, want to focus on black history or literature. And this can have a huge impact on one's academic performance*

There were some exceptions, for instance:

- *In the study of the human body, typically conditions are explained as presented on Caucasians*
- *I feel like people have a subconscious bias that science is not a place for black and minority ethnic people. Feel like as there aren't many black and minority ethnics here I feel a pressure to do well to prove to people that BME individuals can be good at science.*

Other students pointed out that the differences might be felt less in Faculty lectures than in College supervisions and the bias of supervisors:

- *In the expectations that supervisors have regarding the ability of a student. If unconscious bias means that a supervisor sees a black student as less intelligent, they are more likely to not give them as much help and support to go through the difficult content*
- *It may be apparent during supervisions by some exclusion from the discussion when topics in the lectures are being covered*
- *Often feel kind of stared at in lectures/practicals as the only BME person there (might just be overthinking). I definitely feel like I can't relate to my supervisors as well as I did my teachers in school.*

A majority of respondents (53.84%) believed that issues related to their black British identity have affected their wellbeing, with a smaller number believing that their black British identity affected their academic performance (38.46% with 23% unsure and 38.46% disagreeing). The resulting attainment gap was most often attributed to the lack of welfare support available to them in Cambridge.

### **Students' perceptions of reasons for the attainment gaps in STEM**

An analysis of the qualitative commentary provides the following insights into students' perception of the reasons for the attainment gaps:

- Students expressed a lack of black mentors/role models in their STEM subjects having a negative effect on motivation.
- A few responses express that unconscious bias may be a factor: supervisors may assume black students are less bright/have less subject knowledge
- Internal pressures: being one of very few black students in a STEM subject/Cambridge in general causes students to feel as though they have something to prove (worsened impostor syndrome).

The first open comment question in the survey was 'do you believe that any differences in the teaching and learning experiences would explain the differences in the attainment/awarding gaps between black and white students?' The general consensus here was, indeed, the different experiences could definitely play a part. Students mentioned supervisor's support in pursuing topics and subjects in Arts & Humanities that were related to blackness, and how this correlates to successful academic performance.

- *The way that students are treated by staff members; it can lead to low self esteem/being awarded worse marks*
- *It may be apparent during supervisions by some exclusion from the discussion when topics in the lectures are being covered*
- *Discussions with supervisors, where there may be an assumed lack of knowledge*

Representation within the staff was also raised as a distinguishing factor between STEM and Arts & Humanities learning experiences, one student stating that not seeing BAME representation made it 'difficult to push through when the workload gets tough' as well as it being 'demotivating'. We don't currently have the statistics of the ethnic representation of staff in the two sectors, but from the survey responses, can assume that the makeup of the STEM teaching staff is primarily white. Again, this points to an issue of welfare, lack of representation doesn't just feed into imposter syndrome, but also makes it difficult for students to reach out for help within the faculty if they are finding things difficult. Similarly, the issue of lack of mentors was raised, this is a problem due to the small numbers of black students in STEM, making it difficult for current students to navigate the space without informal guidance and support.

- *The fact that I haven't had a single non-white lecturer in a year and a half is something I find kind of demotivating. If you don't see anyone like you teaching here makes it difficult to push through when the work load gets tough, and also the feeling of being less comfortable/not fitting in as*

*much in supervisions and not feeling comfortable to ask as many questions might be a factor, although could just be a Cambridge thing for everyone.*

### **Unconscious or racial bias in STEM subjects**

In the question of where racial bias could occur in STEM subjects, the issue of unconscious bias came up often. Students reported that although the subject material is 'neutral', supervisors can still 'assume' the knowledge of their students and behave accordingly, and many times, this assumption is that their black students know less than their white counterparts. Some mentioned feeling 'excluded' from supervision discussions therefore, and receiving less support and instruction. 'Low self-esteem' seems to be the perceived conclusion from such behaviour from staff members, which of course can translate itself into low academic performance through the anxiety, lack of confidence and frustration it can cause.

Beyond this, some students mentioned the assumed 'neutrality' of STEM subjects, stating that much of the course content considers only 'Western and supposedly neutral' theories. This student asks the question of if the content of STEM is racially neutral, when there is a clear pattern of the kinds of theorists that are celebrated and cited. Again, this relates to the issue of lack of representation.

Perhaps most interestingly, although not directly related to the question, was one student's response stating that they felt a 'pressure to prove that BME individuals can be good at science'. Although this is not an example of racial bias coming externally, it does demonstrate how the feelings of isolation mentioned above can culminate in an exaggerated sense of responsibility to do well. Such pressure cannot be healthy and could most definitely lead to the opposite of the intentions, such as burning out or not doing as well as one has hoped because of the emotional burden and toll placed on oneself:

- *While I would expect that there is less racial bias in STEM subjects, you can't discount the impact of microaggressions or unconscious bias on black students, just in day-to-day experiences in College or their feelings of confidence in speaking up in class. Crossover with welfare and academic performance can't be discounted.*
- *I think it is the impact on welfare that then affects academic performance in STEM subjects, rather than direct confrontations with ideas about race*

Overall, the conclusions from the students were largely based around the idea that it was the negative impact on welfare that was indirectly affecting academic performance. Impacts on welfare came from unconscious bias in supervisions, which causes lack of confidence, lack of mentors and black or BAME supervisors and lectures which fuels a feeling of isolation, this is expounded by the small numbers of black students in these subjects that means that an informal network of support is also almost non-existent. The survey demonstrates the importance of analysing experiences as well as quantitative research.

### **Exam Results Analytics:**

We reviewed the attainment gaps by the courses where the largest proportion of numbers of black students were clustered in the current academic year, in both STEM and Arts/Humanities subjects. In 2019/2020, for STEM the largest proportionate cluster of black students is in Architecture (10 black students making 11.90% of the population across all years of study), followed by Psychology (10 black students making 6.99% of the population across all years of study). For Arts/ Humanities the largest proportionate cluster of black students is in Land Economy (7 black students making 7.87% of the population across all years of study), followed by Human, Social and Political Science with 31 black students making 7.62% of the population across all years of study).

Our reading of the attainment gaps as visualised in the Exam Results Dashboard (looking manually course by course, by 'good honours', by UK domiciled and by grouped ethnicity) showed us that the attainment gaps for black students was similar across the STEM and non-STEM subjects with the highest proportion

of black students, if not worse. Please see attachment for screenshots of the Exam Results Analytics data visualisation of the four courses (STEM: Architecture and Psychology, Arts/Humanities: Land Economy and HPS).

(Note: We acknowledge that this visualisations of the attainment gap are indicative and not statistically reliable, given the small numbers of graduating black students in the previous five years, which also meant that the gaps fluctuated wildly between years depending on an individual black British students' academic success.)

Nonetheless, this data showed that the attainment gaps between STEM and Arts/Humanities black British students were similar, if not actually worse for STEM students. This was not what we expected to find, so our assumptions were challenged.

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

### **Increased research**

Due to small numbers of students, the focus needs to be on qualitative data: the experiences of black STEM students. Further investigation is needed into the cause of attainment gaps for these students as it is not likely caused by the material they are studying.

Further collection of data as the numbers of black students increase. This will improve the validity of conclusions drawn from quantitative data provided by the Business Information Team and observable in the Exam Results Analytics dashboard.

### **Cross-referencing**

Beyond the scope of this small project are some questions that need further investigation: How does class, gender and sexuality play into black attainment gaps? For instance, are there systematic demographic differences between black students in STEM vs those in Arts/Humanities?

### **Staff role models**

Overall there are very few black or BME staff role models available for students. This impacts on black students' sense of belonging and confidence to speak up in class or seek support, which will inevitably impact their academic performance and attainment.

### **Mentorship**

There currently exists only informal networks of mentorship for black students, mostly in schemes ran by the African-Caribbean Society and the CUSU BME Campaign. Formalising and resourcing such networks and ensuring that there are extra welfare provisions placed for black STEM students can be the start of addressing the identified problems with academic performance and attainment.

Formalising these networks can be done by running these schemes through the department and advertising it through the Faculty, not just through the societies. The Faculty should also be responsible in monitoring the networking relationships and ensuring that students are having their welfare needs met.

### **Racial bias and sensitivity training**

Not just necessary for STEM staff, but all, however, in this context, as students have raised specific issues about feeling 'excluded' and 'isolated' in supervisions, largely because 'assumptions' of knowledge and other racial biases, it may be worthwhile looking into what these biases are exactly, and offering training to staff on racial sensitivity.

## **8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS**

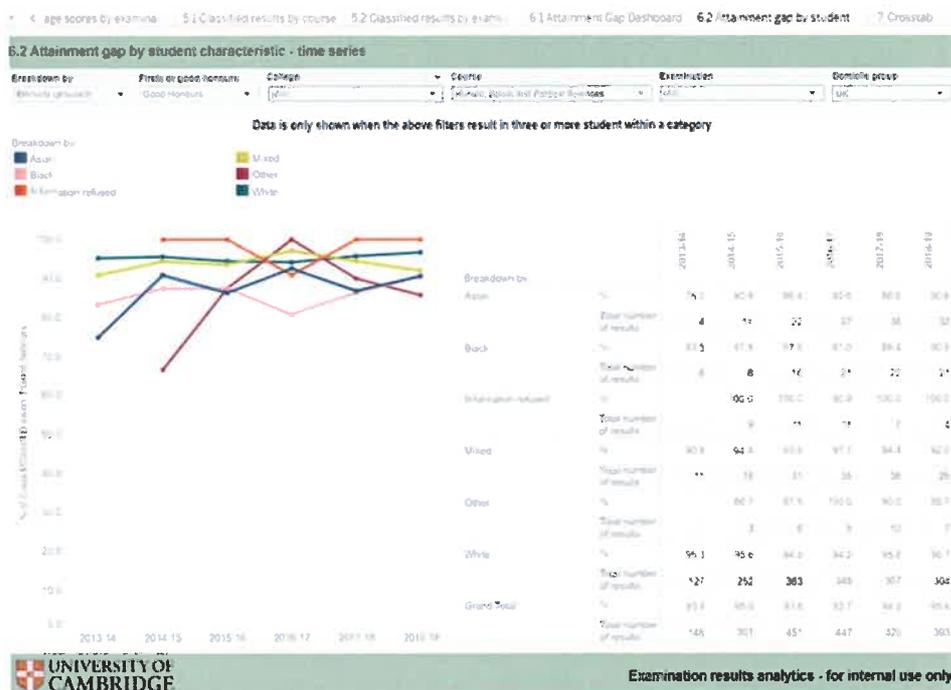
1. That the Business Information Team develop a tool within the Exam Results Analytics dashboard that would allow a comparison of attainment gaps by STEM and Arts/Humanities.
2. That more research be undertaken about the teaching, learning and assessment experiences within STEM and the impact on students' academic performance and attainment gaps (by ethnicity, disability and gender)
3. That welfare support and avenues to find informal or formal academic mentors are clearly communicated and resourced for black British students in STEM.

## Appendix: STEM vs Arts/Humanities Attainment Gaps in Exam Results Analytics

The following images are screenshots of the data visualisation of selected STEM and Arts/Humanities subjects, filtered to look at good honours results for UK domiciled undergraduates across 5 years.

### Human, Social and Political Science (Arts/Humanities)

This is one of the courses with the highest numbers & % proportion of black British students to white students. Note in the graph below that all results cluster in quite a high percentage range: this is typical of Arts/Humanities that tend to give higher results overall. The attainment gap between black British students (pink line) and white students (dark green line) is observable and sustained across 5 years, but relatively narrow.



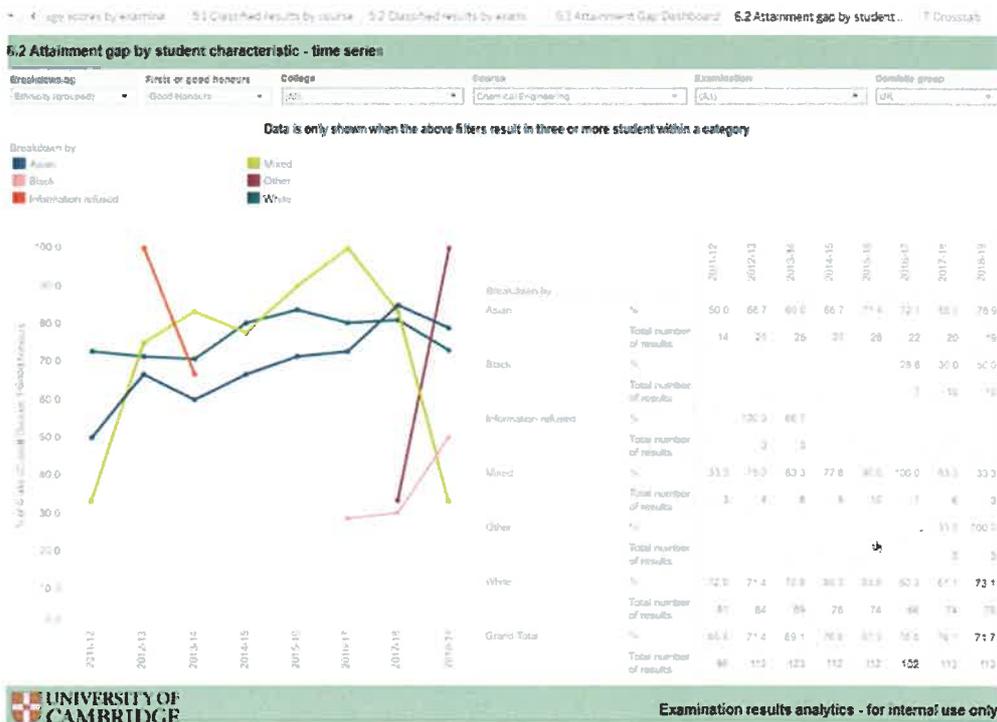
### Architecture (STEM)

This is the STEM course with the highest no of black British students and % proportion against the whole student population. Note that there are much wider and more erratic spikes in attainment for the black British students (the pink line) while the white students (dark Green remain stable. This is attributed to very small numbers of black students, where one students' performance will have an impact on overall course outcomes. Also note that overall, the outcomes for all students are in a much lower range across all five years: this is typical of STEM subjects that tend to give lower % marks.



### Chemical Engineering (STEM)

Because one of the student co-researchers on this project is studying Chemical Engineering, we are also including a snapshot of the attainment gap for this course. This graph shows a very wide attainment gap, as well as missing years of data for the black students (the pink line). This indicates small numbers of black students in this course (it was only in 2018/2019 that more than three graduated, so that their numbers would be represented in the Exam Results Analytics). In the last academic year there were 12 black British students, and this year there are 6.





## Project 3: Black Student Advisory Hub

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	✓
	Disability/Mental Health student	
Topic	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	✓
Specific research question	Would Black British students and staff at Cambridge benefit from a centralised means of educational support, such as an Advisory Hub?	
Student co-researchers	Tyra Amofah-Akardom, undergraduate Education	
	Bobby Mugo, undergraduate, History and Politics	
	Folu Ogunyeye, undergraduate, Human, Social and Political Science	

2. Executive summary:
<p>This project explored student perceptions of the value of a centralised support network or “Advisor Hub” that would provide both pastoral and academic support for specifically Black British students. To our minds, this was the most direct and impactful way to address the concerns about Black students sense of belonging and the attainment gaps, while also providing an opportunity for staff to engage with or find opportunities for professional development in the ways that they could more effectively support their Black British students. We conducted our research by sending out a survey through streams that interact with Black students the most – namely, the African-Caribbean Society (ACS). We asked the student respondents about the support systems that Black students currently use and whether or not they believe they would benefit from this Advisory Hub if it were to be resourced and realised within Cambridge. The findings of the project indicate that an Advisory Hub would be of value to students and staff interested in more effectively supporting their students, but that care would need to be taken in the development and resourcing of such a Hub, so as not to over-burden student and staff volunteers, and to avoid potential hostility or resistance to dedicated support for Black students.</p>

3. Rationale
<p>There are two main reasons that we decided that having such a Hub would be an interesting proposal to make to address the attainment gap between Black students and their counterparts. The first thing that we addressed and highlighted when discussing the issues within Cambridge is the fragmented nature of the University due to the different colleges and faculties. We identified that this creates issues for all students, but particularly Black students, in terms of locating support that addressed their particular needs and perspectives. We also identified that some places more so than others in Cambridge have such a lack of diversity that systems to support Black students in particular may not even exist to begin with. When discussing the idea of a Hub, we decided what we would want such a Hub to encompass, and we identified that not only is academic support important, but also pastoral support which we recognise has a significant impact on academic performance. All three of us who worked on this project have experience in some form of welfare work: Tyra is currently a CUSU Welfare</p>

and Rights Part-Time Executive, Folu is the outgoing ACS Welfare Officer and Bobby is the incoming ACS Welfare Officer. We understand that having issues outside of the academic that arise and persist throughout studying at university can affect the way in which a student performs.

#### 4. Existing evidence

As we started this project, we researched other competitive universities in the UK higher education sector to see if there are any models of a specifically Black Student Advisory Hub. We failed to find an example in the UK, with the primary issue we came across was the categorisation of racial groups as BAME rather than just Black students, who have the most issues with attainment gaps at Cambridge. BAME includes so many other ethnicities that such a broad focus would obscure the particular academic and welfare issues experienced by Black students at this University. We decided to look at examples in North America, and found the most desirable template from Dalhousie University in Canada. They have what they call a Black Student Advising Centre, where they not only have help that they can refer Black students to in terms of their academics, but also point them to places where they can find societies and clubs to connect with people, and also where they can find support in terms of their academics and funding. They also have a calendar where they post events that may be of interest to Black students. The Dalhousie Black Student Advising Centre has a strong web presence in the University and is staffed by a Black Student Advisor and a Community Outreach and Transition to University Coordinator.

The Dalhousie Black Student Advising Centre: [https://www.dal.ca/campus\\_life/communities/black-student-advising.html](https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/communities/black-student-advising.html)

We thought that this would be the most desirable model to replicate in the Cambridge context as it highlights the significance of pastoral support in providing students with a fulfilled university experience, but also considers things that we didn't, such as providing financial support for Black students.

#### 5. Generation of evidence

There were three stages in the data collection for this project.

**Stage one:** focus group discussion with the other Black British student co-researchers in the APP PAR project, in order to identify the places where our student peers looked for academic and pastoral support, and what they found missing, hard to locate, or inappropriate for their specific needs. This discussion formalised our interest in proposing a specifically Black Student Advisory Hub. We discussed how, while this might be resources intensive for the university, it would have an immediate impact. We also discussed the need for more than just student support networks, but for a Hub that could coordinate teaching staff professional development around race issues in educational contexts. While staff allies exist in different Faculties and Colleges, we understand that there are challenges to the exchange of ideas and resources to support Black students, or to consider how critical race theory can inform different disciplinary interests.

