



Final Report: Student Access Conferences, Murray Edwards College

INT Widening Participation & Induction Fund (WPIF)

December 2024

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1. Summary

We are deeply grateful to the Isaac Newton Trust for their support of this project, delivering a new approach to engaging Derbyshire, Manchester, and the London Borough of Haringey in keeping with the College Area Links Scheme.

An ambitious departure from the traditional SLO-driven school engagement approach, this project delivered three regional conference events for targeted students at state-maintained schools in each region. With limited numbers of places at each event, Murray Edwards College worked with partner schools to ensure careful targeting and selection, rather than mass engagement in 'school assembly' formats. Delivered by the College's team of permanent outreach officers (all former teachers), long-term relationship building with schools in these regions was also a key objective, in addition to engaging the individual event participants. As well as priority criteria for widening participation purposes, schools were required to target those with the academic potential to progress to the University of Cambridge.

The stated targets for engagement in our proposal were a total of 220 participants across the project: 60 each at the Haringey and Derbyshire conferences, and 100 at the Manchester Conference. With a firm Access focus, schools were specifically encouraged to prioritise students with WP background flags, distinguishing the event from other, existing Cambridge/Oxbridge recruitment activities that were identified in each region.

The Haringey Conference engaged 64 Year 12 students from three schools. Although school engagement was lower than expected, participant numbers were slightly higher. The Manchester Conference engaged 45 Year 12 students from five schools, which was significantly lower than expected. The Derbyshire Conference was delayed, with delivery in December 2024 – but engaged 115 Year 12 students from 8 schools, far exceeding expectations. Overall, the project engaged 224 participants across the three conferences.

Participant feedback from all events was overwhelmingly positive, demonstrating significant impact on attitudes and confidence towards Cambridge in both students and the education professionals that accompanied them. Analysis is detailed in Appendix 1. Tracked applications from participants from the Haringey and Manchester conferences for 2025 entry to Cambridge are detailed in Appendix 2. Derbyshire Conference progression will be tracked in the next application cycle.

2. Delivery report

Following a single model, all three conferences were delivered with a local school partner as host, joined by groups of participants from other schools in the area.

The format of each conference saw Murray Edwards College's Senior Tutor, Directors of Admissions, Directors of Studies, and student ambassadors from across the arts and sciences spend a day with students, teachers and other supporters in each region.

As well as an Admissions guidance session and sessions on the range of AHSS and STEM subjects on offer at Cambridge, participants at each conference enjoyed an extensive Q&A session with the student ambassadors. Throughout session breaks and the provided lunch, participants enjoyed informal chats with Fellows and student ambassadors, as well as members of the College's Access and Student Recruitment team.

a. Haringey Student Access Conference

Hosted at Fortismere School on 26 March 2024, the first conference delivered was attended by 64 Year 12s, as well as a small number of highly able Year 11 Fortismere students that joined different sessions (but are not included in the data as they fall outside of the target group).



Sixth form participants and Murray Edwards College student ambassadors at the conference

Schools in attendance included:

- Fortismere School
- London Academy of Excellence Tottenham (LAET)
- St Thomas More Catholic School

Two more local schools had confirmed their engagement, but had to withdraw their groups at short notice due to unforeseen internal clashes impacting student and/or accompanying staff availability. This would have resulted in a further 30 Year 12 attendees joining the conference, which was unfortunate given that the three schools that did attend would have taken the additional spaces between them, had they had sufficient notice.

Against priority targeting criteria, 41% of participants resided in IMD Q1-2 postcodes, 39% were in current receipt of a 16-19 bursary, and 5% declared that they were Care Experienced at that time.

For attending schools, in comparison to average application and progression rates to the University of Cambridge over the past 5 admissions cycles¹, Fortismere and LAET average the largest numbers of applications to Cambridge in the Borough (excluding fee-paying schools such as Highgate School, which averages more acceptances than all other local schools combined). However, their offer and acceptance rates fluctuate significantly around the average offer and acceptance rates for Cambridge. St Thomas More is consistently, significantly, below average application, offer and acceptance rates for their cohort. Of the three schools that withdrew at short notice, one was comparable to Fortismere and LAET, while the other two were comparable to St Thomas More.

b. Manchester Student Access Conference



Hosted by Xaverian College on 16 April 2024, the second conference was attended by 45 Year 12 students.

