

## Contents

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### 1. Summary

We are very grateful for the Isaac Newton Trust's support of the 2023 Murray Edwards College Festival of Reading, which ran from 1 April 2023 to 31 July 2023. The project aimed to introduce students from non-selective schools in East Anglia and Norfolk to English as a university subject. Previous iterations of the project were run by our project co-ordinator, English Fellow Dr Claire Wilkinson, at the Faculty of English, between 2018 and 2022. This year's Festival of Reading was the largest and most successful yet, with 84 entrants to the competition, and 100 students and staff visiting Cambridge on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2023. Participants were from disadvantaged backgrounds targeted by the University's WPP 2020–25 (89% POLAR4 Quintiles 1 and 2). The Report (section 2) contains more information about targeting and the schools we worked with.

Participating students completed a study module, based on the BBC's National Short Story Award, before submitting an essay of 500–750 words to the final competition. The event on 29<sup>th</sup> June featured a lecture from Dr Fred Parker (Director of Studies and Tutor, Clare College), lunch, a tour of Murray Edwards with current student ambassadors, a Q&A session, and a prize giving ceremony with the Murray Edwards College Senior Tutor, Dr Andrew Rudd. Teachers were given the opportunity to talk to Matt Diston, Murray Edwards College's Head of Access and Student Recruitment, and Claire Wilkinson about progression to Cambridge throughout the day. Full teacher feedback, which was exceptionally positive, is provided in the Appendix (section 5).

### 2. Report

#### i) Targeting

The project targeted students between the ages of 14 (KS3, Y9) and 17 (KS5, Y12) and operated in schools where over 50% students fall into Quintiles 1 and 2 of POLAR 4, OAC supergroup 8, groups 3a, 3b, 3c, 4b, 7a, 7b and 7c, and subgroups 4a1, 4a2, 4c2 and 6b3.

Participants were from disadvantaged backgrounds targeted by the University's WPP 2020–25: 99% of the students were from POLAR4 Quintiles 1, 2, and 3, which are all under-represented at undergraduate level in the most recent University figures (2017–18). 89% of the students were from POLAR4 Q1 and Q2. Presently, students from these quintiles comprise 11% of the University of Cambridge's undergraduate body, despite representing 37% of 18 year olds in the UK. The APP 2020–25 specifies a target of 16.6% for POLAR4 Q1 and Q2 students by 2024–25.

We have developed our network of schools over the past five years. This year, students from three secondary schools managed by the West Norfolk Academies Trust, along with one new Peterborough secondary school, attended the Festival event in June.

**POLAR4 Quintile breakdown\***

POLAR4 Quintile	No. of students	Percentage	2017–18 ug. %
1	48	62%	4%
2	21	27%	7%
3	8	10%	11.3%
4	1	1%	20.4%
5	0	0%	57.1%

*\* Not all participants gave us permission to track their home postcodes, hence the disparity between the total number of attendees and the number represented in this table.*

ii) Project execution

We created and distributed learning packs for students in KS3 (Year 9), KS4 (Year 10/11), and KS5 (Year 12/13). The packs are designed as dynamic learning resources with two versions, one suitable for teachers to deliver in class, and another suitable for students to work through at home. This gives the schools the most possible flexibility in how they deliver the project. The work packs aim to introduce students to key skills necessary to study English (and the humanities more generally) at university. These include:

- Close reading
- Understanding critical writing
- Structuring a response
- Improving writing skills

While our material does not overlap with the National Curriculum, to make sure teachers maintain their interest in participating, we ensure that the work we offer to students extends the work they are doing in schools in an exciting way: we want to show them the richness of the subject at university. We do not ask that schools only use the materials with higher-ability students and we have found that students in all ability bands respond well to the learning packs. In practice, students who complete the project and submit an essay to the competition are those who are more likely to achieve higher grades in their GCSEs and A Levels.

iii) The Festival of Reading

This year’s Festival of Reading took place on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2023. The event saw 100 students and staff from a range of schools in Norfolk and East Anglia visit Murray Edwards College for a day of talks and introductory university experiences. Students travelled by coach and train from hub schools in their area. We employed undergraduate college ambassadors to help show the students around and to talk about what it is like to be an undergraduate student. We aimed to provide an enriching day of academic activities, alongside an introduction to Cambridge—and particularly to the idea that selective further education is an option that all our attendees should start to consider seriously. Teachers were given the opportunity to speak to academics and to staff from the College’s Admissions Office.