**Stage two:** In order to collect a broader range of Black student perspectives for our project, we sent out a survey through the African and Caribbean Society, which included a range of closed and open questions about the support systems that students currently use and their opinion about the proposed Black Students Advisory Hub. The survey received 36 responses, from students in 16 different disciplines across STEM and Arts/Humanities subjects. While the number of responses is limited, the patterns that emerged in responses from across the collegiate University has been helpful in providing an insight into current student perspectives.

**Stage three:** the project team met with the Head of the Equality and Diversity Unit to discuss the role of Race & Equality Champions and School Equality Champions, and how the proposal for a Black Advisory Hub would dovetail with the recommended actions in the Race Equality Charter action plan. This discussion informed our understanding that an Advisory Hub would be of value to both students and staff within Cambridge, and could be a way of coordinating and supporting other student and staff-facing initiatives to narrow the attainment gap (such as the proposal to resource and support student mentoring schemes and an anti-racist glossary).

## 6. Small project research findings: Please describe new evidence and findings

### **What kinds of support do Black students currently access and value**

We started by asking students to tell us where they sought and received support, and how satisfied they were with this support.

Satisfaction with pastoral care and wellbeing support from the University and Colleges:

- 0% of participants were very satisfied
- 50% of participants stated they were satisfied
- 20% of participants were unsure/indifferent
- 20% of participants were unsatisfied
- 10% of participants were very unsatisfied

This shows that generally speaking, there is a significant enough dissatisfaction with the support systems currently provided from Cambridge

Satisfaction with University/college/CUSU support on issues related to race:

- 0% of participants were very satisfied
- 10% of participants stated they were satisfied
- 50% of participants were unsure/indifferent
- 30% of participants were unsatisfied
- 10% of participants were very unsatisfied

This shows that generally speaking, more students are indifferent and unsatisfied with the way the University reacts to issues relating to race in particular

### **Would an Academic Advisory Hub be useful for students:**

- 40% of survey respondents think it would be useful
- 33% of participants think it could potentially be useful

We conclude that in general, the response is positive. Some supportive comment include:

- *“Creates a network of both black undergraduates and post-graduates which would provide a value resource for everyone. Also by seeing black post-grads would provide us with a vision of where we could be.”*
- *“Yes - having a space we can turn to specifically for us would be a safe haven and would save us a lot of emotional turmoil trying to find people who will fight for us”*
- *“It would allow Black students, as a distinct minority here in Cambridge, to have a safe space where support (pastorally/academically) can be given in times of need outside of other current College/University support systems*

Of the respondents who did not respond positively to the proposal, we identified that there was some apprehension that a specifically Black resource would attract hostility from other students:

- *“it sounds like an amazing idea theoretically but I’m apprehensive of how this would sort of segregate black students from the rest of the student body”*
- *“it would be likely to get a hostile response from certain white students which would potentially negatively affect us even more”*

**Would an Academic Advisory Hub be useful for staff:**

- 50% of participants think it would be useful
- 21% of participants think it could potentially be useful
- 0% of participants think it wouldn’t be useful

Slightly more respondents found a value in the Advisory Hub for staff than for students:

- *“Staff may be able to handle things related to Black students a lot better which will make our experiences far more comfortable”*
- *“People from different departments who may not otherwise interact with each other, now have the opportunity to do so.”*
- *“This would be particularly useful for Black staff for the same reasons as for students but also for many non-Black staff, where they can be educated about how to best support Black students. It also allows for connections to be made between Black students and staff, which will provide more opportunity for Black students.”*
- *“I think such a hub would potential be more useful for Careers and professional development than academics”*

We conclude that students are keen for staff to access resources, training and professional development that would enable them to better support their Black students. In this way, the Advisory Hub would help Black students by providing staff with opportunities to support students, across disciplines and across the University, in both Colleges and Faculties, and in professional services units, like Counselling.

As a final note, at the 24 February Forum for the APP PAR group, we presented our proposal for an Advisory Hub to support Black students and staff. Student co-researchers as well as invited senior staff from across the collegiate University provided feedback, some of which is collated below:

- *“The fragmented nature of Cambridge is an issue for black students – this makes the Hub really important”*
- *Online hub to start is pragmatic – physical hub would be difficult to have permanently but maybe weekly or monthly? “*
- *“Pointing out the impact that negative responses to initiatives for black students could have (e.g. hostility) is really important – thank you”*
- *“Good luck – I hope you get the hub running.”*

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

The main outcomes we identified is that Black students are currently more likely to gravitate towards outside support for their wellbeing or academic performance, than to the current University services, relying particularly on friend and family networks. This suggests that there has to be some form of modification when it comes to the systems in place to ensure that Black students are more comfortable using them if they need to.

The dissatisfaction that student expressed in relation to the University services is also a red flag that needs to be addressed. In term of the Advisory Hub, the apprehension about hostility from white students is also a concern, and shows that extra sensitivity has to be taken with this project. The same way that student representatives from the BME Campaign and the ACS were consulted for this broader APP PAR project is the same way that it would be beneficial for Black students to be involved in the building and maintaining of the Advisory Hub. This will mean resources and care that the students will not be overburdened. The same is true for staff engagement with the building of an Advisory Hub. The lack of representation of Black people here must be taken into account, and they must be consulted in order to come to solutions. While there are challenges in developing and maintaining a BAME staff network across the collegiate university, with the burden falling on BAME staff to advise both students and other staff members, a paid coordinating role in the Advisory Hub, for at least one staff member, would lessen this burden.

Whilst numbers of Black students are still small in this University, the level of enthusiasm in response to our project is a great starting point for working towards an Advisory Hub. The Black experience is not homogeneous but having a place where unconscious bias and racism and can be challenged and people can come for support is vital. The Hub would be a way to bring together varying opinions and challenge this issue which is ultimately never going to have a quick fix. It would also provide a coordinating centre for some of the other related initiatives to address the Black British students' attainment gap at Cambridge.

## **8. RECOMMENDED ACTION**

1. That an online Black Student and Staff Advisory Hub be resourced and developed  
This is a short term aim, that will meant the collation of information about existing services and events that support Black students could be located in one place.
2. That a physical space in Cambridge be dedicated to a Black Student and Staff Advisory Hub  
This is a long term aim, that there would be a place for face-to-face interactions and support by people trained in issues that impact black British students, including pastoral, academic and financial. It would not necessarily have to be open permanently, but perhaps once a week. It should have staff with dedicated workload, rather than relying on volunteers.



## Project 4: Mentoring

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	✓
	Disability/Mental Health student	
Topic <i>The broad educational point that impacts student performance/ attainment gaps</i>	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	✓
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
Specific research question	To what extent are Black British students adequately supported by mentors or mentoring networks at Cambridge?	
Student co-researchers	Freya Lewis, undergraduate student, History	
	Abdi Guleid, undergraduate student, Human, Social and Political Science	

2. Executive summary:
<p>The aim of this research project was investigate whether Black British students in Cambridge are provided with adequate academic mentors, and whether mentors were considered by students to be a useful educational strategy to narrow the attainment gap. We conducted interviews with our co-researchers and disseminated a survey to members of the Cambridge African and Caribbean Society asking about the formal and informal mentoring currently experienced by other Black British students, and their perceptions of their value in Cambridge, where there were a range of other non-Black student specific support and mentoring schemes, such as College ‘families’. We found that most Black students in our sample had not been mentored by another Black student, or had engaged as a mentor themselves, though the majority recognised that Black student-student mentoring could be very valuable for a range of academic, peer support and social reasons. However, there were some concerns about the undue burden this mentoring put on students. Regarding staff-student mentoring, students believed that staff generally were supportive but Faculties were not always equipped to deal with the specific academic or welfare needs of Black students, which could have an impact on their academic performance, for instance where students were not supported to follow their research interests, particularly when these interests touched on topics related to race.</p>

### 3. Rationale:

We decided to pursue this project due to a comment which came up frequently in the co-researcher forums in the discussions about the reasons for the attainment gap for Black British students, and was also common in conversations amongst students outside of this project: that Black students often feel isolated in their Faculties or Colleges and do not feel that they have adequate academic mentors and role models to encourage them in their studies.

This led us to consider whether Black students believed that they received adequate academic guidance from staff members such as their DOSs, supervisors and lecturers in the first place - and if they did not, who else these students might turn to for support.

The research focus was also inspired by the project team noticing a tendency of Black students acting as academic mentors for each other, in schemes such as the one facilitated by relevant student societies that offer newer students the opportunity to be paired with a more senior student. We wanted to interrogate the upsides and limitations of this practice.

Our results indicate that, whilst there was a general agreement from our respondents that there is a need for mentoring schemes that support the specific needs of Black British students, they have had diverse experiences of the types of academic support already available to Cambridge students. We interpreted this as meaning that different Faculties and Colleges support Black students with varying levels of success and that, therefore, more targeted research needs to be done within subjects/disciplines to understand what kind of support works best, or how support might be improved in ways that better support the academic and welfare needs of Black students in Cambridge.

Students have filled in the gaps in the available support system by participating in informal mentoring activities. These peer support schemes are valuable – but the project team noted that this informal work can be a burden on other students. For this reason, they believe that a formalised and resourced mentoring scheme for Black students by staff would take some of the burden of mentoring off students themselves by making more strategic use of the existing Race and Equality Champion networks across the university and within Schools, and extend these to offer targeted support to Black students. We feel that this will be a practical way of narrowing the attainment gap and improving the educational experience of Black students.

### 4. Existing evidence

We were not able to access research that explicitly addressed the topic of academic mentoring and Black British students, particularly by staff members. The literature we did find was from the United States, which tends to emphasise that students who have mentors found that they had a significant impact on both their confidence and in their academic performance. For example, Kendricks, Nedunuri, and Arment (2013) report on a programme which included various activities relating to personal and professional development for BAME scholars, out of all these activities the research found that “each year mentoring was consistently rated as having the largest impact on their academic performance” (p.38). Furthermore, Fries-Britt and Snider (2015) argue that “connections to

campus agents like faculty and staff are the strongest predictors of success among college students in general” (see also Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and they explore the barriers minority ethnic students may experience in predominantly white institutions and argue “Mentoring can be an effective strategy to combat many of these challenges” (p.3).

In the UK higher education sector we found that there is some precedent for academic mentoring schemes at other institutions in response to identified attainment gaps for BAME students.

#### **Student academic mentoring programmes**

- The University of Hertfordshire supports a central peer mentoring programme: <https://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/outreach-and-widening-participation/mentoring>. In addition, it has a well-developed student-staff partnership programme with a focus on narrowing the attainment gaps for BAME students by supporting the BAME Student Advocate Programme. This programme involves 4 student partners working with central university units, as well as school based student ‘advocates’. The student advocates are compensated for the time and are given development training in unconscious bias, public speaking, working in committees and curriculum critiquing. In this way, the student advocates’ roles moved from “representation to advocacy”.
- SOAS University of London developed a number of educational interventions in response to the publication of the report *Degrees of racism: A qualitative investigation into ethnicity attainment gaps at SOAS* (SOAS, 2016). One of these interventions involved the development of a BAME mentoring programme in which staff from BAME backgrounds mentor students from BAME backgrounds

#### **Staff academic mentoring programmes**

- The University of Portsmouth has showcased their ‘personal tutors’ programmes at recent *Closing the BAME the Attainment Gap conferences* sponsored by Universities UK and Advance HE (2019 and 2020). This Raising Awareness and Aspiration project was developed in partnership with the University of Sheffield and King’s College London and involved the development of a personal tutoring platform which enables all personal tutors to connect with their personal tutees, with a specific focus on personally welcoming all BAME students, as well as mentoring of tutors by Senior Tutors about the attainment gap issues in different courses of study.

Overall, however, we found it difficult to find examples and research that compared the differences in value of the staff-student and student-student academic mentoring schemes in the UK, which became the focus of our research project. The difficulty we experienced in finding examples of mentoring schemes that would be suitable in a Cambridge context, and which would address the needs of Black British students in particular, made our research even more important to us.

#### **References**

- Universities UK (2019) Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Attainment at UK Universities <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.pdf>
- Fries-Britt, S., & Snider, J. (2015). Mentoring outside the line: The importance of authenticity, transparency, and vulnerability in effective mentoring relationships. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2015(171), 3-11.

- Kendricks, K., Nedunuri, K. V., & Arment, A. R. (2013). Minority student perceptions of the impact of mentoring to enhance academic performance in STEM disciplines. *Journal of STEM Education: Innovations and Research*, 14(2).
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (Vol. 2). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- SOA (2016) *Degrees of racism: A qualitative investigation into ethnicity attainment gaps at SOAS* <https://soasunion.org/liberation/attainmentgaps/>

## 5. Generation of evidence

We started the project with a group discussion about our and our co-researchers experience of Black student-student mentoring schemes, and of the variety of existing Cambridge staff-student mentoring available in Colleges and Faculties. Following these discussions we narrowed down the focus of the project and devised a series of questions to be circulated via an online survey to the black student community in Cambridge. We also decided to follow up with some more in-depth interviews with volunteer student co-researchers using the same questions used in the survey, but with more opportunity for depth and reflection.

- Survey: overall there were 36 respondents to the survey.
- Interviews: 6 interviews were carried out with fellow student co-researchers

The questions were centred around 2 central themes:

1. Student-student mentoring between Black students: the experience of mentoring from other students and what students believed were the strengths and limitations of the practice
2. Staff-student academic mentoring: whether students felt supported in their Faculties by academic staff and whether or not students believed that having an academic staff trained in providing the needs for black students could have a positive impact.

## 6. Small project research findings

### 1. Student-student mentoring between Black students

Overall, we found that majority of student respondents had not received mentoring from another Black student, nor been a mentor. However, the majority of respondents also recognised that having mentorship networks amongst Black students was or would be useful. Some comments explained their recognition of the value of Black student peer mentoring:

- *“This because when white people are able to have access to academic mentorship from supervisors and people who have years of experience in the field, it naturally puts black people as having a disadvantage. Other students are in a similar boat and may not fully*

*grasp concepts or have the ability of hindsight which can help develop their fellow black students”*

- *“Yea, non-BME students often aren't aware of the race-related struggles that black students have to incur on a daily basis, on top of the stresses of Tripos and generally being at Cambridge.”*

A number of hesitations were noted to the student-student or peer mentoring activities amongst Black students:

- *“There might be very few students who have studied your subject”*
- *“Black students tend to prefer to stay around other ethnic students to help them settle in and feel welcomed here in Cambridge. However, due to the very small proportion of these students, it is likely to be more difficult for Black students to get guidance from other students, particularly those who are also Black”*

Some respondents noted the time burden on students to contribute: :

- *“It's not necessarily a bad thing, but it takes time away from what we should be getting as part of the course. We should be able to have content tailored to our interests and the fact we must depend on someone else is unfair and is more time consuming for us!*
- *“Unfairly places the burden on students and allows faculties to elide responsibility of making the content more objectively accessible”*
- *“We all have existing pressures and time constraints. Mentoring someone consistently on top of this (as well as e mentoring many of us give to year 12/13 students) would be a lot”*
- *“ I don't think it's fair that we the students have to take on all these responsibilities and burdens for free”*

There was a call for more support from the University to train or otherwise resource the currently informal network of Black student peer mentoring:

- *“It wouldn't be fair on the mentor to feel like whether or not they continue to provide support will affect how their mentees do, as the mentor should be supported by the University, and the mentees should feel able to turn to alternative formal forms of support if the mentor is no longer willing or able to continue providing academic mentorship”*
- *“There is no official structure for such a programme so it's hard to know where to help and how much. Black students are themselves going through a lot and mentoring someone else when you, yourself are having a hard time is a lot to take on. Especially since these black students haven't been given any training to support and mentor another student.”*

## **2. Staff-student academic mentoring for Black students**

The good news was that 78% of Black student respondents to the survey felt that they are adequately supported by staff at Cambridge. However, majority of students (69%) were either unsure (31.58%) or disagreed with (36.84%) the statement that their Faculty was equipped to accommodate the academic needs of Black students. Thus, while staff are generally supportive, when it comes to meeting the specific needs of black students, there is less or inconsistent support. This is concerning in light of the black attainment gap.

Some students who felt as if they'd had no staff academic mentoring felt that they had not been able to always pursue their academic interests:

- *"Currently, every paper that I take is compulsory so I have not yet been readily given the option to pursue my academic interests. In spite of this, I would have found it helpful to have an academic mentor to show me the possibilities within the subjects that I find difficult or uninteresting. I would have liked to speak to someone who could give me perspective in order to persevere in the topics that I don't enjoy but must take. This is especially important as there are very few people in the years above who even take my subject"*
- *"I don't have [access to a mentor], so there's little guidance or focus on the things I find interesting and how to access those"*
- *"They could help me overcome my insecurities about tackling predominantly white narratives and ways of thinking and refine my own methods of understanding and analysing the work"*

Others found themselves unable to do dissertation topics pertaining to race, for example:

- *"My interests are often challenged with hostility which is a shame. But I'm fortunate enough to have a DoS who fights my corner and have had some supervisors who are the same"*
- *"I came in to university with an interest in exploring race in the law and it's not something I have been able to discuss at all so far. I'd like to do my dissertation on this topic but I don't know any supervisors or faculty members who can steer me in the right direction"*

### **Role-modelling and shared experiences**

Responses placed emphasis in terms of an individual who could understand experiences and difficulties:

- *"You do not know what you are missing if you have never had it. However, by not having a mentor, it makes it harder for me to envision myself as an academic and I don't see myself becoming one, particularly at Cambridge. Not being able to see people who look like me does discourage me and creates the environment that I am not welcome or even have a place here. So having a mentor who just actually understands the difficulties would be extremely helpful".*
- *"I would just have restored faith in academia and an extra push from someone who is in the field. It would reassure me that I have a place here".*
- *"It would be nice to speak to someone who can validate the experience of feeling socially isolated at times and who can see the possible link between that experience and being Black British"*
- *"It would be nice to speak to someone who can validate the experience of feeling socially isolated at times and who can see the possible link between that experience and being Black British".*
- *"I feel that having support from someone who understands your background would be more beneficial. Especially in later years when I would have the chance to study politics in a broader sense".*

### **Concerns about student-deficit approaches**

A few respondents were concerned about the specificity of the support for Black students, and of the impression this might give:

- *“There may not always be this sort of structure especially when you get to the workplace for example so the independence element may not be developed. It also can promote the mentality of not being able to support yourself as a black student without outside help”*

There were varying comments about whether the support should be academic or welfare related, and if it was academic, whether it would only be valuable if it was discipline specific:

- *“On the academic side, I don't particularly see the value in having mentors. But that is mainly because I am not entirely aware of the differing needs of Black British students in an academic sense. Outside of academics, there is definitely need for tutors or mentors specialised in this area, but I'm not convinced that the academic needs and facilities differ based on the race of the individual”*
- *“In STEM, the benefit would be more pastoral than academic”*
- *“I think this would be beneficial only if there was one catered to each subject therefore they could understand the academic needs of that particular subject”*

In summary, despite some concerns about how mentoring schemes that targeted Black students would be resourced or perceived, there seemed to be general agreement with the sentiment expressed by one respondent:

- *“This would be extremely useful in helping to settle in new Black students with Cambridge work and the lifestyle here. Also, it would help current Black students feel more confident about their academic performance and feel like we have the ability to be level with non-Black students”*

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

Our findings indicated a variety of experience of mentoring amongst the Black student population at Cambridge. This suggests some inconsistencies amongst Faculties and Colleges in supporting Black students, and also that Black students have different needs that may be discipline specific. This indicates a need for further research with a larger sample, headed by individual Faculties, into whether their Black student cohort are supported in their academic interests, or are provided with appropriate academic support.

