

Experience Christ's Summer School 2024 Final Report for the Isaac Newton Trust, April 2025

24.2viii(a) CHR31 WPIF MAY 2024

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I. Summary

The Experience Christ's Summer School aims to provide students with the opportunity to experience the social and community aspects of college life at Cambridge, as well as a sense of the academic challenge that studying at Cambridge entails. The summer school offered 60 places for the event taking place from 18 to 21 August 2024, and during their stay students attended a variety of academic sessions as well as additional sessions focussed on core information, advice and guidance (IAG) to support and encourage their consideration of Cambridge as a university option.

Subjects covered included Architecture and Design, Engineering, Chemical Engineering and Biotechnology, Law, Psychological and Behavioural Sciences, Education, Geography, and Land Economy. Supporting IAG sessions included a focus on applications to Cambridge, exploring options and careers beyond university, financial support for attending university, and the opportunity to attend a student-led subject fair with current undergraduates to gain a better insight into different courses at Cambridge.

The travel costs for attendees were fully funded by a grant received from the Isaac Newton Trust, with all remaining costs covered by the college's own outreach funds.

II. Advertising and Selection

Applications

Applications were either made directly by the student (accompanied by a supporting reference from a teacher) or via a nomination from a teacher. Those who were nominated were invited to complete a short optional form for anything else they wished to add. In total, Experience Christ's received 296 applications, of which four were teacher nominations, from students at 180 schools.

The map (*right*) shows the geographic spread of applications with attendees in yellow.

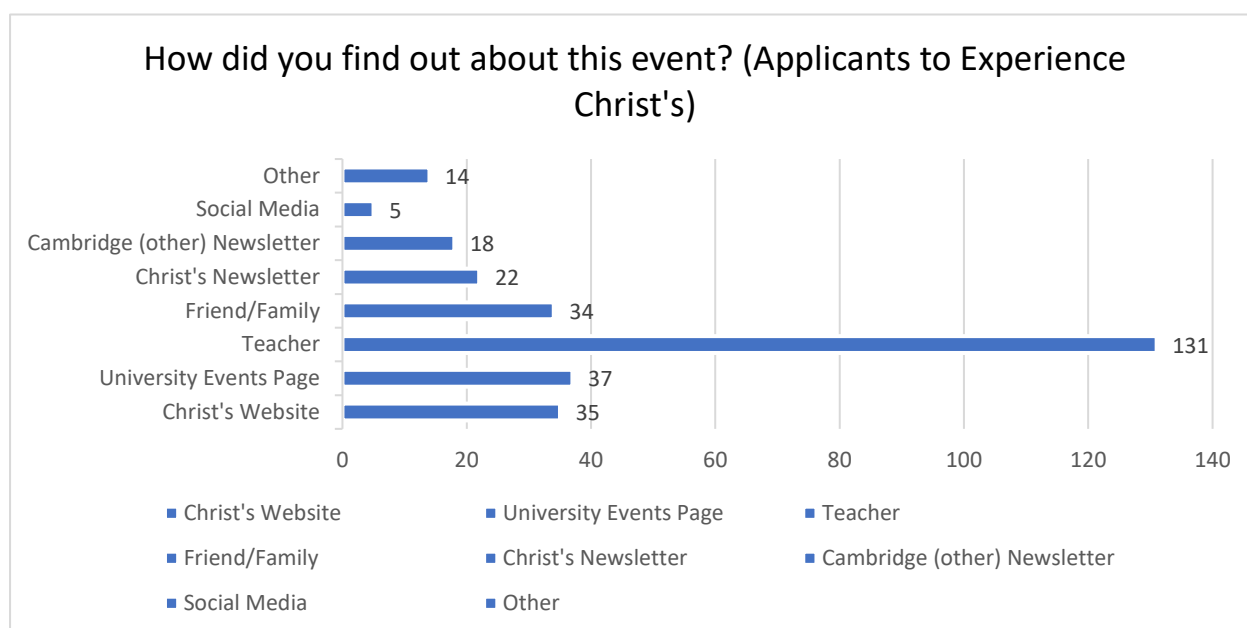


Advertising

The event was primarily advertised through the Christ's College website, the University's Upcoming Events page, and through student and teacher mailing lists. In addition to these routes, we contacted teachers who had supported applicants to other outreach programmes who had indicated they would like to be informed of future opportunities, and asked colleagues at other colleges to share with their own Link Area schools and teacher mailing lists. In an attempt to encourage applications outside of London and the South East, we identified geographical cold spots in applications received part way through the application window, and reached out to colleges with Link Areas in those regions to further promote the programme.

