

Arts & Humanities: Inspiring Sustainable Change

Downing College Report – April 2024

This programme was delivered by Downing College in partnership with Judge Business School and funded by the Isaac Newton Trust.

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Overview and purpose of the programme

40 Year 11 (Year 12 Northern Ireland/S4 Scotland) maintained school students took part in the Arts and Humanities: 'Inspiring Sustainable Change' programme. This comprised of five online sessions followed by an essay assignment with a supervision-style feedback session.

The purpose of the programme was to:

- Expand the young people's knowledge of sustainability
- Introduce them to university style teaching
- Develop the young people's critical thinking, research ability and academic writing skills
- Encourage the young people to consider applying to Cambridge

Each online session included an hour-long lecture delivered by an academic, followed by up to an hour of related discussion questions led by current undergraduate student ambassadors. The five lecture topics were:

- 1) Environmental Sustainability - led by Dr. Lidia Mishchenko
- 2) The UN Sustainable Development Goals - led by Dr. Lidia Mishchenko
- 3) Introduction to the University of Cambridge - led by Dr. Kamran Yunus
- 4) Change Management & Cultural Change - led by Dr. Lidia Mishchenko
- 5) Communicating Sustainability: Storytelling Workshop - Dr. Lidia Mishchenko

Following the online sessions, the young people were set a 1500-word essay titled '*How the subject of your choice applies to one or multiple UN Sustainable Development Goals and how you could bring about change in the field*'.

The young people received support with their essay projects through:

- A one-hour writing skills workshop delivered by a PhD student
- A one-hour group discussion with undergraduate students
- Access to an online mentoring platform where they can ask undergraduate students questions and support anytime

The essays were grouped into similar subject themes and submitted to postgraduate students for marking. The young people then received detailed individual feedback on their essays. In March they took part in a supervision-style discussion around the topic to further develop their critical thinking skills.

Contextual Data of Attendees

All 40 students are at UK maintained schools and have one or more of the below contextual flags.

Contextual Flag	Number of Students	Percentage
IMD D1/2	15 students	37.5%
POLAR4 Q1/2	25 students	62.5%
No parental history of higher education	4 students	10.0%
Eligible for Free School Meals	20 students	50.0%
Disability	9 students	22.5%
Underrepresented ethnic groups	21 students	52.5%
Young carer	6 students	15.5%

Table 1: Contextual data of the 40 young people who are part of the programme

This programme has successfully engaged with young people who are typically less likely to access higher education with half the students being on free school meals and almost two-thirds of students being from low participation neighborhoods.

Financial cost of the programme

Item	Budgeted For	Expenditure
Judge Teaching Staff	£1,000.00	£1,000
PhD Teaching Staff	£280.00	£140.16 (1-hour of training for 12 staff)
Ambassador Pay	£670.00	£1,296.48 (18.5 hours x6 ambassadors)
Essay Marking Payments	£1,200.00	£467.20 (1-hour of marking payment x40 essays) £233.60 (30 minutes of essay-based supervision preparation x40)
Online Supervisions	£100.00	£163.52 (14 1-hour group supervisions)
	£3,250.00	£3,300.96

Table 2: Financial breakdown of costs from the programme

Table 2 provides a breakdown of how the funding was spent.

As this is the first time that we have run a programme involving essay writing and supervision style discussions, our expenditure did not fully match the budget. The PhD teaching staff cost came under budget, as the academic sessions ended up being delivered by Downing or Judge teaching staff. The essay marking payments also came under budget because we overestimated the cost of marking.

However, the young people ended up needing more support with their essays than anticipated, so we were able to offer additional online sessions delivered by the ambassadors. Additionally, as we ran more online supervisions than anticipated in order to accommodate for the range of essay topics, the online supervision payments were over budget.

Overall, the programme was £50.96 over budget, which Downing College covered.

Impact of the Online Academic Sessions

34 of the 40 young people who participated in the programme completed the online session evaluation form. The data presented considers 34 as 100%.