Generally, there was a widespread recognition of the value of more opportunities staff-student mentoring being provided for Black students ( preferably discipline-specific).

Despite the perceived value of informal Black student-student mentoring, our results suggested that there is a need to take the burden of mentoring off students and to make more use of the Equality and Diversity Unit's network of Race Champions and School Equality Advocates to have more of a focus on addressing the needs of Black students and further investigating the reasons for the attainment gaps, as well as developing appropriate discipline-specific educational interventions.

## 8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. That the current Black student-student mentoring schemes coordinated by student societies be provided with resourcing, professional training and development opportunities for Black student mentors
2. That the University further develop the existing network of Race and Equality Champions or BAME staff to include training and guidance on issues relating to the Black attainment gaps and to encourage and support staff academic mentors of Black students across the collegiate University
3. That Schools and/or Faculties build on the existing School Equality Network (that currently focuses on gender) to nominate, resource and train staff to mentor Black students in order to better meet their discipline-specific academic and pastoral needs

## Project 5: Extended Period of Leave ('Double Time')

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	
	Disability/Mental Health student	✓
Topic <i>The broad educational point that impacts student performance/ attainment gaps</i>	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	✓
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
	Other?	
Specific research question	What is the perceived value of 'Double Time' to disabled students with mental health conditions?	
Student co-researchers	Kerensa Gaunt, undergraduate student	

2. Executive summary: Please provide a summary of the small research project – aims, methods, findings (max 250 words)
<p>The project investigated student perceptions of whether availability of Extension to Period of Study (EPS), known colloquially at Cambridge as 'Double Time', affects continuation rates, attainment and well-being in disabled students with mental health conditions who are studying at the University of Cambridge. Qualitative data was obtained via written interviews with APP PAR co-researchers, and via open questions in an online survey that was circulated to students registered with the university Disability Resource Centre. The project found that the perceived effect of EPS availability on disabled students was overwhelmingly positive, but that many students considered the current implementation of both intermission and EPS to have a partially negative effect. We therefore recommend that awareness of EPS as an option is raised among staff (via training) and students (via online resources and via staff), and that small changes be made to the implementation of intermission and EPS to better support student well-being.</p>

3. Rationale: Please provide the background context which provided the impetus for the choice of research question
<p>The main researcher of this sub-project has been the student union representative for part time undergraduate students for two years (2018-2020), and has therefore had much experience advising students who experience barriers to participation in Cambridge, particularly due to chronic health (including mental illness).</p> <p>Co-researchers noted that students with long-term health problems were usually offered either full time study (100% rate) or intermission (0% rate), and neither staff nor students were usually aware of 'Double Time': a student-facing term for the Alternative Mode of Assessment 'Extension to Period of Study', where students may continue their studies at a reduced rate, for example 50%.</p>

While intermission is often appropriate for those with short-term barriers to study, such as an acute illness or family concerns that are expected to resolve, it is not always appropriate for those with long-term barriers. Chronic health problems, notably, are not expected to 'get better', and usual advice is not to 'recover', but to gain a sense of stability and learn to manage the condition alongside studies. Accessing EPS, therefore, could be better for individual disabled students' well-being than switching between 100% and 0% rate of study

A review was conducted into the guiding policy literature across the sector on extensions to periods of study and opportunities to shift to part time (see below), this included exploring the practices at competing universities.

However, the distinctive systems, practices and structures of this university necessitate context-specific research into the practicalities, constraints and opportunities of Extended Period of Study in the Cambridge context.

Early in the project it was determined that the following sub-questions needed to be answered:

- Whether or not there is an awareness of EPS among Disabled students at Cambridge?
- Whether disabled students perceive that EPS would benefit or impede their academic progress?
- How and why EPS might impact on academic progress or attainment?

#### 4. Existing evidence

##### Relevant Research

An initial review into the literature indicates that there is a real dearth in research into this area (*i.e.* the impact, importance and issues relating to extended periods of study for disabled students in Higher Education). However, similar topics provide evidence for the necessity and value of this focus. The Open University conducted research investigating the challenges, experiences and opportunities of part time study in the UK emphasising the importance of researching this topic given the "extent to which the experience of part-time higher education contributes to social mobility and widening participation" (The Higher Education Academy 2015, p.5 ). Their research received 1567 responses to a 25 Question online survey and they also conducted 22 semi-structured one-to-one interviews. They received important insight into understanding what difference part time study makes to people's lives and emphasised that issues around the impact of disability and long term health conditions figured strongly in the survey responses (22% reported learning choices being affected by persistent health issues: especially "coping with mental health problems, being on medication, managing hospital appointments, being housebound or facing deteriorating mobility issues were all reported". They explain that their research corroborates the findings from a Welsh study (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015) emphasising the relevance of more flexible study periods to students with long term conditions: "***for students in such circumstances, part-time higher education is a lifeline and should be even more accessible, rather than its availability being under threat***" (The Higher Education Academy 2015, p.5 ).

##### Context Across the Sector

A scoping review was conducted to explore the policies and practices around extending periods of studies at competing universities. Below we include examples of practice at competing universities.

- ❑ **Durham University:** Durham considers applications for part-time study from students “whose personal circumstances preclude them from undertaking full-time study (such as in cases of ill-health, for example)” ([Durham University Website](#)).
- ❑ **University of Edinburgh:** A student must seek permission from their Head of School to switch to part time (full details on Pages 7 and 8 of [this document](#)).
- ❑ **University of Exeter:** Part time is offered as an option in the ‘[Flexible study](#)’ offered at enrolment.
- ❑ **University of Oxford:** Rather than intermission, students are allowed to suspend their studies ([around 1000 do every year](#)) and they have a [large campaign](#) specifically related to suspension, reintegration, retention, well being and performance . The Vice Chancellor of Oxford has shown specific concern for the [treatment and wellbeing of students](#) who suspend their studies.

### **Relevant Policy**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has specific advice and guidance relating to enabling student achievement. This guidance places particular emphasis on “Clear, accessible and inclusive policies and procedures to enable students and staff to identify when support mechanisms may be required for academic and personal progression” (QAA, 2018/2019, p.3) as well as “Clear, consistent and accessible communication about opportunities and support available to students from pre-entry through to completion and beyond” (QAA, 2018/2019, p.3).

The guidance specifically highlights the value of regularly checking that policies impact students, especially those with protected characteristics (such as disability). Each policy is clearly linked to appropriate procedures to facilitate seamless identification of, and access to, any academic or other student support needs. The impact of current and proposed policies and procedures on students with protected characteristics is consistently assessed to identify and mitigate barriers to student development and achievement". (QAA, 2018/2019, p.3)

## **5. Generation of evidence**

Digital form filled in by students registered at DRC (short, quantitative)

- Digital form to reduce confidentiality concerns
- Answers given on a scale rather than free text for ease of analysis
- Respondents who completed this section: 73
  - Varies from 71 to 73 depending on question

Digital form filled in by co-researchers (interview style, qualitative)

- Digital form to allow co-researchers to reflect on their answers without time pressure
- Status as a student rep and as a co-researcher allowed for a level of trust and honesty in responses that staff-led surveys would not be able to achieve

## **6. Small project research findings**

**Quantitative data (short survey)**

Respondents were given brief information about **Extension to Period of Study ('Double Time')**. 51% had been previously (very) aware of 'DT', and **47% (very) unaware of 'DT'**. Considering that disabled students are the most relevant group for this mode of study, and that those engaged with disability provision are more likely to know about the options available to them, it is likely that general student

awareness of 'DT' is significantly lower than in this small sample, which **could currently reduce the likelihood of informed decision making in the wider student body.**

Respondents, having been briefly informed about EPS ('DT'), **broadly perceived there to be no unfair advantage for those studying 'DT':** 86% 'no', 14% 'maybe', 0% 'yes'

Respondents broadly perceived there to be a **positive effect on disabled students' wellbeing if 'DT' were an option:** 88% (strongly) positive, 1% (strongly) negative

**57% had considered intermission due to chronic health problems,** and 43% had not. Since many chronic health problems require long-term stability in order to learn to cope with the condition, it is disappointing that while over half of respondents had considered intermission (that is, switching between 100% and 0% rate of study), it is likely that many had not been aware of the possibility of for example 50% rate of study via EPS, which may have been more appropriate for them in learning to manage their condition long term. Despite the small sample size here, this data indicates that **it is likely that some students have considered intermission despite this not necessarily being the appropriate choice for their specific health needs.**

Were 'DT' an option, 56% of respondents considered themselves unlikely or less unlikely to consider intermission due to chronic health problems (32% neutral, 12% likely or more likely). If this trend is representative for the wider body of disabled students, **this suggests that wider knowledge of 'DT' would be relevant for perhaps half of potential intermissions due to chronic health.** Notably, this would not necessarily affect those intermitting for other reasons, such as acute illness or bereavement, which may have the possibility of 'recovery' to 100% capacity and where intermission is likely appropriate.

Were 'DT' an option, 70% of respondents considered themselves likely or more likely to be able to finish their degree (27% neutral, 3% unlikely or less likely). The trend from this small sample indicates that **increased awareness of EPS ('DT') could have a positive effect on the completion rates of many disabled students.** Notably almost a third of respondents were 'neutral', suggesting that awareness of 'DT' would not have any significant effect on some students, and only 2% (1 respondent) considered that it would be negative for their degree completion. **This suggests that increased awareness of 'DT' may have relatively low risk and high potential benefit** within the wider student body, allowing students to make informed decisions about their health and education.

Similarly, 73% of respondents felt that studying 'DT' could have a (strongly) positive effect on their own ability to fulfill their academic potential (21% neutral, 7% negative). Though not necessarily representative of the wider student body, this data suggests strong trends that merit further research and consideration.

#### **Qualitative data (interview style)**

**Content note:** disability discrimination, intermission with abusive family, destitution, sex work

Interviewees described offering EPS ('DT') as **enabling students with disabilities to continue with and finish their degree** in a way that only offering intermission ('disregarding terms') does not. In particular, interviewees mentioned disabled students who were not offered EPS and who intermitted for several years or did not return to their studies, who could have likely continued to study had EPS been offered to them.

Some interviewees described the **EPS application process as prohibitively long** (6+ months, sometimes ending in unnecessary intermission), as not transparent for the applicant.

Interviewees described **awareness of EPS as non-existent**, or as found out about only once it was too late. It was described as 'hidden', and as not mentioned on relevant DRC, faculty or college websites.

All interview participants had considered both EPS and intermission, or would have considered both had they known about EPS. 2 participants mentioned **offering only intermission as particularly inappropriate for disabled students who do not have a safe home environment to return to**. One participant mentioned disabled intermitting students as particularly vulnerable to sex work, due to their lack of eligibility for financial support.

The interviewees with personal experience of EPS described the alternative to EPS as

- "I would have been forced to withdraw [from my studies]"
- "[EPS] stopped me from being forced to return to an abusive family, or risking destitution if I refused to go back to live with them during intermission"
- "Undertaking this degree without EPS would have been impossible for me without severely affecting my mental and physical health"

Additional comments include:

- "The [university] environment can actually become **really disabling throughout your degree** if you have a health condition"
- "It seems not only that the university doesn't advertise Double Time, but rather that they **actively suppress and discourage the use of this mode of study**. This seems nothing short of discriminatory towards disabled students who are unable to study full time".

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

Current practice (offering either full time or intermission) does not enable all disabled students to continue and complete their studies. **Perceived outcomes for continuation, completion and well-being are improved for these students when EPS ('DT') is offered in addition to full time or intermission, with perceived risk of unfair advantage or of negative effects on students low.** However the implementation of EPS must still be improved to avoid disadvantaging disabled students.

Current practice during intermission is for the student to leave their college, usually for 1 year. Even if this period of intermission is necessary, its implementation can reduce well-being in some students, specifically those without a safe home environment to return to, and can in some cases lead to reliance on sex work due to ineligibility for financial support. **It must therefore be ensured not only that EPS has been offered, but that intermission, if offered, is implemented in a way that does not have a negative impact on their well-being.**

## **8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS**

That the EPS ('Double Time') application process be urgently reviewed, in order to: substantially reduce waiting time; involve student representation in the reviewing process; to provide guidance to staff and students about the process and as EPS as an alternative to intermission

A number of related actions will help implement this:

- That the review process aim to substantially reduce the application waiting time, to reflect the urgency of the decision for the disabled student
- That there be student representation, for example the student union's Disabled Students' Officer, involved in the review of the EPS application process
- That all staff and students should be made aware of EPS as an option, for example in introductory course meetings, college welfare and tutorial training, disability awareness sessions
- That information relating to EPS should be made freely and clearly available on college, faculty and university websites
- That staff offering intermission should also discuss with the student whether EPS might be appropriate for them
- That staff offering intermission should discuss with the student and the college to find options for intermission that are not detrimental to well-being, for example not returning the student to an abusive family or leaving the student without any accommodation or financial support

## Project 6: Content Notes

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	
	<b>Disability/Mental Health student</b>	✓
Topic <i>The broad educational point that impacts student performance/ attainment gaps</i>	Assessment & Feedback	
	<b>Teaching &amp; Learning</b>	✓
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
	Other?	
Specific research question	What are Cambridge student and staff understandings of the role and value of Content Notes in helping students engage with their study materials without risk to their mental health?	
Student co-researchers	Emma Carey, postgraduate student, Psychology	
	Emrys Travis, postgraduate student, MML	
	Maja Lezo, undergraduate student, Archaeology	

2. Executive summary
<p>We aimed to ascertain the usefulness of Content Notes at the University, and investigated whether their use could mitigate the attainment and retention gap between students with and without mental health conditions. We further investigated barriers to the widespread use of Content Notes with the goal of resolving student demand with staff reluctance.</p> <p>We used three data collection methods:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) a short survey that was sent to disabled students at the University;</li> <li>2) a more in-depth survey to our student co-researchers to gain richer qualitative information about how Content Notes may be beneficial; and</li> <li>3) a survey to staff members about their practice and ideology regarding Content Notes.</li> </ol> <p>Our findings highlight how and why Content Notes are useful to students, including their specific impact on students with mental health conditions. We have also identified concerns by staff, both erroneous and genuine, about the use of Content Notes and considered how barriers to their consistent implementation may be overcome to support students with mental health conditions in their attainment and retention at the University.</p>

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

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

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

#### 4. Existing evidence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## References

- Bentley, M. (2017). Trigger warnings and the student experience. *Politics*, 37(4), 470-485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716684526>
- Beverly, E., Díaz, S., Kerr, A., Balbo, J., Prokopakis, K., & Fredricks, T. (2017). Students' Perceptions of Trigger Warnings in Medical Education. *Teaching And Learning In Medicine*, 30(1), 5-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10401334.2017.1330690>
- Cares, A., Franklin, C., Fisher, B., & Bostaph, L. (2018). “They Were There for People Who Needed Them”: Student Attitudes Toward the Use of Trigger Warnings in Victimology Classrooms. *Journal Of Criminal Justice Education*, 30(1), 22-45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2018.1433221>
- Carter, A. (2015). Teaching with Trauma: Disability Pedagogy, Feminism, and the Trigger Warnings Debate. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 35(2). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v35i2.4652>
- Flaherty, C. (2015). *Professors Can't Decide What They Think About Trigger Warnings, Either*. Slate Magazine. Retrieved 27 February 2020, from <https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/12/trigger-warning-debate-some-professors-say-they-build-trust-others-say-they-stifle-discussion.html>.
- Fenner, S. (2018). Not So Scary: Using and Defusing Content Warnings in the Classroom. *Journal Of Political Science Education*, 14(1), 86-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2017.1359095>
- Halberstam, J. (2017). Trigger Happy: From Content Warning to Censorship. *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture And Society*, 42(2), 535-542. <https://doi.org/10.1086/688189>
- Lukianoff, G. & Haidt, G. (2015). *How Trigger Warnings Are Hurting Mental Health on Campus*. The Atlantic. Retrieved 27 February 2020, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>.