Applications were open from mid-June through to 9 July – a slightly later and shorter period than anticipated. This did however, mean we could advertise during the July open days to students whom we might not otherwise have encountered or reached, such as those whose schools for which we do not have a contact email.

It was clear from applications that advertising to teacher contacts was crucial, with 44% of applicants stating that they had heard about the summer school from a teacher.



Ahead of the 2025 summer school, we have set up a form through which potential attendees can register their interest in advance. This has been open since the start of the academic year and currently stands at over 1000 sign-ups who we will notify when applications open.

Selection

The **core eligibility criteria** were set as follows:

- (a) Currently in the lower sixth – Year 12 England and Wales, Year 13 Northern Ireland, S5 Scotland

- (b) Attending a state-maintained school in the UK
- (c) Had achieved a minimum of 5 GCSEs at grade 8, 9 or A*, or a majority of As at National 5s for Scottish applicants
- (d) Were on track for the minimum grades required in suitable qualifications and subjects for their desired course
- (e) Were available for the full duration of the programme.

Beyond this, we **prioritised applications from** those who met any of the following:

- Had not yet had the opportunity to participate in a summer school, residential or taster programme at Cambridge
- Were care-experienced, refugees, asylum seekers or under humanitarian protection
- Were currently or previously eligible for Free School Meals, or were in receipt of the 16-19 bursary (England) or Education Maintenance Allowance (rest of UK)
- Had a home postcode within the lowest four deciles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation
- Lived in underrepresented geographical areas and for whom a day trip to Cambridge was least feasible, such as Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, the South West, North West, North East and West Midlands in England
- Attended schools with low progression to Cambridge and/or would be the first generation in their family to progress to higher education

For larger scale events such as this, we also tend to avoid taking more than two students from the same school or college other than in exceptional circumstances, as we have found that this tends to negatively impact the experience of those attending. We also aimed to strike a fair balance of subject interests – around a third of the applicants were in the field of Engineering or adjacent physical sciences, and around a fifth were interested in Law. Attendees broadly reflected this split, but it did mean a greater number of those interested in the likes of Engineering were turned down compared to other subject areas. This is not dissimilar to the Low Participation Neighbourhood Summer School which was offered at Christ's (along with Sidney Sussex and Murray Edwards) where a third of applications were for Medicine alone, of eight possible subject streams from which to choose.

Applications were first and foremost assessed on academic achievement with consideration given to educational and personal circumstances and context. 60 offers of a place were made in the first instance, of which four declined their place. After factoring in replacement offers and late withdrawals, our final number of attendees was 58.

Characteristic	Initially Offered (%) N= 60	Final Attendees (%) N= 58
Care Experienced	2 (3%)	1 (2%)
Refugee	2 (3%)	2 (3%)
IMD Quintiles 1-2	23 (38%)	22 (38%)
Outside of London and SE	37 (62%)	36 (62%)
FSM, 16-19 bursary or EMA	15 (25%)	12 (21%)

48 of the 58 attendees (83%) met one or more of the above characteristics.

III. Aims, Objectives, and Offering

Aims and Objectives

Through the programme, we set out to:

- Provide an insight into the social and community aspects of college life
- Provide a sense of the academic challenge studying at Cambridge entails and the different types of teaching from lectures to supervisions
- Build confidence in different aspects of the admissions process, including the UCAS application (personal statements), admissions tests, and interviews
- Bring together a cohort from all over the UK, to provide attendees with an opportunity to interact with other bright young people from different places

Programme Offering and Aims

The Experience Christ's Summer School hosted attendees for three nights (four days). Attendees received:

- **three academic sessions;**
- **four information and guidance sessions**, in addition to the introductory welcome session with an overview of Cambridge;
- **Q&A with the Director of Admissions** at Christ's;
- an **enrichment session from Lord Simon McDonald**, Master of Christ's on his life and career; and
- **student-led sessions** in the form of a **student Q&A and 'Subject Fair'**.

Academic Sessions

During the event, the participants attended three academic sessions from a choice of six or seven in each session block, with some paired sessions allowing attendees to go into more depth on a topic across multiple days. In the case of Architecture, due to the programme of study developed by the session leader, attendees compulsorily attended four sessions culminating in a presentation session to fellow students about their mini-project.

As a result of having provided guidance and online reading prior to the summer school, we were able to offer more focussed, 'deep dive' IAG sessions for attendees than for some of our events taking place earlier in the academic year. The benefits of this were clear from the feedback provided after the event, especially concerning financial support.