Schools in attendance included:

- Cheadle Hulme Sixth Form
- Didsbury Sixth Form
- Hazel Grove Sixth Form
- Loreto College
- Xaverian College

A sixth school had planned on bringing a further 20 student participants to the conference, but cancelled due to staff sickness absence and a lack of available cover. All attending schools, including the hosts, ended up bringing smaller cohorts of students than originally

planned. Explanations were varied, but most linked in some way to the challenges of getting some staff and/or students released from timetable.

Against priority targeting criteria, 70% of participants resided in IMD Q1-2 postcodes, 34% were in current receipt of a 16-19 bursary, and 3% declared that they were Care Experienced at that time. Although attendee numbers were significantly lower than expected, the very high proportion of participants coming from these priority groups, as well as having the required level of academic potential, demonstrates that school partners worked hard to prioritise those students that may benefit the most from the experience.

While Loreto College has, over the past 5 admissions cycles, demonstrated a higher-than-average conversion rate from applications to acceptances at the University of Cambridge – and makes many applications due to its size, all other schools that sent groups to the conference had a history of average-to-below average acceptance rates to Cambridge, given their applicant numbers². Loreto's high application numbers and acceptance rate also mask the fact that, given that it is the largest state-maintained sixth form in Greater Manchester, there should be a significantly larger number of applications, given the academic performance of their students at A level.

^{1,2} CAO School Targeting Dataset Mk. 5 October 2024

c. Derbyshire Student Access Conference

Hosted by Derby Moor Spencer Academy on 17 December 2024, the final conference in the pilot was attended by 115 Year 12 students. Originally planned for delivery before the summer, this conference was delayed until the following term due to staff absence at Murray Edwards College. The conference was well attended, receiving the largest number of school groups and individual participants of the project's three events – and double the original expectation. This number was limited by the venue capacity, with all schools operating a dynamic reserve list that ensured that schools could fill their own places, should one become available after confirmation of their allocation. The event was also well attended by sixth form staff and advisors, as well as leadership representatives of two multi-academy trusts with a school present.

Schools in attendance included:

- Derby College
- Derby Moor Spencer Academy
- Heanor Gate Academy
- John Port Academy
- Landau Forte College Derby
- Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School
- St Mary's Catholic High School (Chesterfield)
- The Ecclesbourne School

Attendance at the Conference was broadly in line with expectations, with only a small number of targeted schools failing to engage. It was also clear that there is interest from some schools in the north of the county, for whom travel down to Derby is challenging. Although they did not attend this Conference,

a second event held in the north of the county would be well received by rural schools – many of which have a good track record of high-achieving A level students who could benefit from such engagement.

Against priority targeting criteria, 40% of participants resided in IMD Q1-2 postcodes, 28% were in current receipt of a 16-19 bursary, and 3% declared that they were Care Experienced at that time. While these figures are comparatively lower than for Haringey and Manchester Conference participants, they are still significant and positive, given that attendance numbers in Derbyshire were more than the sum of the previous two events combined.

Attending schools varied very significantly in progression rates and representation to the University of Cambridge. The attending schools were predominantly from the Derby City area, with Chesterfield the furthest afield. As mentioned in section 4c., however, they were only able to attend with financial support from the project to cover their group's travel costs. Derby, in general, continues to present stubbornly low progression rates to selective universities – including Cambridge. This conference was also attended by a representative of the University of Derby's *Derby Scholars* programme, both to benefit their team's work through knowledge acquisition and to further develop links between their local work and the College Area Links Scheme for the wider benefit of schools in the city. Murray Edwards College will look to continue the development of this link, in order to increase access to Cambridge with local partners.



Student Q&A session with Murray Edwards College student ambassadors

3. How others may learn from the project

A guiding principle underpinning this project was the desire to establish new ways of engaging with schools in Murray Edwards' link areas – not just in terms of activity delivered, but also when, where and how engagement happens. Primarily, this needed to be on the back of sustainable relationships, where significant investment proved to schools in those areas that their Cambridge link college was committed in a way that went far beyond traditional visits and newsletters from SLOs that cycled every 1-2 years. Systemic challenges with the College Area Links Scheme are widely acknowledged³, and this project was designed specifically to address a number of them.

In this regard, the project was hugely successful, with comments from partner schools at all three conferences highlighting not only the direct benefit to their staff and students, but also justification of the significant amount of their own time and resource invested in participation – and their desire to continue participation in and/or hosting future conferences along the same lines. While the Committee shared its concerns at the point of grant approval about a college for women's ability to meet the needs of all participant genders, the project's conference model demonstrated that with a clear and transparent approach to access agendas with school partners, fully inclusive events do not depend on the student recruitment priorities of the College delivering the work.