## 5. Generation of evidence

### Brief student survey

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

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

### Staff survey

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

### Student email “interview”

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

## 6. Small project research findings

### Staff survey

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

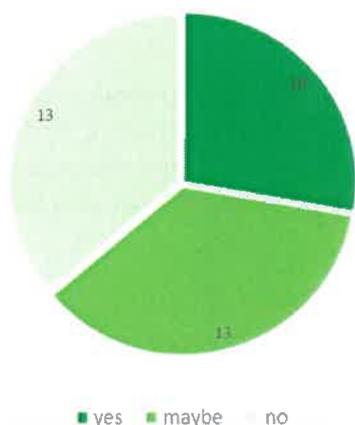
We asked staff what impact they felt Content Notes would have upon student wellbeing, engagement with course content, academic performance and the academic freedom of both staff and students. Responses to all these questions clustered around “unsure”, suggesting that many staff are amenable to various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

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

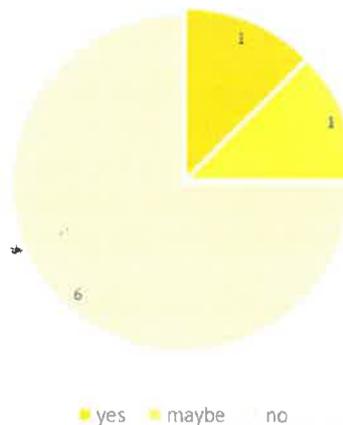
### Student survey

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

students with mental health conditions



students without mental health conditions



### Student email "interview"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"Most lecturers did not provide warning about distressing content. Sometimes such content was included **gratuitously** in an attempt to make lecture material less "dry". When asked to provide content notes, one lecturer told me that "suppressing information because a student has PTSD would be the same as not teaching about the harmful effects of cigarette smoke in case a student smoked". I was not asking him to suppress material, only to warn about it."*

*"In first year [Law] a compulsory paper is Criminal Law, which includes Sexual Offences. We tackle in detail issues of consent, rape etc. This involves lecturers going into **immense detail about historical cases**, often in a narrative fashion. This comes with **no warning or content notes**, and often (male) lecturers can have an incredibly blasé attitude to very upsetting stories."*

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

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

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

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

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

## 8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. That the University should endorse the guidelines for Content Notes developed by CUSU/DSC and encourage them to be adapted and adopted by Faculties for their staff, with instructions about how and when Content Notes should be used for any material that relates to common trauma (in particular: rape, sexual violence, physical violence, war, racial violence and other offences based on protected characteristics )
2. That Faculties should support staff in the development and delivery of Content Notes in their teaching and course material, educating them about the value of Content Notes and correcting misconceptions that students use them to avoid engaging
3. That Faculties should provide information to their students about Content Notes, acknowledging that they are a reasonable adjustment that they might request if not provided as a matter of course
4. That Faculties should develop processes whereby students might provide (optionally anonymous) constructive feedback on Content Note provision, thereby enabling a staff-student dialogue that will mutually develop and improve Content Note provision while also ensuring that students are not forced to disclose information about their specific traumatic experiences under their own name



## Project 7: Time Costs

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	
	Disability/Mental Health student	✓
Context	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	
	Learning development/skills support	✓
	University/College systems and processes	✓
	Other?	
Specific research question	What is 'Cambridge Time' and how does it penalise Disabled Students at the University of Cambridge? ( <i>"We have to use every moment of the day to keep up"</i> )	
Student co-researchers	Denicia Barnard	

2. Executive summary
<p>The lead co-researcher for this project (Denicia Barnard) sought to discover whether the concept of 'Cambridge Time', as defined by disabled students themselves, influences the attainment of Disabled Students. By exploring what 'Cambridge Time' is, how it creates persistent time penalties specifically for disabled students, and how these costs are negotiated/remedied, we hope to explore the barriers that are reducing the possibility of positive attainment, in order to address, mitigate and remove barriers to attainment. Data was gathered via two surveys, of varying length and disclosure, distributed both to the wider disabled student population and also our research group for ethical reasons.</p> <p>This research found that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disabled Students experience persistent barriers. The most common are time penalties in relation to accessing or processing materials, persistent battles with balancing side-effects of medication or conditions with university systems, chronic levels of fatigue, and different time demands to complete tasks when compared with able peers.</li> <li>• Disabled students are being required to advocate for themselves multiple times to different parties which is causing distress and is a persistent time cost.</li> <li>• Adjustments, where in place, are mostly thought to be useful, but students struggle with them being solely exam focussed.</li> <li>• Services such as Lecture Capture, Mentoring and Study Skills are recognised as ways to reduce Disability related time costs.</li> </ul> <p>Recommendations relate to: funding to enable co-developed Staff Training on diversity and inclusive practice; Lecture capture provisions as standard where possible. Increased access to mentoring and study skills, particularly for neurodivergent students. Looking at ways to speed up access to treatment (medication adjustment times remain an issue and the wider context of provisions is set to become more stretched; better internal infrastructure for mental health support could help translate this process into the 'Cambridge Time' context.</p>

### 3. Rationale

Cambridge students often reflect on how 'Cambridge Time', the pressure and intensity of the eight week terms and the skills necessary to balance competing academic demands is highly distinctive to this University: student- and staff-led internal research (Cooper and Harding, 2020), and student-perspective surveys, articles and reports (e.g. Hussein, Naylor-Perrott, & Richardson, 2019; Rokep Hewson, 2019) indicate that there may be a link between 'Cambridge Time', mental health, disabling barriers and academic performance; however, until this APP research study, to our knowledge, no research has been conducted to specifically to understand disabled students perception of 'Cambridge Time' and to explore whether and how this may be impacting on disabled student academic progress, wellbeing and attainment.

Despite being somewhat 'common knowledge' anecdotally, I (DB) was unable to find it within formal research, yet I believe that it clearly ties a lot of key issues relating to disability and mental health together i.e. access to support and treatment, ability to perform self care and academically in a high pressure environment, and general issues with ablest ethos, therefore I believe it deserves its own rigorous enquiry. Given existing research into disability and violent conditions and the resources which can bridge the gap, and based on my own and anecdotal experience, I would like to shed light on the Cambridge specific conditions which create additional struggle for disabled students including: advocating inside a devolved system, balancing health and wellbeing with workload, and work inaccessibility. These are particularly important given the wider mental health context and treatment times. Therefore, I chose a three part enquiry i.e. what Cambridge time is, how does it cost time, and how is it navigated, to explore disability within its unique context and its relationship with resources and desired outcomes.

### 4. Existing evidence

#### **Approaches to Disability**

This research used a social model of development inspired by the 'Capabilities Approach' (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000) to inform the study's conceptualisation of 'disability'. This is highlighted in the sector literature as both an established and helpful theoretical lens to conceptualise and explore issues of disability (e.g. Mitra, 2006; Dubois & Trani, 2009) and social (in)justice in education systems (Hart, 2012; Mutanga, & Walker, 2015).

Expanding on Sen's (1999) 'Capability Approach' which looks at methods of distributive justice and conceptualises functionings, 'the various things that [a person] manages to do or be in leading a life' (Sen, 1993, p. 31), as a means not an ends i.e. worth only being tied to productive outcome, Nussbaum's model is a social justice approach which highlights how there are multiple things, regardless of culture, which individuals should gain access to for agency and wellbeing i.e. health, affiliation to groups etc (Nussbaum, 2001). These 'central capabilities', as Nussbaum highlights, are influenced by resources and access to conversion factors and this is central to why it has been used throughout contemporary disability theory (Mitra, 2006; Dubois and Trani, 2009); they can help us to assess whether limited functionings, of multiple central capabilities are due to impairment or surroundings.

It is also an approach which inspired policy analysis as "public policies affect the factors that allow individuals to convert resources and commodities into capabilities" (Trani, 2011, p 145) and therefore the challenge is to "reduce the constraints that an environment adds to a person's impairment in order to expand their capability set and allow them to live a life which they value (Dubois and Trani, 2009, p. 192).

Therefore, it is highly relevant as, like Nussbaum points out, environments “might do quite well at producing internal capabilities but might cut off the avenues through which people actually have the opportunity to function in accordance with those capabilities” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 21-22); i.e. a university might nurture intelligence but have an environment where people fall behind and can never complete their research. Therefore, due to its contextualised analysis of environment and resources and their bearing on functionings and capability, I believe that it is relevant to this research which will explicitly look at resources that individuals have used to negotiate Cambridge Time and its impact on overall functioning, and perhaps wellbeing. I will also look at how supportive resources not being specialised i.e. distributed as a blanket measure, and thus not correctly meeting diverse needs, can lead to the “professionalisation of failure” or the “impetus to blame disabled people for the failure of expert intervention” (Gabel and Connor, 2009) i.e. when adjustments, not designed for their specific needs, don’t work.

When theorising any proposed changes, I will be taking direct recommendations, and also inspiration from multicultural studies in education theorists such as James Banks (1995) who proposes five dimensions of multicultural education:

1. Diversity integrated into the content; not additive
2. Addressing the origins and construction of knowledge, including its influence on scholars
3. A Proactive and ‘positive peace’ inspired approach to challenging prejudice which develops positive attitudes to marginalised groups
4. Equitable Pedagogy which is inclusive of different learners and forms of interaction
5. An empowering culture/structure being consciously cultivated

And also the role of Universal Design for Learning which “emphasises the creation of environments accessible to the greatest number of people possible without regard to disability status” (Gabel & Connor, 2009, p.389).

#### References

- Banks, J (1995) The historical reconstruction of knowledge about race: Implications for transformative teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 24(2), 15-25
- Dubois, J, & Trani, J (2009) Extending the capability paradigm to address the complexity of disability. *ALTER, European Journal of Disability Research*, 3, 192-218
- Gabel, S; Connor, D (2009) Implications and Applications for Social Justice in Education in *Theorising Disability*, Routledge, NY, p. 377-392
- Hart, C. (2012) The capability approach and education, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 42:3, 275-282, DOI: 10.1080/0305764X.2012.706393
- Mutanga, O., & Walker, M. (2015). Towards a disability-inclusive higher education policy through the capabilities approach. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 16(4), 501-517. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19452829.2015.1101410>
- Nussbaum, M.C (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Sen, A. (1993) Does business ethics make economic sense? *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 3(1), 45-54
- Nussbaum, M.C (2011) *Creating Capabilities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Rauscher, L ; McClintock, J (1996) Ableism and curriculum design. In M. Adams, L. Bell, *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (p. 198-231). New York: Routledge
- Trani, J, Bakhshi, P, Bellanca, N; Biggeri, M; Marchetta, M (2011) Disabilities through the capability approach lens: Implications for Public Policies. *ALTER, European Journal of Disability Research*, 5, p.143-157

### Cambridge Conditions: Time, Violence, The Body and 'Fitting in'

In the presence of a visible attainment gap specific to our institution, it is perhaps useful to think of Cambridge as a cultural landscape within its own right, which by its nature has somewhere along the line become hostile or violent to certain groups including disabled students.

Laurie & Shaw (2018) use the term "*violent conditions*" to describe geographies of being that restrict the potential for individuals to flourish and achieve their potential. This advances Galtung's (1969, p. 168) definition of violence as "*the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual*" in a world (p.9); a 'vicious/violent triangle' (Galtung 1990, p. 294) made of direct, structural and cultural violence. Galtungian theories, like Laurie and Shaw's amongst others, highlight how violence can be built into systems and made to appear every day and banal; as Lawrence and Karim point out, at "its first eruption, violence is always experienced as unique. If given time and repetition, however, it becomes routine, part of the air and one learns how to breathe it without being asphyxiated. One no longer seeks to eliminate it, more even to understand it." (2007, p5). Not only do they recognise that violence "requires a system of norms, through which something wrong or undeserved or unjust happens" (Gordon, 2017, p. 51) i.e. ableist procedures becoming everyday, Galtungian theories like Laurie and Shaw's also recognise the ways in which humans can be limited by socially situated conditions, which ideologically corresponds directly with the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) and makes it a beneficial lense to inspire our enquiry.

Laurie and Shaw (2018) stress the importance of "understanding violence [and/or disadvantage] in and through conditions discloses the insidious, atmospheric, and unjust *matters and senses of existence*" (p.9) as violence is a "slippery concept...nonlinear, productive, destructive *and* reproductive" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004, p. 1). I believe that their research is important to the current study as in their work they create a "cartography" split into 4 sections and one of these is *Time*, an area central to this study. Time, they argue, is "integral to the act and study of violence" (Laurie and Shaw, 2018, p. 13); it is "the vital force that nourishes what could be, and what is"; it "evolves in blinks heartbeats and aeons" (Laurie and Shaw, 2018, p. 13), and perhaps, in the context of Cambridge University, evolves differently all together which I aim to explore. Time and temporality, they continue, is the thing which can "recognis[e] the way in which violence refuses to be bounded by a temporal event, and can haunt the future potentials of subjects... in short, is not just a measurement, but is the articulation and unfolding of conditions." (Laurie and Shaw, 2018 p.13). Therefore, the "Chonopolitics of violence recognises the importance of time in the metamorphosis of violence, as violence mutates into different forms and articulates its presence in new ways" which I believe will be very relevant within the Cambridge Context. In my experience, I have found that within the Cambridge Time context, even falling behind on a singular task can often lead to the creation of cumulative time penalties later on, even before they happen i.e. a predictive time lag, and this becomes cumulatively violent; people who are constantly behind for reasons out of their control may start to internalise this sense of failure. Therefore, I will be using a lense inspired by Laurie and Shaw (2018) and Galtung (1969, 1990) which seeks to explore whether 'Cambridge Time' is violent, and whether this can be interrupted or challenged to eliminate its role as a cultural barrier.

I will also take a materialist disability perspective as inspired by Garland Thompson (2011). She reinforces how certain environments i.e. in the context of our study, Cambridge University running on 'Cambridge Time', can create a 'misfit' who isn't compatible and is subsequently pushed out and falls behind. 'Fitting' Garland Thompspon argues occurs when "a generic body enters a generic world, a world conceptualized, designed, and built in anticipation of bodies considered in the dominant perspective as uniform, standard, majority bodies" (2011, p.595) but for disabled people this isn't the case; subsequently she highlights how "inequality occurs not purely from prejudicial attitudes but is an artifact of material configurations misfitting with bodies" (p. 602). I will use this lense to explore how Cambridge can accidentally turn disabled students into 'misfits' of this calibre by perpetuating Ableism which can be defined as: "a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses disabled people...de deeply rooted [in] beliefs about health,

productivity, beauty and the value of human life [which combines]] to create an environment that is often hostile to those whose...abilities...fall out of the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable” (Rauscher and McClintock, 1996, p. 198).

Disability is diversity, and we need to look at the ways it is being approached through this lens. As Garland-Thompson (2011) points out, “What we call disability is unavoidable, insistent in its misfitting. Our conventional response to disability is to change the person through medical technology, rather than changing the environment to accommodate the widest possible range of human form and function. The concept of misfitting shifts this model. The body is dynamic, constantly interacting with history and environment; sometimes it fits and at other points or moments, it does not. We evolve into what we call disability as our lives develop. The misfits that constitute the lived experience of disability in its broadest sense is perhaps, then, the essential characteristic of being human. (p. 603). Therefore, in line with the social model, I am interested in interrogating the ways in which disabled students change their environment to return make it ‘fit’ for them so will be considering this concept as I design my enquiries.

#### References

- Galtung, J (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research, *Journal of Peace Research*, 6 , pp. 167-191
- Galtung, J (1990). Cultural violence *Journal of Peace Research*, 27 , pp. 291-305
- GARLAND-THOMPSON, R. (2011), Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept. *Hypatia*, 26: 591-609. doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x
- Gordon, L; Fanon, F; Evans, B; Carver, T (Eds.) (2017). *Histories of violence: Post-war critical thought*, Zed Books, London, pp. 48-69
- Laurie, E, Shaw, I (2018) ‘Violent conditions: The injustices of being’, *Political Geography*, Volume 65, Pages 8-16
- Lawrence, B; A. Karim (2007), *Theorising violence in the twenty-first century*, *On violence: A reader*, Duke University Press, Durham and London , pp. 1-16
- Scheper-Hughes N; P. Bourgois, (2004), *Making sense of violence*, *Violence in war and peace*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford (2004), pp. 1-31

#### Research Conducted Within the Cambridge Context

##### **Cooper, I; Harding J (2020) Briefing paper on digital accessibility: GBEC (2020)**

Findings: Students aren’t getting appropriate access to reasonable adjustments and accessible course material

- Feedback from students, both reported to the DRC and as outlined in a review of the reasonable adjustments process conducted by CUSU demonstrate that the legal duty to provide reasonable adjustments isn’t being appropriately or consistently met.
  - A student with visual impairments in 2018-2019 was able to access < 25% of the material within their reading lists
  - Only 25% of responses to the CUSU survey indicated that the materials for their course were in an accessible format when questioned about the accessibility of course materials
- There is confusion across the University regarding the application of Accessibility Regulations and Duty under the Equality Act 2010
  - Voluntarily following the Accessibility Regulations would assist in ensuring that it complies with its equality act duties
  - If we continue to produce inaccessible content the university will be perceived as not caring about equality or inclusion, or not having taken appropriate and proportionate action, at a time when particular focus is being put on universal design, inclusive practice and widening participation

**Harrison, T (January, 2020), ' Cambridge's notoriously short terms aren't working. Something must change' *Varsity, Cambridge*, <https://www.varsity.co.uk/opinion/18135>**

In a recent article, current student Harrison (2020) commented how ““Cambridge time is different - in Cambridge time we've known each other for ten years.” and “Terms at Cambridge are not only unusually short, they're also unimaginably intense” which subsequently results in an “ongoing cycle of stress”. She goes on to discuss how “The unconventional 'Cambridge week,' beginning on Thursday and ending on Wednesday, adds to this and “the intensity of these brief terms fuels and exacerbates the scale of mental health issues in Cambridge: something needs to change”. Harrison concludes by discussing how, “Whether it's giving students more time to seek treatment for serious conditions or simply offering an extra week to catch up if they've been bedridden with Freshers' flu or missed an essay, the benefits a longer term could bring to student well-being are boundless.” (Varsity, 2020).

**Hussein, N; Naylor-Perrott, L; Richardson, J (2019) 'Feeling Blue: Mental Health at Cambridge University' Report**

Findings:

- Students are frustrated and desire change
  - “there is a general feeling that the collegiate University has, to date, significantly underperformed against the levels of both preventative and curative care which could, with a comparatively small degree of effort and funding, be attained” p7
  - “ a number of students believe that the collegiate University is in a position to improve the wellbeing of students, and consequently the consistent quality of their study and research, by seriously re-examining priorities. A large proportion of students interviewed, and many more of those who sent in their statements, made it clear that with regards to mental health awareness and attitudes, they felt as though Cambridge could do much more.” p. 7
- Workload remains a significant issue
  - “Workload requirements and expectations are often unclear to students. Some students feel as though an increase in clarity could reduce levels of work-related stress. In [their] interviews, students and staff alike discussed workload in uncertain terms, with expectations of amount, frequency and quality of work not always made clear by supervisors or Directors of Studies. For example, students reported overlapping essay deadlines and reading lists that were deliberately impossible to complete in full. “ p.9
- Academic Pressure is creating mental health issues, not related to diagnosed conditions
  - “A large number of students reported experiencing feelings of anxiety or depression which were not sufficiently severe to be diagnosed as a mental health issue, but which are better described as issues with wellbeing, as a result of academic pressure.” p. 10
  - “a number of students raised concerns about culturally endemic, yet potentially unsustainable 'background', 'situational' and 'non clinical' levels of stress and depression, with one suggestion of 'adjustment disorder'. Some students were concerned that their feelings of depression or anxiety would be taken seriously only on the point of becoming debilitating.” p.10

**The Tab (2017), UK University Mental Health Survey <https://thetab.com/2017-mental-health-rankings>**

- Cambridge ranked 3rd highest on welfare spending per student (Cambridge spent £38.96 per student on mental health in 2017, significantly higher than the national average of £21.80), yet it came 27th in student mental health satisfaction.

**The Times (2018), Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey,**

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/student-experience-survey-2018-results>

- Cambridge ranked 4th for academic experience, yet 41st for quality of welfare support.

**Big Cambridge Survey Report (2016-2017)**

- 4% undergrads thought that their workload was manageable and healthy, falling to 34% of mature undergrads (mature students often face financial barriers: they are more likely to fund their studies with paid work, or to have families to support alongside study), falling further to 28% of self-defined disabled students
- 52% of undergraduates found dealing with stress and anxiety a problem in student life, but the figure was significantly higher for students in historically excluded and disadvantaged groups, rising to 83% of those who self-defined as disabled, 62% of LGBT+ respondents, 78% of non-binary people, and 59% of women
- 55% of those undergraduates who self-defined as disabled felt there was enough structure in their courses to allow them to work effectively, in contrast to 70% of those with no known disability.
- College teaching staff were perceived as significantly more supportive to disabled students than staff within the Faculties, with 74% of disabled undergraduates agreeing that they felt fully supported by their College teaching staff, in comparison to 51% agreeing that they felt fully supported by teaching staff in their Faculty.
- Disabled students were significantly less likely to agree that they knew where to go if they had problems with their courses, with 69% agreeing to this in comparison to 81% of those with no known disability. Only 47% of disabled students felt that reasonable adjustments had always been made for them if needed.

**The Big Robinson Survey, (2018-19)** <http://www.rcsa.co.uk/files/documents/Big-Robinson-Survey-2018.pdf>

- 60% of students believe that attending Cambridge University has had a negative effect on their mental health (41% slightly negative / 19% very negative). 20% of students believe that it has had a positive effect (15% slightly positive / 5% very positive).