iv) Aims

Our project was designed to meet two of the INT WPIF's principles and purposes:

- (1) Developing subject interests at younger ages
  - The majority of our participants were KS3 students (Year 9) and will begin their GCSEs next year.
- (2) Encouraging applications among Year 12 students to Cambridge or other leading universities
  - Our KS5 work module aimed to introduce English as a university subject to students in the first year of sixth form.
  - Our campus visits included an academic session and a presentation on access to university.
  - In speaking to teachers and sharing information with them, we have aimed to demystify the Cambridge application process.

We also aimed, in addition, to:

- (3) Improve attainment
  - Feedback from teachers speaks to the value of the project for improving the academic work of participants, from the in-school visits to the competition and the Festival in Cambridge.
- (4) Increase aspiration
  - By showing students Cambridge as a welcoming and inclusive environment, we hope to show them they could succeed as undergraduates here.
  - We also hope to introduce the idea of university more generally to a cohort with low progression rates to any form of FE.

### 3. How others may learn from the project

We have a few points that may help other colleges embarking on a similar project:

#### i. Building long-term relationships with teachers

One of the reasons we were able to ensure so many people attended the Festival is the strong connections we have with several schools in Norfolk and East Anglia. These are not high-achieving schools (two are in Ofsted special measures), but they all have teachers who are particularly energetic and committed to widening their students' horizons. This year, we made contact with twelve eligible secondary schools. Of those who didn't attend the Festival in June, some used the learning packs but didn't enter the competition, whilst others didn't respond to emails. It's a busy time of year and we are very careful not to burden teachers with extra administration – we therefore understand why some schools are not able to participate. The schools we've been particularly successful with are those where we've worked for five years on developing a relationship with the English department. We were able to add one new school to our cohort this year, but experience over the past few years of liaison suggests that it will take further sustained effort to cement longer term relationships. Our advice to new projects is to focus on getting a high level of engagement from a few schools, before broadening the remit in future years.

#### ii. Concentrating on focus schools

This point leads on from the last. By distributing our materials to schools, rather than via a website, we ensure that we're reaching the right students (from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds). To find these schools when the project began, we looked to those identified in the CAO's annual

dataset, as well as those that worked with Insight+. We check this data every year to compose a list of schools to invite. We also only send materials to schools that are entirely non-selective.

Focusing on a few key school hubs has practical applications too: the most complex logistical barrier to delivering the project was transport from rural Norfolk to Cambridge for the day. It would not have been possible to bring students from a greater number of schools into Cambridge with our budget, nor would it have been desirable, or of additional benefit, to apply for a greater travel budget. This figure could increase very quickly without careful monitoring. Focusing the project in a few key schools (and having coaches stop at multiple schools) made it possible to bring a large number of students to Cambridge, whilst keeping the travel budget reasonable.

### iii. Data collection

We collect participant postcodes and dates of birth for HEAT tracking, using the University's disclaimer when we request permission for the information from guardians. We recommend that other projects collect this information as early as possible, because it is very difficult to collect the information once the event is over (we ask participants to provide it on the form they fill in when entering the competition—and still find we don't get full information for about 5% of participants).

### iv. POLAR4

We have no doubt that we are targeting, and reaching, some of the most disadvantaged students in the country. The teacher reports in the appendix speak to this – very few of the students have parents who have been to university, and the teachers describe low levels of aspiration, extremely low progression to further education, and a sense that university (and Cambridge particularly) is not for 'people like them'. The students are almost all flagged as living in POLAR4 Q1 and Q2 areas; however, very few of them have an IMD flag, or are in receipt of free school meals. There have been questions raised both in the university and at the national level about the use of POLAR4 as a targeting measure. Without it, these students would fly beneath our radar. They are relatively local to Cambridge but yet exist in an entirely different world. We feel very strongly that our access programmes can offer something valuable to these students and we recommend the POLAR4 measure to colleagues working on similar projects in local rural areas, where poverty looks very different from in inner cities.

## **4. Finances**

Our award, gratefully received from the Isaac Newton Trust, was £11,400 and we spent £11,325.53.