Figure 1, below, depicts the responses to the question *‘Do you feel you have a better understanding of Environmental Sustainability having been to the online sessions?’*

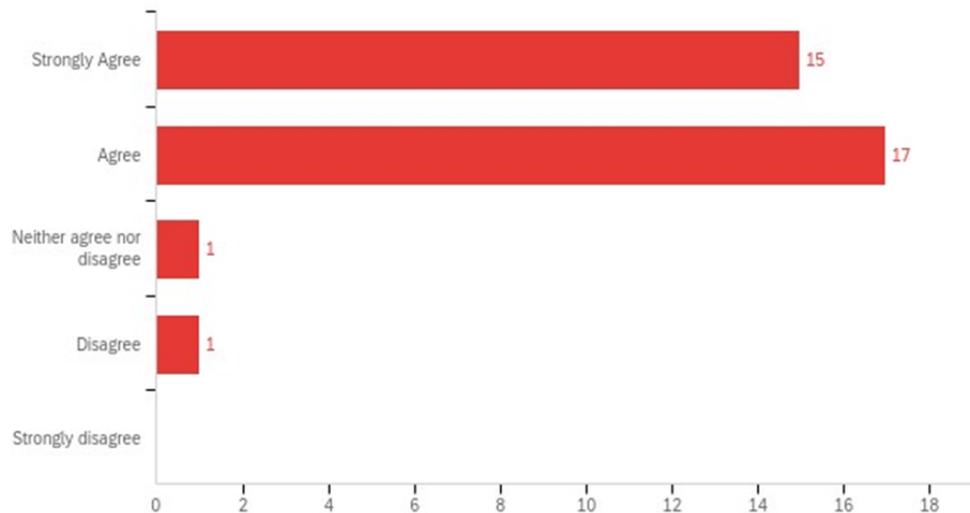


Figure 1: Do you feel you have a better understanding of Environmental Sustainability having been to the online sessions?

It is great to see that 94.1% (32 young people) either agree or strongly agree that they have gained a better understanding of Environmental Sustainability following the online sessions, as the purpose of these was to provide the young people with new academic information about sustainability. This suggests that not only did the online sessions provide them with new content, but that it was delivered in an accessible manner despite it being high-level information.

It is not clear whether the student who disagreed either already knew the content or found it difficult to access. Whilst it is unfortunate that this young person did not benefit from the sessions, it is reassuring that the overwhelming response was positive.

Figure 2, below, depicts the responses to the question *‘Out of 5, with 5 being the highest and 0 being the lowest, how would you rank each of the following questions?’*

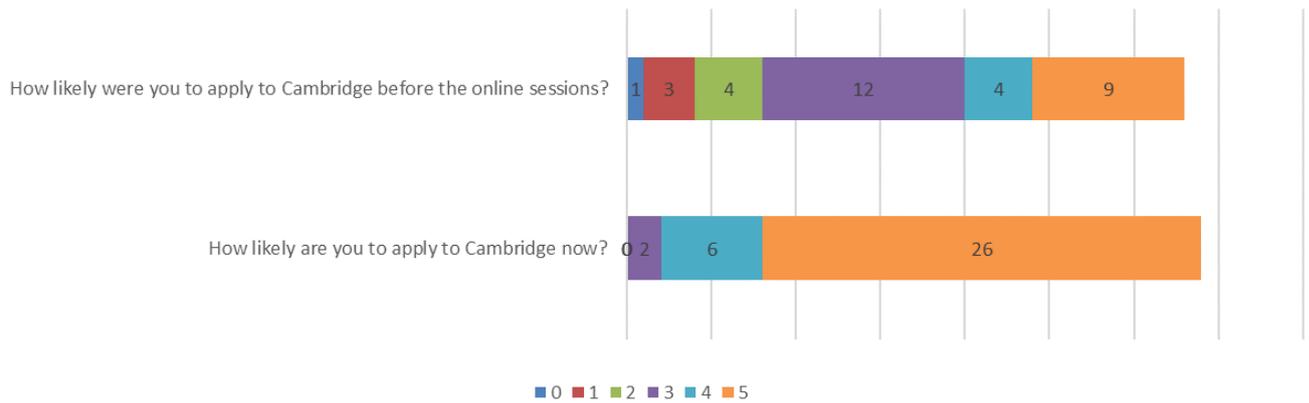


Figure 2: Out of 5, with 5 being the highest and 0 being the lowest, how would you rank each of the following questions?

Prior to the online sessions, only 26.5% of young people were definitely intending on applying to Cambridge. However, it is brilliant to see that after the online sessions this number almost tripled to 76.5%. This highlights the importance of beginning our targeted outreach in Year 11, as it has encouraged 50.0% more of the young people to genuinely consider Cambridge, enabling them to begin to access more support and super-curricular opportunities to prepare a competitive application.