**Ropek Hewson, S (2019) Postgraduate Mental Health Report, Cambridge Graduate Union,**

<https://www.gradunion.cam.ac.uk/files/postgraduate-mhreport/view>

- Overall, 67% of respondents reported both diagnosed and undiagnosed mental health problems.

**Cambridge Culture:**

- 46% of all respondents reported feeling either uncomfortable taking breaks/holidays or not allowed to take them, and a resultant negative impact on their mental health.
- 61% reported that a competitive and high pressured university environment had affected their mental health.
- 68% reported imposter syndrome affecting their mental health.
- 59% reported isolation and loneliness affecting their mental health.

**Supervisor Relationships:**

- 93% of students who reported that their supervisor has unreasonable expectations also reported mental health problems.
- 80% of students reporting that their supervisor does not provide welfare support or signpost to support services also reported mental health problems.
- 25% of 1803 respondents report that their relationship with their supervisor has negatively affected their mental health.

#### Support Provisions:

- Respondents are most aware of the University Counselling Service (85%) and college graduate tutors (94%).
- Multiple respondents specifically praised the DRC's mentoring scheme and the UCS's Sexual Assault and Harassment Advisor, but criticised both general services for long waiting times.
- Some criticised University and college provisions for being/the perception that they were less operational outside term-time, despite postgraduate students living in Cambridge year-round.

#### Wider UK Mental Health Stats

##### UK Mental Health Stats, Mental Health Foundation

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-most-common-mental-health-problems>

- Mixed anxiety & depression is the most common mental disorder in Britain, with 7.8% of people meeting criteria for diagnosis.
- 4-10% of people in England will experience depression in their lifetime.
- Common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety are distributed according to a gradient of economic disadvantage across society. The poorer and more disadvantaged are disproportionately affected by common mental health problems and their adverse consequences.
- Mixed anxiety and depression has been estimated to cause one fifth of days lost from work in Britain.
- One adult in six had a common mental disorder.

The following references were footnotes in the original UK Mental Health Stats Report.

- NICE (2011). Common mental health disorders | Guidance and guidelines | NICE. [online] Available at: <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg123> [Accessed 25 Aug 2015].
- McManus S, Meltzer H, Brugha T, Bebbington P, Jenkins R (eds), 2009. Adult Psychiatric Morbidity in England 2007: results of a household survey. NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care. [online] Available at: <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/pubs/psychiatricmorbidity07> [Accessed 25 Aug 2015].
- Patel V, Lund C, Hatherill S, Plagerson S, Corrigan J, Funk M, & Flisher AJ. (2010). Mental disorders: equity and social determinants. Equity, social determinants and public health programmes, 115.
- Das-Munshi et al. (2008) cited in McManus S, Bebbington P, Jenkins R, Brugha T. (eds.) (2016) Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014. Leeds: NHS Digital [Accessed 5 Oct 2016] Available at: <http://content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748/apms-2014-full-rpt.pdf>
- McManus S, Bebbington P, Jenkins R, Brugha T. (eds.) (2016) Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014. Leeds: NHS Digital. Available at: <http://content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748/apms-2014-exec-summary....> 5 October 2016]

##### NHS Waiting times

<https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/hospitals/guide-to-nhs-waiting-times-in-england/>

- Mental health services are free on the NHS, but in some cases you'll need a referral from your GP to access them.
- Consultant-led mental health services are covered by the NHS 18-week maximum waiting time.

This however, doesn't cover the wait for a *second* appointment i.e. to continue treatment after initial screening. The BBC (2019) have recently reported that "half of patients waited over 28 days, and one in six longer than 90 days, between their first and second sessions in the past year" as well as a high level of people dropping out due to waits. (see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-50658007>)

## 5. Generation of evidence

- A survey was distributed to students registered with the DRC who identify as disabled. It received 101 responses, although not every participant answered each question. The average sample size of responses was 72 participants.
- A second survey was distributed to the research group; this survey had the same questions but allowed for more open-ended qualitative data to be gathered. It received 5 responses.
- Thematic analysis, both by hand and using Nvivo, was conducted on qualitative data to identify common themes amongst data.
- Simple quantitative analysis was conducted on numerical data.

## 6. Small project research findings

### 'Cambridge Time' and its impact

#### What is it?

Firstly, we asked each participant, unprompted, to define the concept of 'Cambridge Time' in their own terms. Below are key characteristics of Cambridge Time which were explicitly referenced by participants.

Characteristics Of 'Cambridge Time'	Occurrence within Responses
N/A, Unsure	26%
Lack of Time / Time Moving Too Fast	26%
Paradoxical (Simultaneously too fast and too slow)	24%
Exhausting or Detrimental to Wellbeing	11%
Work and Deadlines	10%
Stress	10%
Prioritising Work over Health	10%
Busy	8%
Artificial	8%
Intense	8%
Other	6%
Lonely	1%

Participants described 'Cambridge Time' as a "bubble outside of the rest of the world" where stakeholders are "under the false impression that there are far more than 24 hours in a day and that all other considerations, including mental and physical wellbeing are secondary to work". Cambridge Time's artificiality was mentioned in 8% of responses, with "weeks beginning on a Thursday" and 8 week terms

appearing in most responses; another described factor was the “lack of typical time markers i.e. no distinctions between weekend and week days...and frequent, drastic transitions in available time”.

Similarly, lack of time or time moving too quickly appeared in 26% of responses. Respondents described how term is “really long and exhausting because its non-stop”, everything happens “too fast with no breathing space” leaving one participant feeling “claustrophobic and even physically sick”. Another described how Cambridge Time is unique in nature because “everything happens faster here and I feel like we have to use every moment of the day to keep up”. “Work with no/little opportunity to rest” appeared in 10% of responses, and concerningly, explicit mentions of Cambridge Time’s exhausting nature or detriment to wellbeing appeared in 11% of responses. Characterised by how it is “work first, always”; how there is never “time to take a breather or do ‘normal things’”; and “never enough time to look after yourself or be ill, but illness feeling like it's going on forever because it doesn’t fit into your schedule”, a need to prioritise work over health and wellbeing was explicitly mentioned in 10% of responses. Multiple responses also explicitly mentioned feelings of guilt for leaving Cambridge, or taking time to practice self care, with one student describing feeling like they’re “on bail” whilst taking a weekend away from the University.

Interestingly, one of the most common characteristics (as present in 24% of responses) is a sense of Temporal Paradox i.e. Cambridge Time is both too fast but also there’s not enough of it; days feel long, and yet not long enough. One participant defined Cambridge Time as “strangely long, but at the same time much too quick”. Another describes it as a “bizarre time when all days become one...[it’s] very long and events that took place 3 days earlier seem like...weeks ago, but at the same time it passes so quickly”. Another respondent describes being “against the clock for every minute of the day, yet [they] can totally lose sense of how quickly it goes”; they later describe struggling to find time to both eat and work. Interestingly, multiple participants describe common ‘in jokes’ regarding cambridge time amongst their peers, with pieces even appearing in student satire publications (see Porters Log, 2016, <http://theporterslog.com/news/cambridge-term-to-be-condensed-into-eight-days/> ) and being mentioned in the University Prospectus, highlighting its unique nature.

- 72% of responses in the main survey stated that ‘Cambridge Time’ operates differently to time spent elsewhere (10% Neutral, 18% Disagree). This suggests that it may have its strengths, pending further investigation, as a standalone theoretical concept.

### **How does ‘Cambridge Time’ impact Disabled Students?**

Next, we asked students to describe the general ways in which the concept had impacted them as disabled students. When asked whether Cambridge Time had influenced their overall academic performance, 61% of responses explicitly said it had made a negative impact (15% said it was positive, 24% neutral). When asked whether Cambridge Time had influenced their mental health, 67% of responses said that it had negatively impacted their mental health. Less than 8% of responses said that Cambridge Time had made a positive impact.

#### *Further Findings:*

- 63% of responses said they did not feel confident that they could complete their work within a Cambridge Term. (29% very unconfident, 17% unconfident, 14% Neutral, 21% Confident, 3% Very confident)
- 100% of participants in the longer survey said their identity influenced how they approached Cambridge Time when compared to peers, with increased struggle to maintain a flow/focus; limited free time available; extra pressure to perform; and a different approach to health management compared to external time being most commonly noted. One participant describes how Cambridge Time routinely makes them “feel exhausted for a day [they] haven’t even done

yet". 100% of longer survey responses also strongly disagreed that "everyone, regardless of their identity, experiences time in the same way"; thus suggesting that identity can influence how people interact with Cambridge Time.

**Time Penalties for Disabled Students**

Next, we were interested in the types of penalties that 'Cambridge Time' creates and how students feel about navigating them.

We asked students if, in the last term, that had experienced time costs related to their disability. The findings are below.

	Occurrence within Responses
Missed social interaction whilst catching up with work	78%
Requesting deadline extensions on work	69%
Extra Time spent processing materials compared to peers	65%
Missed classes due to illness	63%
Attending Medical Appointments	56%
Missed contact hours with teachers	50%
Communicating learning adjustments i.e. requesting slides in advance, asking to submit a plan, requesting a room change	49%
Missed time due to medication adjustments	33%
Difficulty accessing learning materials	29%
Communicating accommodation adjustments i.e. in college	25%
Manually converting learning material into an accessible format	24%
Other	13%
Missed classes due to their inaccessibility	11%

\*Other common, self-disclosed, time penalties were: issues with sleeping (3%), emergency trips home (3%), time spent needing to fulfil specific routines (4%), time planning routes when changes happen (3%)

**Communicating Time Penalties**

When asked if they felt confident communicating issues regarding time penalties to the relevant supportive party at the time, 60% of the longer survey responses said they didn't feel confident, 20% said neutral/partially (i.e. dependent on individual staff; and 20% felt confident. When asked if they were happy with the time it took to communicate the issue/to self advocate, 60% expressed dissatisfaction with the time it took to communicate the issue and have it resolved. One participant discussed how "communicating [their] needs is difficult for a variety of reasons" including difficulty "understanding people due to being neurodivergent"; the upsetting nature of "repeated disclosures" due to having to contact multiple people; and "fear of discrimination or neglect due to past experiences"; they explicitly described this causing them to "underperform, which [they are] then criticised or judged for by staff" which is "demoralising". Another participant described how "just being disabled takes up vast amounts of administrative time that Cambridge time does not allow for, making [them] feel even further behind"; and another describes how there are "so many hoops to jump through and emails to send to get things done". Again, describing the difficulties of being neurodivergent in Cambridge, the participant describes how "emails are really hard if you're autistic...[because] what makes sense or is 'obvious subtext' to you isn't

necessarily the same to someone else so there's the endless fear that ...[you're] not making the point you want to make and that's genuinely really difficult".

Whilst an early prediction was that time spent advocating would feature heavily as a time cost, 42% of students in the wider survey actually said they felt confident that they could communicate an issue regarding their wellbeing to the relevant party to receive support in a timely manner, whilst 35% did not feel confident in doing this. We were unable to gauge this discrepancy, however, later testimonies suggest that neurodivergence may play a role to some degree as many people describe difficulties communicating.

### **Persistent Time-Related Barriers for Disabled Students**

Next, we asked students in an open-ended question what had been their most persistent disability-related time cost throughout their degree so far. The results are below:

<b>Penalty by Theme</b>	<b>Occurrence within responses (%)</b>
Processing speed and concentration	15%
Lack of Energy and Fatigue	8%
Struggle with Workload/Deadlines	6%
Takes more time to do certain tasks	7%
Inadequate time to look after health	6%
Sleep Issues	4%
Paperwork/Advocacy	4%
Assumptions behind time (i.e. differentiated time needs) coming from others	3%
Perceived personal flaw	3%
Extra reading	3%
Pre-reading	1%
Attending Therapeutic Services	1%
Waiting for Support	1%
Travel Time	1%

Differences in processing speed and trouble concentrating was the most common theme in responses (15%) with issues relating to fatigue and lack of energy coming second (8%). One response describes lacking "to work as much as most students would be able to", and subsequently lacking time to spend on "social or relaxing activities". Another describes "always feel[ing] drained so [they're] working at kind of half speed that creates downwards spiral"; alarmingly, another reports being "left with Chronic Fatigue" due to struggling to cope with workload in previous terms, and now is unable to "get anything out of [their] final year" at Cambridge.

Struggling with workload and deadline was frequently cited (6%), as were general differentiated time experiences i.e. disability taking longer to complete certain tasks (7%). Students also described how "there is so much work to do that [they] don't have time to look after [their] health at all" (6%). One participant described how they "don't have as many hours in the day as everyone else" due to their ADHD, and supervisors "don't appreciate that a student is even able to struggle in this way, or understand the level of

difficulty [they] face in comparison to [their] peers when attempting to complete the same tasks in the same allotted time”; they conclude by discussing how their teaching staff interpret their difficulty with time management as “a shortfall in both effort and ability rather than the struggle with time that it really is” . A lack of understanding that different people take different time appeared in 3% of responses to this question, but also was cited in response to other questions. Students also mention issues with the time that it takes to adjust to medication, with one participant describing how “by the time [they’ve] got the right dose prescribed and working, term is almost over”, and sleep was another penalty raised.

Whilst a low percentage, I have viewed these as significant as responses were gathered entirely without prompt.

### **Therapy and Support Services for Disabled Students**

Every participant in the longer survey declared that they had used a therapeutic support service on a routine basis in the past year, however, none were satisfied with the wait time or length of provisions offered. One participant described how “accessing help in the university takes months, whereas getting so behind you need to intermit only takes days”, whilst another described how “effectively one can spend almost half a Cambridge Term on waiting for a single GP appointment”; another discussed the difficulties of filling out forms to access to support as they are “are quite long and confusing which can’t really be a priority when you’ve got deadlines coming and lots of emails requesting things from you”.

Interestingly, 60% of responses to this question discuss mentoring and Neurodiversity coaching as useful to negate this, with one participant mentioning how their coach was “proactive with organising meetings...and checked with other staff to confirm [availability and arrangements]”; another describes how having regular mentoring scheduled in “for the same time / same place every week...became [their] only real marker of where [they were] at given that weekends became mythical and Cambridge weeks and real weeks don’t match up”.

### **Negotiating ‘Cambridge Time’**

Next, we sought to explore how students reduce the time costs associated with their disability.

#### *Time Management*

Generally, we found a fairly broad divide between students’ confidence in their time management abilities outside of studying i.e. social commitments; 43% were confident, 49% unconfident. We are unable to clearly speculate why this might be, but later time cost discussions from participants who mention neurodivergence frequently raise struggling with time management as a key issue.

#### *Reasonable Adjustments*

When asked if they received adjustments relating to their disability 76% of our sample said yes. We then asked how they felt these adjustments had helped them to navigate Cambridge time.

	Occurrence within responses (%)
Helpful	55%
Issues with them being Exam Only	13%

Extra Time helpful	13%
Lecture Capture Useful	11%
Time Management still an issue	11%
Not Helpful	9%
Lecture Capture not useful	7%
Helped to Catch Up / Stay on Track	7%
Unsure/ Not Yet	7%
RAs created balance but not an advantage	5%
Improved Wellbeing / Decreased Stress	4%
Flexible Deadlines Helpful	4%
Adjustment not specific to condition	4%
Mentoring	2%

The most common theme (55%) was that adjustments have been helpful when negotiating the time penalties that come with disability. Out of useful adjustments, lecture capture (11%), and Extra time in exams (13%) and Flexible deadlines (4%) came up most commonly in responses. Students described how extra time is “exceptionally helpful during the exam...as it negates difficulties that [they’ve] experienced due to slower comprehension”, whilst others describe how “there is no way [they] would pass any of [their] exams without [extra time]”, and that it created space for one student to “stop the clock when [they] feel the [dissociation] coming and start [time] again when [they’re] focussed enough to write”.

However, numerous reports (13%) describe the frustration of adjustments being entirely exam-based. One student describes how they “don’t really feel like there are any adjustments available to help [them] cope in term time throughout the academic year”; another describes how they “don’t have 25% extra time that [they] can spare for doing work in term time and similarly a third muses that it’s a “shame [they] don’t get extra time in the week”. Of other adjustments deemed not useful, lecture capture not being correctly implemented featured in 7% of responses. Students discuss how some “faculties refuse to record lectures”, not being able to attend a lecture and thus unable to record it, and one describes feeling “like a burden on [their] friends by asking them to record lectures for a week or so in a row” as well as discussing how “having to ask the lecturers permission is incredibly difficult” in their faculty where it is not standard practice. Other sources of frustration came from adjustments not being specific to the mental health disorder, but instead something else (4%); one student describes frustration that “no real accommodations regarding time have been made for [their] mental health condition [therefore they] rely on [their SpLD] as the excuse”.

However, overall adjustments seem to have a positive or mixed impact, with a further 4% of responses describing improved wellbeing or decreased stress.

### **Saving Time**

We explicitly asked our long survey respondents ‘what would help you to negotiate or save ‘Cambridge Time’ better in the future and 60% discussed a need for increased understanding that people take different amounts of time to perform tasks; i.e. a “better understanding that we do not all have the same background or the same brain” because the “one size fits all model...does not work for marginalised people, never mind the multiply marginalised”. Other suggestions include “training so that staff are aware about neurodivergence”, “reduced workload” and improved access to mentoring and study skills; one participant describes how they “used to agonise over how to ask for the right kind of help” before their

mentor helped them to advocate, another spoke about needing help to “remove the burden on [them] to arrange [their] own support”. Therefore, improved access to advocating staff/services could help to reduce this burden, or alternatively, a review of how students are currently able to communicate their condition and its barriers within a devolved system, and if there are ways to streamline this i.e. increased visibility for SSDs for example.

Finally, in a separate open-ended question, we asked students within the DRC survey what had helped them to negotiate time costs/penalties the most so far.

	Occurrence within Responses
Mentoring or Study Skills	10%
Understanding/Supportive Staff	7%
Flexible Deadlines / Advanced Essay Titles	7%
Lecture Capture	4%
EPS/Double Time	3%
Adjustments within College i.e. groceries delivered direct, access to a freezer	1%
Extra Time (Reasonable Adjustment within Exams)	1%
Access to Funding	1%
College Nurse Provision	1%
Changing personal beliefs about time i.e. independently deciding to reduce workload	1%

Mentoring and Study skills were the most commonly mentioned (10%) ‘time saver’ or Cambridge Time navigation method. One student describes how “Mentoring to prioritise and plan time has really helped [their] time management and has helped to get almost everything done that [they’ve] wanted to”. Another describes how “mentoring...helps me keep each week in perspective and recognise the passage of time as it happens”. With another discussing how their “study skills supervisor is [their] therapist/lifeline when [they] feel down about time management; she reminds me that [they] are trying [their] best and doing very well in spite of it all”.