Student Sessions

A core aspect of any residential is the opportunity to interact with current undergraduates. As such, we included two student-led sessions: a Q&A, and the Subject Fair. During the fair, student ambassadors each hosted a stall for their subject with examples of work, past papers, texts and course content to allow students a deeper

insight into and demystification of these aspects. By splitting this out from a Q&A, it also allowed us to field questions beyond workload and course content which can often dominate at the expense of other information.

IV. Impact, Feedback, Outcomes

Of the 58 attendees, 43 completed the feedback survey after the event.

- **79% of respondents indicated they were “certain” or “very likely” to apply to Cambridge following the programme** (on a scale of 1 – “definitely not” to 10 – “I’m certain”). 88% rated themselves as between 7-10 for likeliness to apply to Cambridge.
- **91% of respondents rated the event as “Excellent”**
- **All respondents** replied either “Definitely yes” or “Probably yes” to whether they would recommend the programme to teachers and peers (93% said “Definitely yes”).

When asked ‘How far do you agree with the following statements?’, responses were as follows:

Scale points: “Strongly agree”, “somewhat agree”, “neither agree nor disagree”, “somewhat disagree”, “strongly disagree”.

Statement	% Strongly Agree	% Agree (Strongly or Somewhat)
I feel I now know more about the University of Cambridge	95%	98%
I now have a more positive opinion of the University of Cambridge	77%	88%
I feel that people like me go to Cambridge	49%	88%
I know how the collegiate system at Oxbridge works	67%	95%
I understand how students are taught at Oxford and Cambridge	53%	98%
I know what supercurricular activities are	91%	98%
I know what support is available to me at university (academic, pastoral, financial)	63%	93%

Comment Highlights: Confidence, Social Skills, and Information

Feedback overall was extremely positive, but there were particular aspects that clearly stood out compared to other similar events we run through the academic year. A selection of the qualitative questions and responses are outlined below:

What did you most enjoy about this programme?

Both academic sessions and the people they were able to meet during the programme were repeatedly cited as a favourite aspect for respondents. Academic sessions were mentioned in nearly half of responses (47%) and people in 40% of responses. Specific comments included:

"I enjoyed most the supervision style lectures which displayed a new way of teaching that allowed for the growth of new ideas but also meeting new people, everyone was so lovely and i saw how diverse the population of Cambridge students are and how the colleges lead to a close environment. "

"Made Cambridge seem a lot more approachable and provided a valuable opportunity for students who otherwise couldn't afford to visit for an open day. The people were also very interesting with a broad range of views and personalities."



Figure 1(above): Word cloud of responses to the question: 'What did you most enjoy about this programme?'

How helpful/informative did you find the information sessions (around aspects of applying, finance etc)? Plus any other comments in relation to these.

Feedback on this point suggests the tone and content of these sessions were well-targeted – not just a re-hash of the same, more general sessions offered earlier in the academic year. There was evidently positivity around the variety of speakers from within the college admissions team and current undergraduates. The session on financial support at university was specifically mentioned in a third of responses. Comments included:

"The informational lectures were some of the most useful lectures as it clarified the process of applying to Cambridge and the support received once there. This cleared any misconceptions or rumours that I previously had and the information provided would have otherwise been quite hard to find. The speakers/lecturers for these were also very open in answering questions which also proved helpful."

"They were incredibly useful and gave me a much deeper insight than I had before. I particularly enjoy that the approach taken was to start from scratch to ensure all levels of understanding we accommodated."

"I was really glad that you included these sessions as before I had no idea on things like student finance and Cambridge in general as my school hadn't really

"I feel I have received a lot of useful information about both applying to university and life when I am there. I am now a lot more confident in my abilities to go to a Russell Group university and it has motivated me more to revise for my A-Levels and the UCAT"

We are also aware of one further student from this cohort – not accounted for in the 44 October round of applicants to Cambridge - who has made an application for the Foundation Year in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

V. Learnings and Reflections

There are a number of learnings and reflections from 2024 that we will be or are already incorporating into our preparation for the 2025 event, and some additional reflections we hope will be of benefit to others to consider in their own practice. We have split these into five areas: (1) advertising and geodemographics; (2) selection; (3) transport and reimbursement; (4) timetabling and offering; and (5) evaluation.

Advertising and Geodemographics

Teachers are a clear front-runner in how students are finding out about events, and so we will be considering what additional teacher networks we can reach during the application period in 2025, such as charity organisations and local councils working in areas we wish to target.

We have also been able to implement our typical practice of enabling students to register their interest throughout the academic year. This will also, we hope, diversify the range of schools attended by applicants for the programme. At the time of writing, only 40% of those who have registered interest are from outside of London and the South East, with 25% from within London alone, so we will need to give careful consideration as to how we can increase the proportion of applications from our priority regions.