"Thank you for your organisation of the conference yesterday. It was such an informative, useful and well-planned event. We certainly got a lot out of it as teachers and the students definitely did too."

Rachel Shaw, KS5 student development lead, St Mary's Catholic High School, Chesterfield

Impact on short- and long-term relationships can, however, be seen as varied across the project. The Derbyshire Conference far exceeded expectations in engagement, but it is also the case that Derbyshire has received very little direct or targeted engagement from the Collegiate University for many years. In that sense, demand and appreciation from schools was much higher – although more effort was (and will continue to be) required by Murray Edwards College to build trust and buy in with local school partners.

In comparison, the Manchester Conference participation fell short of expectations, with many schools withdrawing engagement as the event drew closer – clearly with internal pressures and the need to prioritise a deciding factor for school leaders. At the same time, Greater Manchester is a highly contested student recruitment environment for many Cambridge colleges, as well as around 8 colleges that have Link Area responsibility within the Greater Manchester area, and more on the periphery. As the link institution for many areas of Greater Manchester we have witnessed, firsthand through this project, the challenges of delivering individual and collaborative college access and student recruitment activity without an effective centralised, collectively agreed, structure for coordination. Nonetheless, feedback from school coordinators underlines that more outreach capacity is required to meet demand – not less.

This was a complex and ambitious project to deliver. Although framed within the context of the College Area Links Scheme, it also came during a period of significant change and restructure in outreach work at Murray Edwards College.

The project originally intended to deliver all three conferences in the 2023-2024 academic year, but this proved impossible with significant staff absence at Murray Edwards College during that period. The Derbyshire Conference took place in the current academic year – much later than planned – once these challenges had been resolved, which are also factors in it delivering significantly higher engagement than originally projected.

³ University of Cambridge Strategic Review of Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach, Final Report, June 2021



Had this staffing and resource situation not existed, all three conferences would have been delivered as originally scheduled – and it is possible that relationship building (and subsequent school engagement) would also have benefitted. While this is hardly surprising, it does further reinforce the importance of ensuring a stable, sustainable relationship management approach with schools through the College Area Links Scheme, be it through the avoidance of short-term SLO contracts – or other staff turnover.

The final learning point to flag from this initiative is the importance of developing local knowledge and insights into short and mid-term relationships between local stakeholders. Taking the example of the Haringey Conference, the choice of Fortismere School as host was a complicating factor, in hindsight. Their team were extremely keen and supportive and were hugely generous hosts – but anecdotal evidence suggests that the prospect of having to visit that school lessened enthusiasm amongst other (competing) sixth form groups. In comparison with other projects delivered in Haringey by Murray Edwards College, using a ‘neutral’ venue such as a local conference or civic centre saw better engagement from a greater number of schools than for the Haringey Conference.