Understanding staff and deadlines came in next at (7%) occurrence respectively. One participant described how “staff actually taking what I say at face value and believing [them]” was a rarity, so when “staff proactively [offer] adjustment it is of massive benefit”. Another describes how they are “less worried and the stakes are lower, so stress and negative thoughts are less likely to overwhelm them” when they have supportive supervisors, perhaps highlighting that improved training could increase support available to disabled students. Again, lecture capture (4%) was also raised as a key method of negotiating Cambridge Time as students describe its ability to reduce “physical expenditure and thus [create] rest time needed [to allow them] to keep up with the workload.

Therefore, adjustments and provisions clearly are providing very beneficial ‘conversion factors’ (Nussbaum, 2011), but there is clearly further fine-tuning and reviewing needed to ensure that they are specialised to the diverse needs and requirements of diverse individuals.

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

It is evident that students believe they would benefit from lecture capture provision as standard within faculties; this has important policy implications, particularly when looking at its practical ability to reduce time lost to fatigue, illness or loss of concentration which are persistent barriers for many. However, it's also important to look at its implementation i.e. so that students don't have to be present to record it themselves, permission is granted easily.

Any changes to mentoring provisions could have vast implication; increasing access to the provision could benefit multiple students.

A review into advocacy procedure and access to Student Support Documents could reduce time that students are currently spending communicating their requirements, potentially reducing both admin time and individual distress.

## **8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS**

1. That staff training on inclusive practices include recommendations about managing time costs/penalties experienced by disabled students
2. That time saving approaches, such as lecture capture, be standardised in the delivery of course materials
3. That increased support for neurodiverse students, such as mentoring and study skills, be provided
4. That a more streamlined infrastructure for mental health support be investigated, taking into account student workloads, time costs of self-advocacy, access to treatment and management of medications

## Project 8: Diagnosis, screening and self-advocacy

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	
	Disability/Mental Health student	✓
Topic The broad educational point that impacts student performance/ attainment gaps	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	✓
Specific research question	How can disabled students with mental health conditions who have co-occurring neurodiverse conditions be identified and supported?	
Student co-researchers	Chay Graham, undergraduate, Natural Sciences	

2. Executive summary
<p>Students with mental health conditions may have support needs arising from neurodiverse conditions such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia. Identification of neurodiverse conditions in students can be challenging if mental health conditions are emphasised when students come forward for support. Simultaneously, a lack of support for neurodiversity can lead to poor wellbeing and attainment. The aim of this project is to explore how students with co-occurring neurodiverse and mental health conditions can be identified and supported in an effective manner. To achieve this, analysis of Disability Resource Centre student records was conducted to estimate how many students are impacted by co-occurring conditions, and this estimation was further contextualised by synthesising sector-wide and medical literature. Qualitative interviews of student co-researchers with mental health conditions who had attempted to access support for neurodiversity were collected to examine trends in diagnosis and support. Based on DRC record analysis, approximately 1 in 6 Cambridge undergraduate students with mental health conditions also have a neurodiverse condition, although this is likely to be an underestimate. Thematic analysis of interviews and literature synthesis was used to create a summary model of the hardship experienced by neurodiverse students, and determine key intervention points. Five factors were found to be integral to an effective process: (1) an accessible screening, both financially and accounting for disability access; (2) relevant competencies of the evaluator, and wider staff training in neurodiversity support; (3) supporting students with disclosure; (4) empowering students to self-advocacy; (5) signposting students to specialised services and communities.</p>

3. Rationale
<p>Students with mental health conditions potentially have unidentified neurodiverse conditions that are not reported. The Office for Students has recognised that there is more complexity behind HESA data because their categories are inefficient at distinguishing multiple conditions, especially with mental health and neurodiversity<sup>1</sup>. Neurodiversity can be defined as natural variations in brains and nervous systems amongst humans. When referring to neurodiverse health conditions, a distinction can be made from</p>

<sup>1</sup><https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported>

mental health conditions. There are many ways to make this distinction; in Cambridge services the distinction is mainly made whereby neurodevelopmental health conditions such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette's syndrome and specific learning difficulties are considered neurodiverse, whereas conditions such as depression and anxiety which are not developmental in nature are considered mental health conditions. Whilst this distinction is possible for particular services to make, it is not always understood in this way by individuals, and can mean that students with neurodiverse conditions are erroneously reported as having mental health conditions, particularly for ADHD which is conceptualised as a learning difficulty, neurodiversity and mental health condition all at once. Further, students are arriving at Cambridge, identifying with, developing and/or being diagnosed with multiple conditions which may affect learning and well-being. In order to investigate the attainment gap in disabled students with mental health conditions, it is therefore relevant to consider the extent to which this reflects students with unsupported neurodiversity.

Attainment and welfare Students report that lack of support or ill-fitting support due to missed diagnoses, context-specific manifestations of characteristics and undiagnosed neurodiverse conditions have a significant impact on student lives and academic progress. It is well documented that when support needs are not met there is a significant effect on academic attainment of well-being of the individual<sup>2</sup>. Misdiagnosis, missed diagnoses and other evaluation issues are common in early adulthood<sup>3,4,5,6</sup>, and co-occurrence of mental health conditions and neurodiverse conditions is known to be high<sup>7,8</sup>. However, there has been no exploration of missed or co-occurring diagnoses in Cambridge Students, nor has there been exploration of how the students could be supported so that barriers do not compound and have significant effect on the student's progress. An estimate as to the number of Cambridge students with co-occurring conditions could provide insight into how prevalent this issue is.

The Disabled Students' Campaign provide a network of support, self-advocacy and listening services for disabled students at Cambridge. Co-researchers working within the Disabled Students' Campaign have cited continuous concern amongst disabled students with struggles to obtain documentation or diagnoses that accurately reflected their individual experiences, needs and strengths. This in turn acts as a barrier to accessing meaningful support, appropriate to the individual in the context of Cambridge. They also explained that there was little evidence to illustrate the complexity, financial expense and emotional demands of navigating diagnostic and screening processes. This was discussed in the first forum and was perceived as a barrier to the attainment, wellbeing, academic engagement and progress of disabled students with mental health conditions. Qualitative data can be collected to develop an understanding of the barriers faced by disabled students, and how to mitigate or navigate these barriers.

Anxiety amongst students has been heightened due to the removal of screening services from the Disability Resource Centre. There is typically demand for over 250 screening sessions each year. Whilst a diagnostic process aims to identify conditions from a medical perspective in order to determine treatment routes, screening allows educational institutes to identify students at higher risk for a condition, instead emphasising their specific needs and strengths, in order to begin support. A screening within a university

<sup>2</sup> Williams, V., & Heslop, P. (2005). Mental health support needs of people with a learning difficulty: A medical or a social model?. *Disability & society*, 20(3), 231-245.

<sup>3</sup> Berenson, C. K. (1998). Frequently missed diagnoses in adolescent psychiatry. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 21(4), 917-926.

<sup>4</sup> Grasso, D., Boonsiri, J., Lipschitz, D., Guyer, A., Houshyar, S., Douglas-Palumberi, H. & Kaufman, J. (2009). Posttraumatic stress disorder: The missed diagnosis. *Child Welfare*, 88(4), 157.

<sup>5</sup> Aggarwal, S., & Angus, B. (2015). Misdiagnosis versus missed diagnosis: diagnosing autism spectrum disorder in adolescents. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 23(2), 120-123.

<sup>6</sup> Gould, J., & Ashton-Smith, J. (2011). Missed diagnosis or misdiagnosis? Girls and women on the autism spectrum. *Good Autism Practice (GAP)*, 12(1), 34-41

<sup>7</sup> Nelson, J. M., & Gregg, N. (2012). Depression and anxiety among transitioning adolescents and college students with ADHD, dyslexia, or comorbid ADHD/dyslexia. *Journal of attention disorders*, 16(3), 244-254.

<sup>8</sup> Kouloupoulou, A. (2010). P01-221-Anxiety and depression symptoms in children-comorbidity with learning disabilities. *European Psychiatry*, 25, 432.

setting can function more generally as a welfare measure, whereby disabled students are socially empowered in an otherwise highly medicalised diagnostic process. Without screening, there are several considerations that can be examined: how unaffordable is the cost to the individual of seeking private services; in what time-scale might the individual be able to access public services, and is this keeping with the expectations of degree length in Cambridge; what further challenges might students need support with in accessing diagnosis, and how can screening remediate these challenges.

The removal of screening from DRC services is due to a lack of funding and resourcing. This is despite diagnostic services for neurodiversity being expensive and time consuming to the individual. The cost of a private educational diagnosis for SpLD is £400, and full private assessment of ADHD and autism can cost approximately £1300 or above. There is poor opportunity for SpLD support through the National Health Service (NHS), which does not offer any diagnosis or support for dyslexic adults and provides no formal services for dyspraxia diagnosis. Furthermore, many general practitioners are unaware of the diverse manifestations of ADHD characteristics<sup>9</sup>, and there is a 1-3 year long waiting list for ADHD support services, which are frequently thought to be fast-moving by university staff. A similar time-scale is required for autism evaluation. As neither the NHS or University takes steps to support neurodiverse students, they frequently fall through the cracks. Exploring how this impacts student experience with qualitative data can identify an intervention.

As mentioned above, screening provides an opportunity to give disabled students information about their strengths and challenges, as well as a safe contact in the form of a DRC mentor to advise on disability. Requests for reliable information on neurodiversity are frequently submitted by disabled students to DSC online forums, due to the frequency at which misinformation is presented in mainstream media channels. Experiences of discrimination, low accessibility and long wait times for ADHD diagnosis via the NHS has prompted the publishing of a guide for University of Cambridge students by the DSC with a similar planned effort to address diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Qualitative data can be used to determine the kind of signposting and specialist support students will need when they come forward for evaluation.

#### 4. Existing evidence

There are reasons to believe that undergraduates at Cambridge with mental health conditions are particularly likely to have co-occurring conditions as well as difficulty accessing a diagnosis that accurately reflects their experience, strengths and needs in the unique context of Cambridge. The literature reports:

- 1) So-called '2e' students ('twice exceptional'), defined as being simultaneously gifted and having specific learning difficulties (SpLD), are thought to be one of the most underdiagnosed groups, which likely affects Cambridge students in particular<sup>10</sup>;
- 2) There are conceptual problems distinguishing and identifying characteristics that relate to

<sup>9</sup> Baverstock, A. C. & Finlay, F. (2003) Who manages the care of students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in higher education? *Child. Care. Health Dev.* 29, 163–166.

<sup>10</sup> Beckmann E, Minnaert A. Non-cognitive Characteristics of Gifted Students With Learning Disabilities: An In-depth Systematic Review. *Front Psychol.* 2018;9:504. Published 2018 Apr 20. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00504

3) Neurodiversity and mental health conditions frequently co-occur<sup>11</sup>, yet mental health conditions tend to be diagnosed first and solely, with the average ADHD diagnosis only being made after 1-3 co-occurring mental health conditions have been (mis)diagnosed<sup>12</sup>.

neurodiversity and mental health conditions, as symptoms and impairments can overlap<sup>13,14</sup>, and the problems caused by unsupported neurodiverse conditions can create poor mental health<sup>15,16</sup>;

## 5. Generation of evidence

The leading student co-researcher of this project, Chay Graham, collaborated with Dr Ruth Walker (CCTL), Helen Duncan (DRC) and Dr Juliet Scott-Barrett (CCTL) to develop questions to help understand the complexity of these issues and to develop an understanding of what may help students and staff in the future. The document containing these questions is appended to this report.

Although originally designed as an interview, it was decided that due to the highly personal nature of the questions (disclosing diagnoses and discussing barriers), this interview would best be conducted over email, with a document that respondents could save and fill in in their own time, and on a medium that best suited their accessibility needs, as many students work with particular software or screen overlays that can easily be added to word documents.

Responses were emailed directly to Juliet who anonymised the data, stored it securely and passes on the anonymised data for co-analysis with Ruth and Chay using a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis offers a strategic way of organising, analysing and interpreting one's data according to the 'patterns' (themes) that both respond to the research questions and accurately reflect what is in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006<sup>17</sup>). Thematic analysis is a process that can enable researchers to critically examine the dialectal relationship between their research questions and what the data present (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009)<sup>18</sup>. We chose thematic analysis because the flexibility of the analysis strategy can offer opportunities to highlight similarities across data, as well as differences, which may help researchers deal with diversity in their data sets, and to see unexpected insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

An analysis of anonymised Disability Resource Centre Data, shared by Helen Duncan, was conducted to explore if there was evidence of co-occurring mental Health Conditions and Neurodiversity in the Cambridge Student population.

<sup>11</sup> Berenson, C. K. (1998). Frequently missed diagnoses in adolescent psychiatry. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 21(4), 917-926

<sup>12</sup> Hodgkins, P. *et al.* (2013) Management of ADHD in children across Europe: patient demographics, physician characteristics and treatment patterns. *Eur. J. Pediatr.* 172, 895–906.

<sup>13</sup> Asherson, P., Buitelaar, J., Faraone, S. V & Rohde, L. A. (2016) Adult attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder: key conceptual issues. *The Lancet Psychiatry* 3, 568–578.

<sup>14</sup> Berenson, C. K. (1998). Frequently missed diagnoses in adolescent psychiatry. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 21(4), 917-926.

<sup>15</sup> Findling, R. L., Arnold, L. E., Greenhill, L. L., Kratochvil, C. J., & McGough, J. J. (2008). Diagnosing and managing complicated ADHD. *Primary care companion to the Journal of clinical psychiatry*, 10(3), 229.

<sup>16</sup> Choi, K. R., Ford, J. D., Briggs, E. C., Munro-Kramer, M. L., Graham-Bermann, S. A., & Seng, J. S. (2019). Relationships between maltreatment, posttraumatic symptomatology, and the dissociative subtype of PTSD among adolescents. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 20(2), 212-227.

<sup>17</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

<sup>18</sup> Srivastava, P., & Hopwood, N. (2009). A practical iterative framework for qualitative data analysis. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 8(1), 76-84.

Based on qualitative data, chronology of student diagnostic pathways were also documented and measured for the following features: the number of times students would come attempt to access support before getting neurodiversity-specific support; the number of times students would access services where an opportunity for identification of neurodiversity was missed; the number of times students would have a missed identification of neurodiversity whilst a mental health diagnosis was identified; the number of times students would experience misdiagnosis of their neurodiversity as something they did not feel relevant to their needs.

Results were synthesised with literature findings presented above to develop a model of student hardship and identify intervention sites.

## 6. Small project research findings

In order to reflect the findings of this research, the experiences of the interviewees, and contextualise these with higher education experiences reported in research literature<sup>1920</sup>, the lead researcher (Chay Graham) designed 'the Neurodiversity Cycle' (Figure 1).

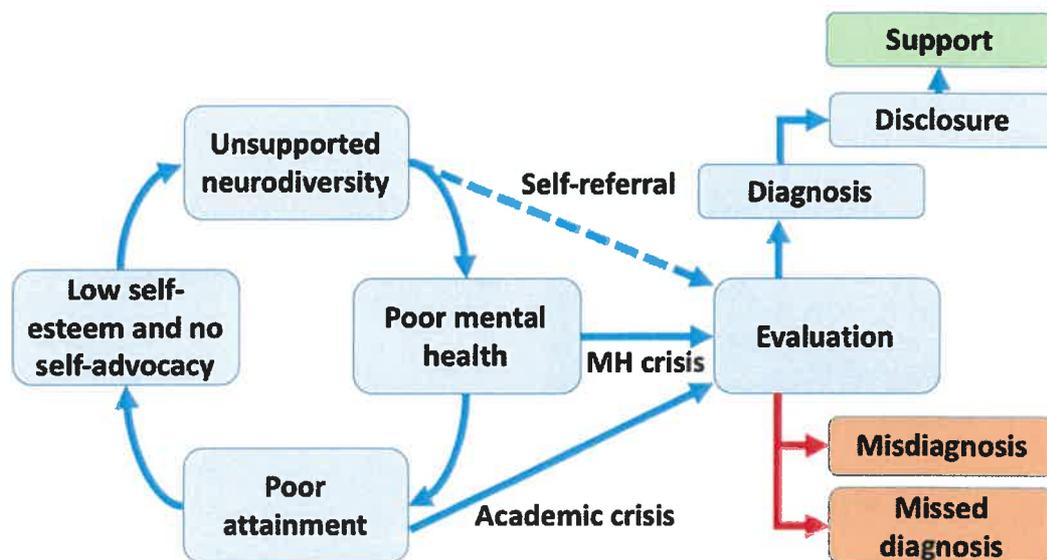


Figure 1. The Neurodiversity Cycle.

Cambridge students with unsupported neurodiversity reported that they experience poor mental health as a result, which they perceive as related to poor attainment, low self-esteem and a lack of self-advocacy. This exacerbates barriers relating to unsupported neurodiversity (such as autistic burnout), and the cycle repeats. Intervention often only occurs due to a mental health crisis (often resulting in hospitalisation), or academic crisis (which may result in intermission, however, this does not break the cycle if neurodiversity and mental wellbeing is not supported during, and on return from, intermission). Self-referral can occur, but is notably rarer (represented by a dashed line). In a good scenario, the student at evaluation is correctly diagnosed, supported to disclose and receives support implementation. More common however is a bad-case scenario, where there is misdiagnosis of the neurodiversity as a

<sup>19</sup> Cai, R. Y., & Richdale, A. L. (2016). Educational experiences and needs of higher education students with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 46(1), 31-41

<sup>20</sup> Emmers, E., Jansen, D., Petry, K., van der Oord, S., & Baeyens, D. (2017). Functioning and participation of students with ADHD in higher education according to the ICF-framework. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 41(4), 435-447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2015.1117600>

mental health condition, or a missed diagnosis of neurodiversity whilst mental health problems are identified. Both mis- and missed diagnoses can be particularly dangerous especially if medication is involved. As students arrive for medical evaluation in a crisis, the emphasis tends to fall on immediate mental health-related symptoms rather than exploring longer term characteristics of neurodiversity (which may have led to the crisis).

Based on results and the literature, a model of student hardship was developed (Figure 1). Students have a cyclical hardship when struggling with unidentified neurodiversity, and frequently do not obtain support until a crisis. Due to arriving for evaluation in a crisis, as well as factors outlined in qualitative themes below, diagnosis is often wrong or unhelpful. Furthermore the co-occurrence of neurodiversity and mental health conditions at Cambridge was also explored using anonymised data from the Disability Resource Centre (Figure 2).