As anticipated, travel costs for the Festival event on the 29<sup>th</sup> June increased slightly from the original projection in February 2023, requiring use of the contingency allocation.

Expenditure was as projected in all other areas.

In total, project costs left an underspend of £74.47.

## **5. Appendix: Participant feedback**

From Marshland High School (Olly Mackett, o.mackett@marshlandhigh.co.uk)

West Norfolk Academies Trust really values the hard work of Dr Claire Wilkinson and her team in delivering the Cambridge Festival of Reading and Writing.

Our schools have a large proportion of free school meals and pupil premium children, and at Marshland, the majority of our families are in the 3rd income decile. Also, it is estimated there is a 'hidden' majority of our students whose socio-economic background places them only just above the threshold to FSM. The majority of our students have no family tradition of higher education, and being from intermediate, lower supervisory, routine, auxiliary or technical occupations (LSOAs) often results in lower aspirations on entry to our school.

Therefore, it is crucial that we are able to access the offer from Cambridge University. Firstly, in raising aspiration, it allows students to visit a university; only one student out of the 41 we took had visited a university before. On the day, students were able to have a first taste of university life, and it sparked conversations with students about what they wanted to do next. Students were able to speak to undergraduates, and it was clear that students from our schools could go to universities like Cambridge.

Not only this, but the quality of the resources shared by Claire Wilkinson, and the lecture on Macbeth directly impact raising attainment. Extended writing, such as essays, is a crucial development area for our schools post-covid, and this type of competition inspires students to engage with independent extended writing. Also, the lecture and introduction to Macbeth is an important element of pre-teaching, which again raises the attainment of the students.

Unfortunately, with some council funding being cut, our students have not seen as many performances, such as Macbeth or A Christmas Carol. The cost of trips have also significantly risen, and with tightening budgets, students who are lacking in cultural capital have had fewer opportunities. So, for us, it is vital that initiatives like this continue to have a direct impact on our students. Again, I would like to thank Claire for all her hard work in making it a successful project.

From Smithdon High School (Amanda Wright, a.wright@smithdonhigh.org.uk)

From my perspective as English subject lead, we're always looking for opportunities to provide students with modern, diverse texts. It's not just about reading them: we want students to engage, probe and question the content of these texts. For the past five (WOW where does time go), we've used the opportunity of the Cambridge Writing Prize to deliver high quality, challenging, modern texts to students during their study of English. Using the resources you created, students are guided to critique modern literature and respond to it in an academic way. Because of our partnership with you, (longevity of the project, your visits to Smithdon), students learn about this opportunity before it is formally pitched to them. Two of our three runners up are middle ability - which shows them, and students like them, that academic achievement can be a reality.

Thomas Deacon Academy (Laura Ashton, lcal@tda.education), and Shabnam Mubarak (shm@tda.education)

From classroom teacher Shabnam Mubarak:

Overall, this opportunity was really appreciated, I want to thank you for inviting us to be a part of this day. It meant a lot to the students to be able to understand university life and the knowing that they have equal opportunity to educated in Cambridge.

From the TDA school newsletter:

**KS3 English Success: Cambridge University Writing Prize 2023**

As part of Cambridge University Outreach Project, English students were given the opportunity to enter a writing competition and to spend a day with the English Faculty at Cambridge University. The writing competition was challenging and required students to write a personal response to a short story. While teachers could facilitate the reading and discussions about the short stories in the classroom, no guidance or feedback was allowed on students' work, so this tested the students' commitment and tenacity with their learning in a way that they had not experienced before.

The day was a huge success, giving TDA's most able English students an opportunity to experience Cambridge University culture and even being inspired by success: Negah Nemat won one of only eight awards for her writing. A fantastic achievement.

**Here is Negah's reflection on the day:**

I believe the trip was very educational, insightful, and inspiring. Being able to sit in lectures, listen in a Q&A, have a tour of the Murray Edwards College where we visited, allowed us a real overview, which was extremely beneficial and was a key component to selecting my choices for future universities! The awards ceremony was rewarding, as I won a reward. :) We had a glance at the dormitories (which were quite large), showing us potential living quarters. Overall, I LOVED the trip, especially with Cambridge being a prestigious university - as well as my dream university. The staff guided and managed us well. I would go again, if given the opportunity.