Selection

Perhaps unusually, we were clear in our advertising that priority would be given to those who had not otherwise had the opportunity to attend a similar opportunity in Cambridge previously. Due to the timing of this event and when we conduct selection, we ought to be able to cross-check resources such as the HEAT database to check who may have already attended something else, as well as liaising with colleagues running other similar summer events.

Anecdotally, we are increasingly hearing of instances where prospective students are applying to numerous residential events with no success and there is a concern that this could be wrongly interpreted as indicative of their likelihood of making a successful application to Cambridge. At the same time, we and colleagues wish to reduce duplication and ensure we are working with as many deserving students as we can, and reduce instances of a small number of students attending multiple residential programmes.

Beyond this, we recognise that a high initial bar relating to GCSE attainment may be interpreted as minimum GCSE requirements for applying to Cambridge. We reassure all unsuccessful applicants that this is not the case, and do still give careful consideration to extenuating personal or educational circumstances before confirming deselection for the programme. This was the case for the attendee who has since applied for the Foundation Year, who had not achieved the set GCSE requirements but for whom we made an exception in consideration of contextual information provided. Ultimately, though, we are often so oversubscribed that almost all those selected were meeting (and mostly exceeding) these minimum requirements, which consequently help manage both expectations as well as the administrative labour of the selection process.

Transport and Reimbursement

Christ's already has an effective process for reimbursement claims, and getting the necessary information, but we did find – despite multiple reminders – there were still seven individuals who did not respond at any point in a two-month period with their reimbursement information. In future, we may consider cc'ing the email address of a parent/carer in reminder emails.

Timetable and Offering

Group sizes: whilst we wished to be able to offer supervision-style sessions for all subject areas, this proved difficult in the science subjects offered. This was in part because of some academics already supporting STEM SMART that ran in the same week, and because of the larger cohort within the attendees making sessions on average larger than for other subject areas. This should find a better balance in 2025, as science subjects should run across different dates, as well as an already greater availability of academic session leads confirmed.

Timing: hosting this at the end of the summer allows us the opportunity to provide outreach coverage to subjects we have not otherwise been able to incorporate in events earlier in the academic year.

Timetable: being a three-night event, this is longer than those we host at other times of the year. As it was a single-college event, we found that this freed up a considerable amount of time and gave us greater timetable flexibility in comparison with events run collaboratively over multiple sites. Attendees reflected that the ample free time allowed them to really explore Cambridge, a particular benefit for those who had travelled the longest distances and provided sufficient breaks to feel fully engaged in the sessions they attended. Equally, others reflected this free time sometimes felt a bit too unstructured.

As we will be expanding to two sets of dates in 2025, we have nevertheless decided to condense the programme to two nights rather than three. However, it will still be possible to maintain the numbers of sessions offered and ample free time by starting slightly earlier and finishing slightly later on the first and final days.

Evaluation

Pre and Post Event Surveys

We were pleased with a 74% response rate for feedback, with the post-event survey prepared and sent immediately after the event ended.

In future, we will be using a pre-event survey as well as post-event and asking for their name when completing forms so we can better target those who have not completed it, as well as providing better quality information to make comparisons between pre- and post-event response.

VI. Financial Report

The award gratefully received from the Isaac Newton Trust for this event was **£5,400**, to cover the travel costs of those students attending. This derived from an estimate, based on our experiences of running the Low Participation Neighbourhood (LPN) Summer School, of £90 per attendee for 60 attendees.

Due to two late dropouts in the immediate days prior to the programme, the final number of attendees was 58. Of these, 47 claims for reimbursement were processed and four others had their travel tickets purchased on their behalf by the College; the other seven did not submit any information, despite multiple reminders before, during and after the event to do so.

In total, **£4,028.86 of this was spent**, an underspend of £1,371.14. The average travel claim per attendee of those who submitted was **£79**.

Expenditure was as expected in all other areas of the programme and covered from the College's own outreach funds as outlined in the proposal.

For the 2025 iteration of the programme, we hope that a longer lead-in time and collection of interest across the academic year will allow us to reach a higher proportion of suitable students from areas outside of London and the South East. If we are able to do so, we then expect the average travel costs to increase to more closely reflect our initial estimate that had been based on an event where most students were from outside of London in particular (due to the few areas that the previous POLAR4 measure applied to in the capital).

We are grateful for the contribution from the Isaac Newton Trust to support the Experience Christ's Summer School, enabling attendees from all parts of the UK to participate in the programme without the financial pressure that might otherwise be incurred.

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