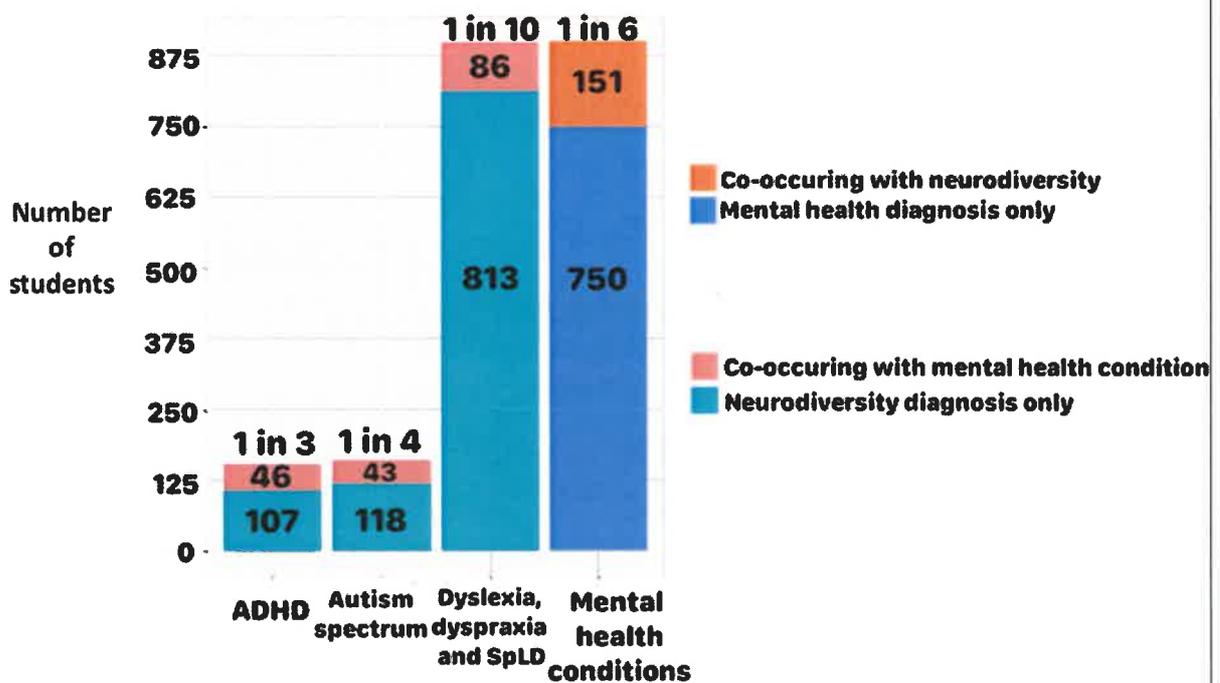


Figure 2. Number of Cambridge undergraduate students, registered with the Disability Resource Centre as of February 2020, with either mental health or neurodiverse conditions compared to students with both types of condition.

Each stacked bar reflects students with the condition printed below on the x-axis. Numbers in bars reflect number of students. Proportions above bars show the approximate proportion of students with co-occurring conditions by category.

Analysis of disability resource centre records, shared with co-researchers by Helen Duncan, shows that a high proportion (1 in 6) of students with mental health conditions have co-occurring neurodiverse conditions also. Several records could be found whereby mental health is first disclosed to the university, then within a few years, neurodiversity is also identified. The number of single-diagnosis students is likely to be an underestimate, as students will have issues accessing a diagnosis, and may have issues disclosing multiple conditions, especially if they are identified at different times. For example, childhood neurodiversity diagnoses may be overlooked by students, or may be disclosed to HESA but not the DRC.

The co-researcher interview uncovered key themes, presented below:

**Key themes:**

- **Access to Screenings/Diagnostic Assessment**
- **Staff Training**
- **Disclosure**
- **Self-advocacy**
- **Signposting**

The data suggest that: access to screening, staff-training, disclosure, self-advocacy, and sign-posting, play a crucial role in accessing support. For each of these themes some factors acted as barriers resulting in negative, stressful and harmful experiences; however, multiple factors acted as facilitators resulting in positive, productive and validating experiences.

**Access to Screening**

The data not only evidences that students need to have access to screening (Student 1), but also that the screening needs to be conducted by someone with sufficient training as otherwise this can be 'stressful and traumatic' (Student 2), rather than validating (Student 3) or helpful (Student 4).

Participant 3 explained: "The DRC no longer has the capacity to do screenings, which is something I think I really could have benefitted from before going and spending £400 on a SpLD assessment".

Participant 4 found the experience of screening "stressful and traumatic" and explained that "There were no aids (e.g. diagnostic tests to jump off from) to thematically move through relevant issues, instead I was simply asked "why do you think you're autistic?", and told after stumbling to the first immediate relevant answer that came to mind (which was recent and situational) that I "have the traits but don't fit the diagnostic profile".

Participant 1 explained "The assessment itself was a very nerve-wracking 3 hour appointment (I was scared because I identified strongly as autistic and did not know how I'd feel if I did not receive the diagnosis). However, my assessor was absolutely wonderful, did not have any doubts in the diagnosis and it was one of the most validating appointments ever!"

Participant 2 explained "Earlier screening goes a really really long way in terms of making plans that can help negotiate with/navigate persistent barriers to wellbeing and academic progress".

Recommendations as to how screenings could be improved related to staff training (see theme below) and related to the structuring of the screening.

*"A screening that would help me would be based around a thematically organised, point by point, written-down checklist/questionnaire or list of questions for discussion. This would be provided in advance so that the pressure of thinking of every relevant thing from your entire life isn't put on you face to face (already a difficult enough situation for autistics!!) in a limited time".*

**Staff Training**

Multiple recommendations were made as to how staff training could be improved, in particular there was emphasis on the need for coproduction of staff training (Student 1), understanding around intersectionality and the overlap of multiple co-occurring conditions (Students 2 and 3), and also that the

staff member should have sufficient time and resource built into their role to conduct work meaningfully (Student 4).

Participant 4 recommended: "Compulsory training developed collaboratively between staff and neurodiverse students".

Participant 2 recommended: "Training - someone who understands that neurodiversity is diverse. sounds obvious but it really really isn't. Intersectional awareness is very very important. Commitment to accepting barriers as barriers; no shaming for needing something changing...Intersectional training and awareness; there is no one size fits all and certainly not a 'look'. Not every ND kid is naughty or square and lacking in empathy; they're not all rich; they're not all white; they're not all male. It presents itself in different ways, and will need an approach towards it that fits".

Participant 1 recommended: "Training into how different groups (women, non-binary people, people of colour, etc) might display less typical autism symptoms and be undiagnosed for a long time. Training into how autism affects the development and manifestation of other mental illnesses and how treatment of autistic people may be affected".

Participant 3 explained: "I don't feel that my college disability officer (staff member) has the time, resources or background knowledge necessary to support me in this, because they have this role in addition to many other roles which take up more time, e.g. lecturer, supervisor, tutor etc. I therefore feel obliged to seek help from fellow disabled students, who are neither paid nor have the time to support me, especially as they have to manage their own disabilities too".

### Disclosure

There were a range of experiences with disclosure, with one participant largely comfortable with disclosing (Participant 1) although most participants reported large ranges of staff they would not feel comfortable disclosing to (Participants 2, 3 and 4). It was noteworthy that different students have unique relationships with different yet analogous staff; for example, Participant 2 felt comfortable disclosing to their Tutor but not their Director of Studies, and Participant 3 felt comfortable disclosing to Departmental administrative staff but not Departmental teaching staff. A Neurodiversity Advocate with counselling training was identified unanimously as a safe and comfortable person to disclose to, as were DRC advisors and UCS staff. Students cited various competencies that a good evaluator would have (Student 1 and 2) as well as pitfalls to avoid (Student 3 and 4), suggesting that co-developing a competency list with students would be fruitful.

Participant 2 listed: "Openness/Flexibility to accept ... Willingness to do research (coming from the right places. i.e. from ND people, not ones created by NT people who view neurodiversity as a problem to fix/eradicate) ...Training - someone who understands that neurodiversity is diverse.... Intersectional awareness is very very important.... Commitment to accepting barriers as barriers; no shaming [students] for needing something changing."

Participant 3 listed: "Professional, trained, discrete, calm, knowledgeable, experienced, organised, reliable, capable"

Participant 1 requested: "Someone without stereotyped ideas of what autism is like, who listens and believes my own experiences".

Participant 4 requested: “Someone who understands the issues with gender bias and neurodivergence diagnosis ...Someone who at the very least is able and willing to fully and logically explain the reasons for their opinions ... in a way that I understand, rather than making me feel stupid for asking questions”

### **Self-advocacy**

Analysing the chronology of each participants’ experience with accessing support, it is seen that there is a significant need to empower students towards self-advocacy. Not only must students be well enough physically and mentally to access support, but they must be informed enough and empowered for repeated engagement with services. The average number of times a student had to try to access support before their neurodiversity was helpfully identified was 6. Further, there were an average of 3 missed opportunities for identification of neurodiversity, and an average of 2 missed diagnoses due to a diagnosis of mental health taking precedence at evaluation. There was an average of 1 misdiagnosis, with students reporting their neurodiversity being misidentified as Borderline Personality Disorder, the impact of bullying, and the effects of stress, all of which are echoed as common misdiagnoses in the literature.

All respondents noted that misdiagnosis seemed gendered, with one student commenting: “it was suggested that I was “statistically more likely” to have a PD than autism because of the gender difference in diagnoses”. Respondents also suggested that factors such as race or transgender identity could impact evaluation and support. Self-advocacy may therefore be more important for students marginalised by other factors such as sexism, racism and transphobia, and may need to be delivered in a way that is sensitive to these issues.

### **Signposting**

Specific beneficial services were unique for each student respondent, due to their unique conditions and needs. Several suggestions for signposting were made including: in-person support groups; online support groups; online blogs; neurodiversity-friendly therapeutic services; reliable information on medication options; disabled communities; medical assessment options. This suggests that signposting should be as broad as possible, with as many relevant resources, services and service reviews collated as possible.

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

1. Funding and a role for a full-time Neurodiversity Advocate to supplement and support current provision in the Disability Resource Centre (DRC). They should have a background in screening of disabled students with neurodiversity, and counselling training. They will be expected to handle approximately 250 cases referred for screening annually.
2. Suggest that the Neurodiversity Advocate offers students a one-hour session for screening, integrated with a welfare toolkit for understanding a social model of disability and diagnosis. Suggest that the Neurodiversity Advocate then offers students up to two follow-up disability counselling sessions with the following focuses:
  - (1) navigating disclosure to friends and family, staff and peers, future employers and medical services;
  - (2) self-advocacy, signposting and next steps.

3. There will be formally regularised contact between the Neurodiversity Advocate and networks that can identify struggling students with undiagnosed neurodiversity, including:

- (1) Tutor/Director of Studies networks;
- (2) Cambridge Students' Union's Sabbatical Officers;
- (3) College nurses, counsellors and welfare teams;
- (4) University Counselling Service staff.

These networks can also provide feedback and enable accountability of the Neurodiversity Advocate.

4. The advisor will train staff in working with neurodiverse students, advise Departments on inclusive practice and co-develop training with disabled students. The Neurodiversity Advocate will be recommended to Departments and staff who are themselves seeking screening, diagnosis or advice on neurodiversity in the workplace.

5. The Neurodiversity Advocate should coordinate an annual meeting and mailing list for (1) dyslexic and/or dyspraxic staff; (2) staff with ADHD; (3) autistic staff; (4) all neurodiverse staff. The Neurodiversity Advocate should further coordinate a current and alumni neurodiverse staff network list, and flag staff with expertise in neurodiversity. When appropriate, the Neurodiversity Advocate should facilitate opportunities for networking between neurodiverse staff and students.

## **7. RECOMMENDED ACTION**

- 1. That the University provides funding for a specific role in the DRC that integrates both screening and support (a Neurodiversity Advocate)
- 2. That the University provides funds to support the co-development of staff training resources and modules.

## Project 9: Diversifying Assessment Project

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	
	Disability/Mental Health student	✓
Topic	Assessment & Feedback	✓
	Teaching & Learning	
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
Specific research question	What are disabled students' perceptions of the value of more diverse assessment methods for their academic performance and wellbeing?	
Student co-researchers	Cecily Bateman, undergraduate student, Classics	
	Beth Bhargava, undergraduate student, History	

2. Executive summary
<p>The project aimed to find out whether disabled students are helped by “alternate mode of assessment’ (AMAs) and/or more diversified methods of assessment both in terms of impact on mental health and on academic attainment; whether the disabled community is disadvantaged by the current structure of exams, and the short and long term changes that must be made to ensure the disabled students are no longer disadvantaged by Cambridge’s methods of assessment. Data was gathered through a survey sent to all students registered with the Disability Resource Centre and through email interviews where respondents provided longer format answers. The results demonstrate that disabled students are disproportionately disadvantaged by the current structure of assessment and are enthusiastic about the possibility of more variety and choice in methods of assessment, believing it would be better for their education, their ability to demonstrate their knowledge and analysis, and their employability and ease of transitioning into employment after university.</p>

3. Rationale
<p>The Disabled Students Committee consistently receives feedback from disabled students around assessments. Student feedback to committee in an informal manner before the start of the project indicated that the current structure of assessment - nearly 100% exams with a burden on students to coordinate Alternative Modes of Assessment (AMAs) - has a disproportionate impact on the mental health of disabled students and their academic performance. Furthermore, it indicated that current</p>

adjustments to exam conditions were not sufficient to mitigate this disadvantage, and the current system of applying for AMAs was not sufficiently accessible and added an additional burden to disabled students to negotiate, had time and work costs for staff and Colleges, and stretched the resources of the Disability Resource Centre and Student Operations. The student participants were also asked for suggestions for discipline-specific and 'authentic' assessment tasks that might replace the traditional exams, or the most common alternative, essays.

#### 4. Existing evidence

The lack of diversity in assessment sets Cambridge apart from other UK universities, where not only are diverse methods of assessment, rather than examinations, much more common, but assessment is spread out over a greater period of time. As will be shown later in this report, the results gathered here map onto the data examined by Helen Duncan (Disability Resource Centre) in the course of her research on the disability attainment gap in Cambridge, the impact of reasonable adjustments, and the efficacy of examinations vs dissertations for disabled students academic performance across a range of STEM and Arts/Humanities courses at Cambridge. Duncan's findings indicate that disabled students at Cambridge do substantially worse than their able peers in examinations, but achieve on a par with other students when assessed by other means (e.g. coursework, viva, dissertation). Her research provides a rich evidence-base that supports disabled students anecdotal understanding that examinations privilege a certain group of students and disenfranchise others.

The University has committed to Widening Participation and Access, and to narrowing the attainment gap for disabled students, particularly those with mental health conditions who understandably perform less well than their peers in high stakes, high pressure examinations at the end of each academic year. Changes to assessment practices, at least to offer more choice as alternatives to examinations, will help with both the equity issues that underpin the Widening Participation agenda, and the practical steps needed to narrow the identified attainment gaps.

Further, this project aligns with the work undertaken by the Examination and Assessment Committee (EAC) and the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning, to encourage the diversification of assessment across undergraduate courses, in line with the recommendations of the Examinations Review Report (2017) that every student (not just disabled students) should have at least one opportunity per Tripos for a non-exam based assessment task.

#### 5. Generation of evidence for this research project

This project team developed a research protocol in consultation with the project leaders and Helen Duncan (DRC), in order to focus the research on issues that could provide an evidence base for Helen's project as well as the work of the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Examination and Assessment Committee on the University's Assessment and Feedback Project.

We discussed experiences of assessment with the APP PAR team of co-researchers, who are all student representatives in the Disabled Students Campaign, and who therefore have insight into a range of

experiences and assessment practices across the collegiate University, with personal experiences of the processes for applying for Alternative Modes of Assessment (AMAs).

From there, we developed an email 'interview' for distribution online amongst the co-researcher team, as well as survey questions for inclusion in a section in the larger project survey that was dissemination to undergraduate students registered with Cambridge's Disability Resource Centre (DRC). The larger survey received 127 student responses, with the assessment section receiving approximately 73 focused responses (not every student answered every question in the larger survey). This section included 10 questions, with a variety of closed and open questions, which were then thematically analysed by the project team. Respondents to this project came from 19 different disciplines: 13 from Arts/Humanities and 6 from STEM.

## 6. Project research findings

The student perspectives gathered for this project demonstrate a clear need for change; the majority of our respondents (more than 60%) agreed that examinations in Cambridge have negatively affected their mental health.

For the majority of our respondents (80.56%), the AMA received represented an adjustment to the conditions of the assessment task (e.g. longer time or different venue to the exam), rather than a change to the method/mode of assessment. Indeed, only one student respondent out of 73 had applied for and received an AMA constituting a real change to the method/mode of assessment. As will be seen below, this is not a reflection of lack of demand for changes to the mode of assessment amongst disabled students; rather, it demonstrates the difficulty we face in applying for these. For example, multiple students raised concerns that they were not aware this was a possibility, while others told us that the application process was so difficult, stressful, and time-consuming they would have been forced to intermit whilst waiting on a decision, had they chosen to follow this path.

Our data shows that more than half of respondents would choose non-exam based assessment over exams, were they given the choice by their Faculty. The reasons behind this are clear; as subsequent questions revealed, the majority of disabled students believe that this would have a positive impact on their mental health and, as a result, on their attainment. Reflecting on their experiences, many also argued that they are simply 'handicapped' and 'structurally disadvantaged' by exams as their disabilities are of such a nature that they will never be able to compete on a level playing field with non-disabled peers in this format. The provision of alternatives to exams on all courses was strongly supported as a solution to this problem.

The debate is wide ranging, as to be expected from survey questions with a lot of hypotheticals i.e. the alternative methods of assessment were not laid out, but the idea of them presented. What comes through is that students are very enthusiastic about the possibility and believe it would be better for their education, their ability to show off their knowledge, and their employability and ease of switching into employment from study.

More than 60% of student respondents believe that the provision of more diverse modes of assessment, which can be substituted for or sit alongside exams, would have a positive or very positive impact on their mental health. Only 6% (four respondents) claimed that this would have a negative or very negative impact.

More than 65% of disabled students felt that having the option of more diverse types of assessment would have a positive or very positive impact on their overall performance in their degree. No students believed that the impact would be very negative, while just 9% felt that the impact would be at all negative.

### **Employability**

In the comments to the survey and the interviews, students consistently raised concerns that current methods of assessments *do not* adequately prepare students for the real world. Students believe that Cambridge's focus on exam-based assessment prevents them from gaining usable skills, thus limiting their employability and future confidence in the workplace.