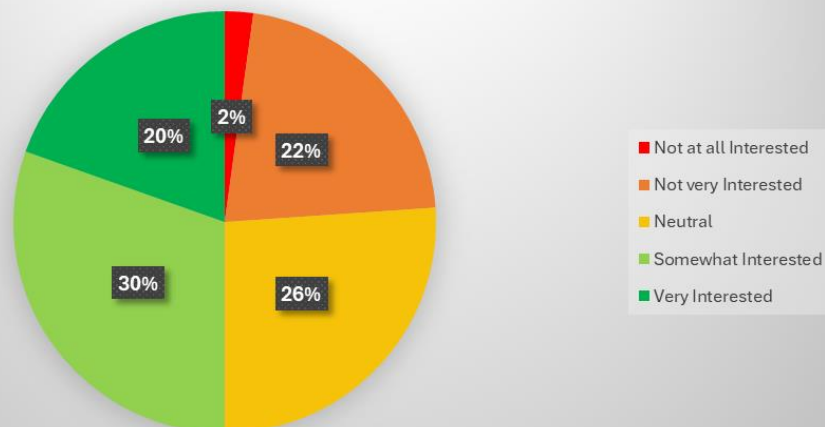


4. Finances

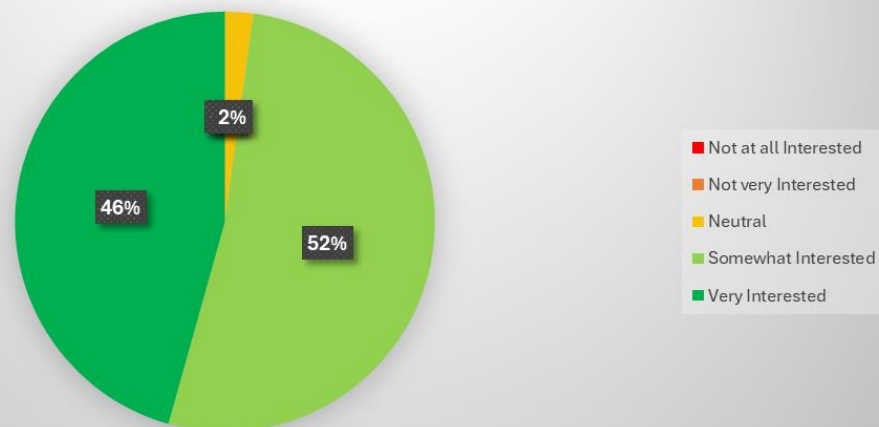
Project element	Projected budget breakdown:	Projected cost	Actual spend	Notes
a. Haringey	£650 - Student ambassador payment (Real Living Wage). £500 - Train travel to Haringey for team £240 - Event team subsistence costs £1,000 - Fund to cover host school's costs for the day £200 - Contingency allocation	£2,590	£2,700	<i>Increased spend on one additional student ambassador, as well as travel being slightly more expensive than projected.</i> <i>Slight overspend on travel, due to increased train ticket and subsistence costs.</i>
b. Manchester	£1,100 - Student ambassador payment (Real Living Wage). £2,000 - Train travel to Manchester for team £3,840 - Accommodation for team in Manchester £1,440 - Subsistence for team in Manchester £1,000 - Fund to cover host school's costs for the day £500 - Contingency allocation	£9,980	£9,100	<i>Contingency allocation unspent.</i> <i>Host costs slightly lower than projected, with them kindly revising numbers for catering at short notice.</i>
c. Derbyshire	£650 - Student ambassador payment (Real Living Wage). £1,000 - Train travel to Derby for team £2,900 - Accommodation for team in Derby £1,080 - Subsistence for team in Derby £1,000 - Fund to cover host school's costs for the day £500 - Contingency allocation	£7,130	£7,800	<i>Additional student ambassadors due to significantly higher number of participants than projected, as well as their travel, accommodation and subsistence costs.</i> <i>Increase in agreed fund for host school, due to increased catering requirements.</i> <i>Support for one school's travel costs to enable a minibus for the group.</i>
	Total	£19,600	£19,600	<i>Overall project on budget.</i>

Appendix 1: Participant feedback from supported events

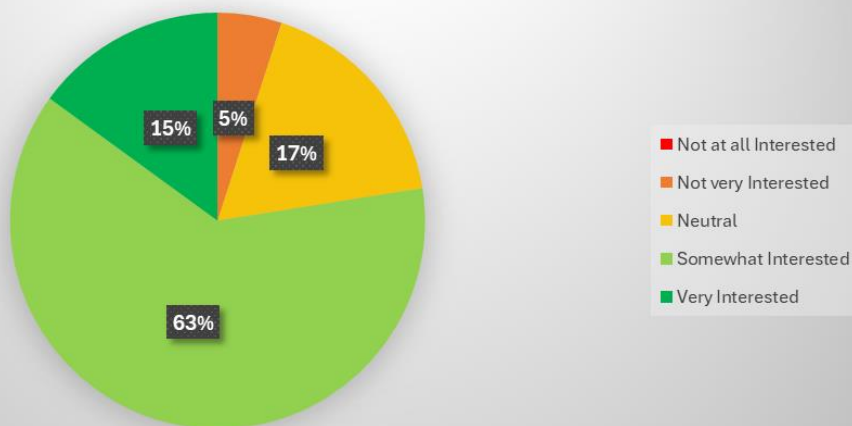
Haringey Conference - how interested were you in studying at Cambridge prior to the conference?