In addition, before the online sessions, one young person suggested that they were not going to apply to Cambridge, and a further 7 young people indicated that they were unlikely to apply to Cambridge, scoring the statement a 1 or a 2. In comparison, after the online sessions no young people rated the likeliness of applying to Cambridge as less than a 3. This clearly demonstrates that the online sessions met one of the aims and are highly effective in encouraging young people in Year 11 to gain the confidence to consider applying to Cambridge.

Impact of the Essays

Table 3, below, details the grades the young people achieved in their essays:

Grade	Percentage
1*	9.4%
1	43.8%
2.1	43.8%
2.2	3.0%

Table 3: Percentage of grades achieved by the young people in their essays.

It is amazing that over half of the young people achieved either a first with distinction or a first. This demonstrates how focused the young people were when researching and writing their essays.

25 of the 40 young people who participated in the programme completed the essay and supervision evaluation form. The data presented considers 25 as 100%.

When asked '*How did you find researching the content for your essay?*', 70.8% reported a positive experience, 12.5% explained that they found researching the essay difficult and 16.7% had a mixed experience when researching the essay. Some of the comments included:

- 'The further I researched the more interested I became in my essay topic and in the end I was extremely interested'
- 'I found it quite difficult at first trying to find reputable and trustworthy sources. However, after I solidified the structure and content of my essay I found it much easier to find suitable sources'
- 'To be honest, it was my least favourite part of the essay, as I wasn't sure how much research I was supposed to do, and how to correctly criticise the research without writing 500 words per bit. However, I did enjoy learning more about my topic in general'

Additionally, three young people specifically highlighted the academic skills that writing the essay helped to develop:

- 'Quite easy, very helpful with my Internal Assessments and Extended Essay'
- 'Difficult at first, but it was a process that will be useful for when I go on to university, so it is quite helpful to have a grasp of the whole process now'
- 'I found it quite interesting, and challenging at some stages but it definitely helped my research skills'

It is brilliant to see that over 3/4 of the young found researching their essays to be constructive, reporting either a positive or mixed experience. It is clear that the young people have learnt academic research skills through this process. However, if we were to run the programme again

we would provide further support in researching as 1/8 of the young people found the research difficult.

When asked '*How did you find writing your essay?*', 50.0% reported a positive experience, 33.3% explained that they found writing the essay difficult and 16.7% had a mixed experience when writing the essay. Some of the comments included:

- 'I really enjoyed it because I like demonstrating my own opinions contrasting others, while also criticising my own ideas. I found I had a lot to say'
- 'It was difficult at first as I was over thinking what to write but once you start all the pieces come together and the writing got easier.'
- 'Very difficult, writing essays isn't my strong suit and I found it difficult to know when to reference and when not to'

Again, three young people specifically highlighted the academic skills that writing the essay helped to develop:

- 'I found it very useful, however it did take me a decent amount of time to write but I feel as though it helped my essay writing skills'
- 'I found it very useful as these skills can be transferred for other essays I complete in the future e.g at university, in competitions'
- 'It was a good experience, whilst challenging, I think it was a good introduction into essay writing. This helped me build on a skill that will be very useful during my university study'

It is good to see that 2/3 of the young found writing their essays to be achievable, reporting either a positive or mixed experience as many of the young people will never have written an academic essay of this level before. However, it is clear that we will need to offer more guidance for the 1/3 of the young people who found it challenging.

Figure 3, below, depicts the responses to the question '*How confident would you feel in researching and writing another essay on a different topic now that you have done it once?*'.

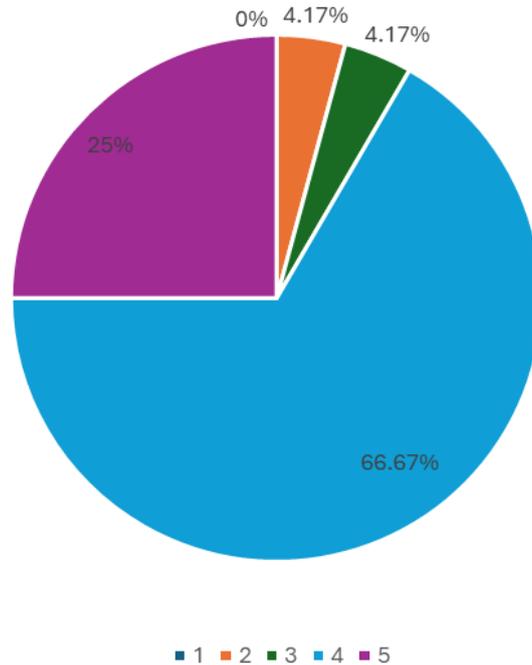


Figure 3: How confident would you feel in researching and writing another essay on a different topic now that you have done it once? Please rank on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest

It is great to see that over 90% of the young people rated their confidence in writing another academic essay as a 4 or a 5, with one quarter of the young people rating it a 5. This demonstrates that the essay task clearly meets the aim of developing the young people’s critical thinking, research ability and academic writing skills

However, when asked ‘*Would you have liked more support in researching or writing your essay? What would you have liked this to look like?*’, 65.2% of the young people stated that they would have liked more support. Some of their suggestions were:

- ‘Going over essay structure and tips on how to focus the essay’
- ‘I would've liked more support in how to reference properly, perhaps a step-by-step guide and example?’
- ‘Yeah, have a generic essay to reference what to do to be able to mimic the essay that you would expect from a university student’

On the other hand, 34.8% of the young people felt that they had enough support and enjoyed the independence of the essay. Some of their comments were:

- 'I think the right amount of support was provided, the seminar given on essays was very helpful, and the independence given was also very good'
- 'The mentor support was very useful'
- 'Optional support would have been useful, however I found the freedom to explore a topic very positive for my personal development within researching and creating an essay'

It is clear that if we run this programme again, we need to provide more optional support for the young people to access, including examples and more essay writing support sessions.

Overall, the essay task was a huge success. It is good that the young people found elements of writing the essay challenging, as this is to be expected when they are attempting a university style essay for the first time. The essay project was successful in meeting the aims of expanding the young people's knowledge of sustainability and develop the young people's critical thinking, research ability and academic writing skills.

Impact of the Supervisions

When asked '*How did you find the supervision? Was it how you expected?*', 90.5% reported a positive experience whilst 9.5% had a mostly positive but mixed experience during the supervision. Some of the positive comments included:

- 'Yes, [supervisor] was truly helpful as he came equipped with extra knowledge that broadened my understanding and knowledge, as well as delivering a very interactive and engaging session. Thank you [supervisor]!'
- 'It was wonderful. I loved how it was only me and one other student, the feedback seemed a lot more personalised and was a lot more helpful as a result. My supervisor was very kind and provided constructive criticism and we also had many interesting discussions about the medical field.'
- 'Very helpful and insightful into what they are like at Cambridge.'

Those who reported a mixed experience enjoyed the supervisions but found them intense:

- 'I enjoyed it so much, I appreciated it being 2:1 and it was a bit more intense than expected, but felt like an open and comfortable environment'
- 'Good - interesting but a tad intimidating'

It is brilliant that the young people who reported a mixed experience found the supervisions enjoyable despite finding them intense. We can confidently say that the supervisions were really successful and well received by the young people.

When asked '*What did you learn from the supervision?*', 63.1% of the young people spoke about improving their critical thinking, research ability and academic writing skills. 21.1% of the young people reported an increase in their knowledge of sustainability. 15.8% of the young people discussed the experience of supervisions and university style teaching. Some of their comments include:

- 'How to tackle a good essay structure with good philosophical arguments in choosing a side in an argument'
- 'I learnt about how politics engages with the SDGs, for example foreign aid, and how it should be distributed and how this will help 3rd world countries economically. I hadn't thought of the distribution of aid, just that we had to give aid to help countries'

economically. I think it was excellent to bounce new ideas of our current research knowledge'

- 'How to think analytically out loud in an academic environment'

It is brilliant to see that the qualitative feedback from the young people about the supervision indicates that the supervisions were successful in meeting three of the aims of the programme:

- Expand the young people's knowledge of sustainability
- Introduce them to university style teaching
- Develop the young people's critical thinking, research ability and academic writing skills

Overall Impact of the Programme

When asked '*Do you feel that this programme has helped you prepare for applying to University and studying at University?*', 100% of the young people said that it had. Their comments included:

- 'Yes, since it gave me an insight into academic writing. And I feel as though I have a greater understanding of what it is like to research academically'
- 'Yes, it has helped me to think and research independently in a way that I wouldn't have otherwise done before'
- 'Yes. It has solidified my confidence in applying to Cambridge as well as other universities'

It is wonderful that all of the young people feel more confident in applying for and studying at university. Through this programme, they have learnt more about what will be expected from them at university and started to develop key skills like critical thinking and academic research and writing. It has clearly been highly beneficial to the young people.