When invited to do so, disabled students listed a variety of modes of assessment which would provide better preparation for the workplace, and the requirements which future employers would expect them to meet:

- *'I think Cambridge assessments focus far too much on academic performance rather than professional skills. Particularly for a vocational degree like mine, I think assessments should focus on the kind of work students will be doing afterwards and their real-life skills, and that there should be multiple equivalent types of assessment that people can choose based on their skills, career path or preferred form of assessment.'*
- *'I want to be a barrister so any kind of debate/oral presentation would be excellent'*
- *'Oral communication skills will be very important in most jobs connected to History (especially routes like teaching or law). We are in fact tested on this on a weekly basis - via supervisions - and it seems ridiculous that we are never given credit for this, and it does not contribute in any way to our grades.'*

### **Disadvantage and discrimination**

Disabled students believe that compulsory exam-based forms of assessment are discriminatory, and structurally disadvantage them. This is due to high stress levels exacerbating existing mental health conditions, and issues of memory/recall in short time periods. Students point out that exams do not provide an accurate reflection of their own abilities:

- *'Memory is a big struggle for me so exam based can be difficult. Also time pressure is very stressful.'*
- *'I'm concerned (especially as it has affected my supervision essays while waiting for medication issues to be resolved) that I'll lose memories during an exam and be unable to communicate what I've worked hard on the rest of the year.'*
- *'Diversifying assessment practices is absolutely essential in order to nurture every student's individual skills. Exams, while they do have their advantages, are outdated, they can be*

*overwhelmingly stressful and often do not reflect the amount of potential and work that a student has put into their studies. Continuous assessment such as coursework is far more accurate, showcasing the best of a student's ability, and is less likely to disadvantage students with ongoing mental health conditions or disabilities.'*

### **Current state of AMA**

The current option and processes for Alternative Modes of Assessment (AMA) are considered by disabled student respondents as not helpful, not accessible, and therefore not fit for purpose. Few students are aware that an AMA involving changes to the *mode* (as opposed to the *conditions*) of assessment is even a possibility. Such changes are in fact almost impossible to achieve; the process is lengthy, impractical, and unlikely to result in a positive outcome. Thus, students who are structurally disadvantaged by exams are usually left with no alternative:

- *'I am convinced that AMA, allowing me to hand in a portfolio of essays rather than completing exam papers, would be the only way for me to compete with my peers on a level playing field. If I can't get through an exam without being sick/having a panic attack because of long-standing mental health conditions, then I am never going to perform to the best of my ability/ on a par with my able peers. Yet AMA of this sort is so difficult to achieve I've been told I'd have to intermit while my application was in progress, and even then it would be unlikely to be accepted. For family reasons, this is completely impossible for me - meaning that, yet again, Cambridge advantages the able AND economically privileged.'*
- *'It would be amazing if it were easier to access non-exam assessments - I know very little about how to apply to switch from an exam to a non-exam assessment even though if this were possible for me it would hugely help my mental health'*

### **Course uptake and access**

Students have considered switching course simply to gain the option of substituting exams for another form of assessment:

- *'I considered switching into English just to have the option of substituting a portfolio of essays for an exam paper; this is the only way I really feel I would be able to show my abilities. Had I known how heavily exam-based Cambridge Undergraduate courses are, there is no way I would have applied.'*

### **Qualifying issues/concerns**

- Multiple responses emphasised that, although the exam format suits them personally, they agree with the principle of diversifying assessment, and recognise that it would help others.
- Some were concerned about what type of alternative assessment would be introduced
- One answer pointed out that the modes of assessment on their course, although not exam based, nevertheless structurally disadvantaged disabled students - this matches up with the responses from our Q5 (in which a majority of disabled students said that they had not chosen to take up those alternatives to exam-based assessment already on offer at the university). The

student requested that the university *always* offer multiple different options for assessment on any given course in order to demonstrate a real commitment to equality:

- *'I believe that when labs are assessed, there should be more support for student who need it/this taken into account for all the marks given ( ie if they couldn't finish due to medical reason then take an average, if there were areas they couldn't do/do as well, take an average, if they have an underlying condition that makes all practical work harder then they should get some sort of accounting of this in the overall grade ie a few % marks added, only consider some reports on practicals that where less of an issue le I am legally blind and find the lab very hard to navigate/use small/glass/clear liquid/ make accurate measurements/ make I Frances when analysing specimen Or alternatively, have an oral test at the end of each practical for such students instead, asking them to run through what they have done to ensure they have understood/taken away the key skills/concepts to the best of their ability Please also note that when each class is run by separate demonstrators it is incredibly hard and draining and embarrassing for students to continuously ask for help or adjustments and so will often not take these up, for many, not standing out from their peers or battling anxiety or strong emotions to discuss such personal circumstances can be near impossible and so they will not ask for the help needed.'*

#### **Ideas for 'authentic', creative and diverse assessment**

The interview and survey asked students to speculate: "In a profession most closely related to your chosen field of study, what kind of tasks might you be expected to do in your future work? (e.g. a classics graduate may go on to work in archaeology and be asked to prepare a site report, or they may go into a policy role and be asked to prepare policy briefs or write a speech for a politician) . Please identify your course of study and list some 'authentic' tasks you imagine you might do in your future role in this field." The wide range of responses will be collated and reported in CCTL's Assessment & Feedback Project, as indications of the possibilities for diversifying assessment that might be considered by course teams in Faculties/Departments. Some examples include:

- *Theology. Maybe policy research or looking into large projects to make them more efficient. This would be fine because it would be work on something tangible and consequential, making it feel worthwhile.*
- *History - oral communication skills will be very important in most jobs connected to History. We are in fact tested on this on a weekly basis - via supervisions - and it seems ridiculous that we are never given credit for this, and it does not contribute in any way to our grades.*
- *Physics - working with teams, designing an experiment with little to no guidance, presenting a potential research project with the aim of getting the necessary funding, giving talk to members of the public and answering questions they may have, writing a formal report on experiment I conducted*
- *Biochemistry - gathering, collecting, analysing and presenting data. writing reports and presentations.*
- *Music - tasks might include performing, preparing lessons plans for teaching, planning and facilitating rehearsals, writing programme notes, organising concerts*

- *Literature - archival research, synthesising research, reading and evaluating secondary literature, preparing presentations for lectures or seminars, collaborating with colleagues on research and teaching, planning and writing original literature.*
- *Biological Natural Sciences - pipetting data analysis, presentations, applications to funding bodies, writing reports*
- *Philosophy - if an academic career, writing philosophy papers, presenting in seminars, reviewing the work of others - if other plausible career after Philosophy degree, writing factual or policy reports, verbally reporting and communicating arguments on social initiatives*
- *Chemistry - I don't want to be a researcher BUT if I was one - long projects - brief lab reports to communicate progress made on project - paper written at the end of a project - outreach/ education type tasks including talks and powerpoints - pitches / proposals for new research*
- *History and Politics - work in Foreign office, reading and collating information and briefs, interpersonal skills and communications, presenting, public speaking, management, creating policy reports*
- *Archaeology - museum/heritage work, field archaeology, report preparation, paper writing.*
- *Computer Science - going into a software developer position, would have to write programs, maybe write a status report on a project.*

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

When taking these results going forward, it is important to consider the difference between AMA and diversified assessment:

- AMA and reasonable modes of adjustment for disabled students can take the form of adjustment to the exam process (e.g. more time or different venues) or as a limited range of different types of assessment (e.g. a viva, an essay). These options are basically only offered to disabled students with medical evidence
- Diversifying assessment means a change in assessment practices away from exams for ALL students. Whilst the data collected for this project was solicited from disabled students only, there was a general understanding amongst respondents that diversified assessment would be:
  - good practice in designing assessment to more effectively evaluate students' learning in ways that align with the courses' learning outcomes
  - more engaging for everyone with 'authentic' tasks that prepare students for future work
  - less stressful than exams for everyone (which is an important consideration given the need to consider students' well being and mental health)

- less workload and time costs for staff to have to work out AMAs/reasonable adjustments with the DRC and Student Operations
- less of a burden on students to have to self-advocate for AMAs

The outcomes of this project will be incorporated into CCTL's Assessment and Feedback Project, reported to the Examinations and Assessment Committee (EAC), and reported at the Diversified Assessment Symposium (March 2020).

## **8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS**

1. That AMA processes be made more accessible (it currently requires a great deal of self-advocacy on the part of disabled students who are already overburdened and who need better support in this process)
2. That College prizes for those who achieve Firsts be abolished (this privileges white, male and non-disabled students, ignoring the contextual factors and advantages that allow them to succeed in the current examination-based system)
3. That Departments/Faculties undertake a review of assessment practices, finding opportunities to offer more choice and flexibility of assessment from first year
4. That the University create an action plan for diversifying assessment so that this is not just a recommendation but a strong commitment

## Project 10: Intermission and Extended Period of Study (EPS)

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	
	Disability/Mental Health student	✓
Topic <i>The broad educational point that impacts student performance/ attainment gaps</i>	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	✓
	Other?	
Specific research question	What is the relationship between intermission and extended period of study, and which is more appropriate to support the academic performance of disabled students with mental health conditions?	
Student co-researchers	Jess O'Brien, undergraduate student, Law	

2. Executive summary
<p>Intermission is a common practice for students with mental illnesses who are no longer able to manage their workload. This research explores the extent to which this practice may be overused or misapplied. Extension to Period of Study (hereafter EPS) might be considered as a more appropriate, less damaging, and more long term solution for a significant number of students who currently intermit. It is clear that the practice was not the correct solution for all students who have intermitted, and in many cases students feel it could have been prevented. Some students may intermit as an informal method of accessing EPS. This seems to be a particular issue for students whose disability does not cease to affect them after 1 year, and thus is still a factor upon their return from intermission. Most students who might consider accessing EPS were unaware of it as an option before this research. The University may want to consider alternative solutions to intermission, up to including EPS, and finding mechanisms to make these more widely used and available to students.</p>

3. Rationale:
<p>As Disabled Students' Officer, I have regularly had to tackle the issues surrounding both Extension to Period of Study and the process of intermission. For example, when training disabled students' officers – some of the most informed students in the University relating to disability – almost none of them were aware of the existence of AMAs, including EPS. This includes students who after the training realised this might have been more appropriate for them than intermission or other current adjustments.</p> <p>As DSO I have also had to deal regularly with students attempting to access AMAs, and the process has been difficult. Additionally, at intermission socials I have had to support many students who are concerned about returning from intermission as they do not feel any better, even after multiple years of intermission, because they have a chronic condition which they should have not intermitted for in the first place, as this is not a solution.</p>

In my own case, I intermitted due to hypersomnia meaning I was sleeping 14 hours + a day. The solution was to intermit, despite my doctors predicting that the problem would persist beyond my period of intermission. The solution should have been to put adjustments in place to decrease my daily workload, not simply to take a year out when it was not clear that my condition would be better on my return. Luckily experimental medication alleviated my symptoms, but the University nor I knew this at the time of my intermission.

It was therefore clear to me that research should be conducted into whether intermission was an appropriate or useful practice in the majority of cases it is currently used for.

#### 4. Existing evidence

##### [CUSU Intermission Survey DRAFT \[2020\]](#)

CUSU has recently surveyed Cambridge students on the topic of Intermission. The survey was distributed through CUSU mailing lists, the CUSU student bulletin which is sent to all students, and CUSU Campaign Facebook groups, including the Intermission Support Group. This data has not yet been published, although the preliminary findings have been shared with the CUSU Executive.

However, as the lead student researcher on this project has access to the CUSU survey results as the current CUSU Disabled Student Sabbatical Officer, they have decided to include the data in this project report, in parallel with the ethics approved data collected for the APP PAR project.

The CUSU survey results were filtered to focus on the 83 responses from students who had disclosed that they had:

- a. Intermitted, or 'Seriously Considered' Intermittent; and
- b. Disclosed a mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder

NOTE: the student co-researcher understands that the use of this CUSU Intermissions survey data has not been approved by the ethics committee that reviewed the APP PAR Project (CHESREC) and therefore cannot be published externally.

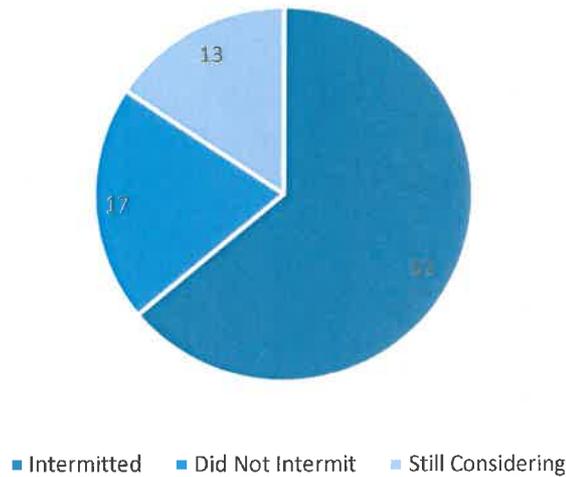
#### 5. Generation of evidence

Other student co-researchers in the APP PAR team were asked to take part in an online interview, in the format of a Google Form. There were 5 complete responses. Only the data relevant to intermission was used for this research, the rest was used by a colleague for their parallel project on EPS/Double Time (see Project 5).

## 6. Small project research findings

The following section discusses findings from the data collected in the CUSU Intermissions Survey, independently to the APP PAR Project.

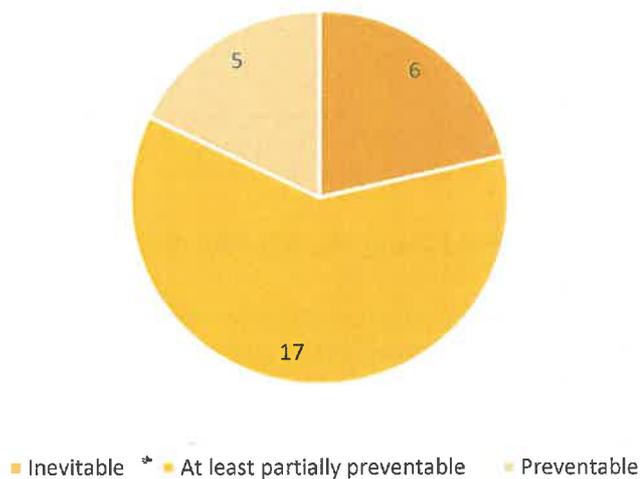
Number of Students Who Eventually Intermitted, of those who 'Seriously Considered'



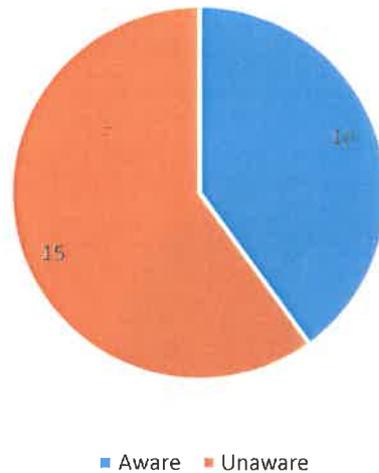
It is worth noting that one of the students who did not intermit, but declared that they had 'seriously considered' doing so, mentioned the following:

"I found out about Double Time [EPS] and decided that was more appropriate for me"

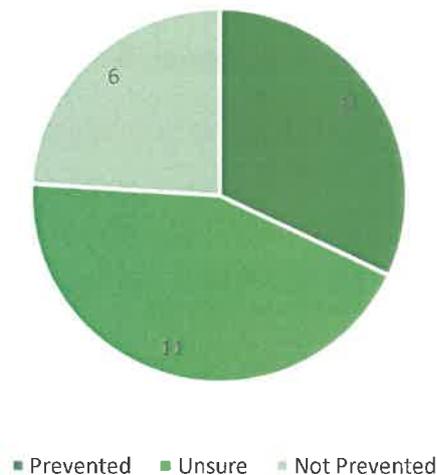
Whether Students who Intermitted Felt Their Intermission Was Preventable



### Whether Students Who Have Intermitted Were Aware of EPS (before this survey)



### Whether Students Who Did Not Know About EPS Thought It Would Have Prevented Their Intermission



#### The following section draws on data collected during the APP PAR Project

Interviews were conducted with 5 participants – 4 who currently study with EPS and 1 who declared that they would have done if they had been aware of it. All had experienced, or ‘seriously considered’ intermission.

In their interviews, 4 out of 5 participants discussed the links between EPS and intermission. Various issues were raised, some of the points made are outlined below:

- It was noted that many people who are disabled or ill for any length of time are told they may need to intermit, even if this is not a long term solution to their lack of capacity to complete work at the ‘Cambridge’ rate. For these students, EPS is a more reasonable option as their health will not be ‘fixed’ by taking a year out, and if a reasonable adjustment in the form of EPS was made they should not actually need to intermit.

- If it can be demonstrated that students who repeatedly intermit are at a significant academic disadvantage compared to non-disabled peers, then failure to properly advertise/easily provide access to EPS may count as a breach of the University's duty under the EA 2010
- The collegiate University appears to, in practice, consider intermission a panacea for any kind of illness or disability that limits a student's capacity to complete a certain amount of work each term
- Participants raised anecdotal evidence of students they have worked with in their representative capacities, who have been negatively impacted by intermission. Some notable issues included: unreliable or abusive family networks; removal from vital medical care located in Cambridge; removal from important support networks located in Cambridge; the risk of homelessness where they are left financially unsupported; the need to work during intermission even where students are not well enough to do so, or need to take on risky forms of employment, due to intermission
- Many students who should be studying with EPS have to withdraw, or repeatedly intermit, as unsurprisingly their chronic conditions do not 'get better' within a year
- The reality of students attempting 'DIY EPS', where they intermit and then continue to study (despite University stipulations to the contrary) in order to effectively split their workload over two years. Of course, this will be less effective than a properly resourced and supported EPS.

These responses were spread across all four interviewees, showing the prevalence of these issues.

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

There are some significant concerns raised by the two parallel research projects (the CUSU Intermissions project and the APP PAR project) which may help to explain the current attainment gaps which exist for disabled students who experience mental illness. These are discussed below.

- 1.) The University is clearly failing to effectively advertise the full range of adjustments that exist to support students who are struggling with their workload due to reasons of disability. Even if students do not fall behind so far that they feel forced to intermit, this may impact their overall attainment in their degree, as they are unable to study at the same rate as their non-disabled counterparts. The University should explore how it can increase awareness of EPS as an option to both tutors and students.
- 2.) The significant volume of students who believed that their intermission was at least partially preventable means that failures are being made in supporting said students. The University should consider what steps should be taken prior to encouraging students to intermit, to ensure that this is avoided where possible.
- 3.) The University at some level is clearly failing to distinguish between disabilities which are 'short' and long term. I.e. which disabilities will cease to impact on workload after a year, and which will not be resolved by a period of intermission and require further adjustments. The University could suggest having a plan in place before a student begins intermission for their return, to ensure that the period of intermission is actually helping the student, and that there will be adequate support upon their return.
- 4.) Potential measures should be taken to mitigate the negative impact of intermission for those students for whom the process is necessary.

## 8. RECOMMENDED ACTION

1. That the University explores how it can increase awareness amongst tutors and students of EPS as an option to Intermission

This should include:

- A consideration of what steps should be taken prior to encouraging students to intermit, to ensure that this is avoided where possible.
- A requirement that a plan is put in place before a student begins intermission for their return, to ensure that the period of intermission is actually helping the student, and that there will be adequate support upon their return.
- The development of measures to mitigate the negative impact of intermission for those students for whom the process is necessary.

2. That the University consider undertaking the further research into intermission and students' experiences of the process, building on from the CUSU Intermissions project.

This should include:

- An analysis of the impact of intermission on students' attainment, potentially as compared to EPS
- An analysis of Cambridge workload as a whole, and the extent to which it impacts disabled students, particularly those with MH issues
- A potential experiment – offering a trial of EPS level workload to a group of students with MH issues, and seeing if this alleviates their symptoms and/or increases their comparative performance as compared to their peers