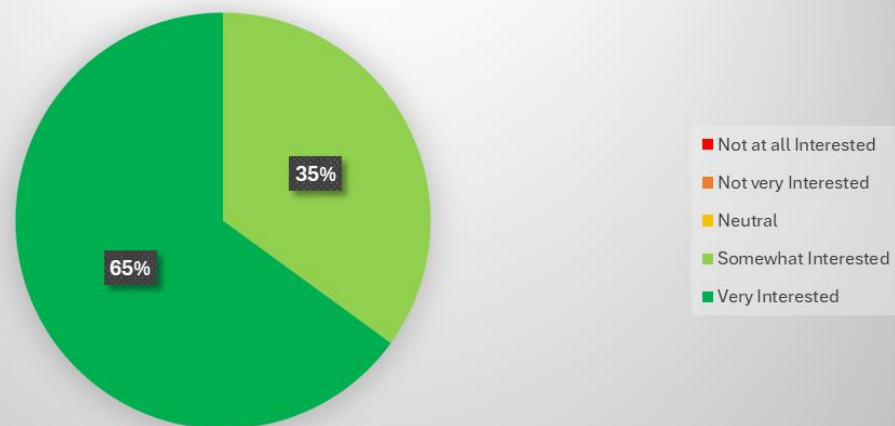
Haringey Conference - how interested are you in studying at Cambridge after attending the conference?



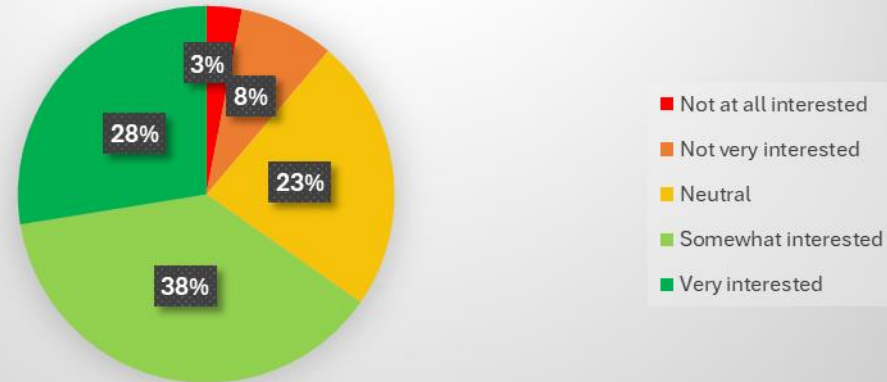
Manchester Conference - how interested were you in studying at Cambridge prior to the conference?



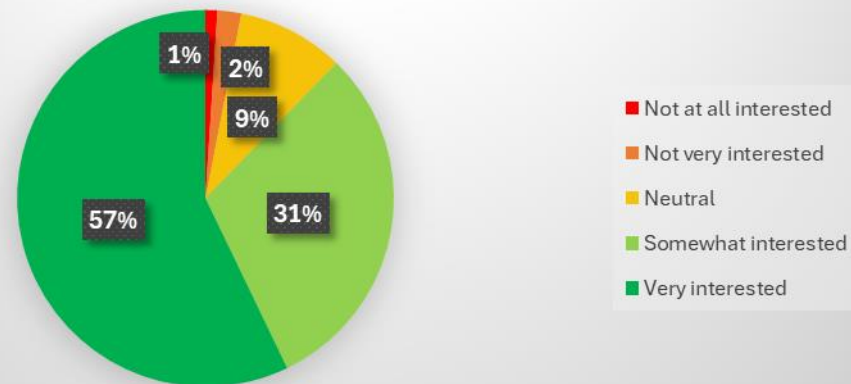
Manchester Conference - how interested are you in studying at Cambridge after attending the conference?



Derbyshire Conference - how interested were you in studying at Cambridge University prior to the conference?



Derbyshire Conference - how interested in studying at Cambridge University after the conference?



Appendix 2: Applications to Cambridge for 2025 entry from tracked participants, by activity

Activity	Participants	Applications (subject)
Haringey Access Conference	64	10: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - x2 (Computer Science) - x1 (Engineering) - x1 (English) - x1 (History) - x2 (Human, Social, and Political Sciences) - x1 (Modern and Medieval Languages) - x1 (Psychological and Behavioural Sciences) - x1 (Theology and Religious Studies)
Manchester Access Conference	45	14: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - x1 (Computer Science) - x1 (Economics) - x2 (Engineering) - x1 (English) - x1 (Geography) - x2 (History) - x1 (Law) - x2 (Mathematics) - x1 (Medicine) - x1 (Natural Sciences) - x1 (Psychological and Behavioural Sciences)
Derbyshire Access Conference	115	N/A: Applications will be tracked in the next cycle.