Successes

1. Partnership with the Judge Business School/Set theme

The partnership with the Judge Business School, and specifically with Dr. Lidia Mishchenko proved to be a highly useful initiative. It enabled us to organise the programme around a set theme (environmental sustainability) as Dr. Lidia Mishchenko was able to deliver a series of sessions which built upon the knowledge of each other. Dr. Lidia Mishchenko also worked with us to develop an essay title and marking criteria in line with the knowledge they have learnt. We would be very interested in working with the Judge Business School, or another academic partner, in the future and would encourage more collaboration between Colleges and Departments in this way.

2. High Level Content

There were some concerns about the content of the programme being inaccessible to the young people. However, the young people selected had excellent GCSE predicted grades, and whilst the content was challenging, the young people were more than capable of engaging with the academic level. This was aided by the consolidation discussion questions held in small groups at the end of every session.

When asked at the end of the sessions, *'What are your final thoughts on the Global Sustainable Development Goals?'*, some responses included:

- *'They are a great way to manage global development regarding sustainability. They aren't imperative for every country however all countries should create guidelines'*
- *'A good system with limited use due to lack of influence within the law'*
- *'I think they have use and are a public display of the goals of responsibility. However, I feel like the goals are somewhat tokenistic and have limited use in making actionable change due to only being wishes, not enforced by Law.'*

3. Sustained Development of Academic Skills

The young people have been working on developing their academic skills for the last eight months. This sustained engagement, which included learning about Sustainable Development Goals, how to research and write an academic essay, individual research and writing, detailed feedback and a discussion-based academic session, has led to an increase in both their academic skills and their confidence in applying to and studying at university.

Improvements

1. Additional Academic Writing Support

This is the first time most of the young people had been asked to write an essay at this level. A lot of the group were daunted about the essay and had concerns about completing it correctly to a “Cambridge” standard, which we had to overcome. More support was needed to give the students the confidence to write, as well as help with their research and referencing. In the end we were able to provide additional support sessions, however if we were to run it again, we would have these planned from the start.

2. Additional Academic Resources

In addition to running more research and writing sessions, if we were to run this again we would also provide the young people with more resources to refer to when completing their essays. These would include more specific guidance in referencing, a guide to support them with understanding how to use sources effectively and an exemplar essay. It would be good if we could increase the number of young people who had a positive experience when writing their essay to more than 50.0%

3. Timescales

As the essay topic was based on the subject of their choice it took longer than anticipated to finalise the subject area the young person had chosen to write about. This delayed the advertising, recruiting and training of the postgraduate markers, as they are specific to certain subject areas. If we were to run the programme again, we would have a more accurate picture of the timescales involved in collecting this information back.

Furthermore, we had a few students who received extensions on their essays due to unforeseen personal circumstances. This further delayed the supervision sessions. If we were to run the programme again, we would set the deadline with the idea of extensions in mind.

Summary

The programme has been very successful in increasing the young people's knowledge in sustainability and interest in Cambridge. The online sessions format worked well, and the students were engaged.

Researching and writing the essays and the supervisions have been highly successful in meeting the programme's aims to introduce the young people to university style teaching and develop their critical thinking, research ability and academic writing skills.

Over the course of the programme it became clear that more support earlier on was needed to support their academic writing and research. We adapted to this need and provided additional support sessions from ambassadors. The quality of the support offered is reflected by over half of the young people achieving either a first with distinction or a first. However, in order to increase their confidence when undertaking the research and writing, if we were to run the programme again, we would provide more support, including more academic skills sessions and resources to refer to.

As this is the first time, we have run a programme of this nature the timescales have not been as we anticipated. However, this has allowed us to offer support over a longer period of time, which we hope has been beneficial. If we were to run the project again, we would adopt a similar timescale, both because the prolonged engagement has been beneficial and because it would enable us to offer more timetabled support.

We are proud of the hard work that the young people have completed, and we are thankful to the Postgraduate supervisors, Dr Lidia Mishchenko, Cambridge Judge Business School and Isaac Newton Trust for their support.