

Evaluation of project to support home fee status mature students to manage the transition to studying at Cambridge

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The Project

We identified offer-holders at Hughes Hall and St Edmund's who met the criteria of being home fees students who had had a gap in their education or were starting at Cambridge after a course other than A-levels. The students were invited to attend a series of online workshops, were mentored by a current student in a related subject and were set a task to write an essay on which a Director of Studies (DoS) provided 1:1 feedback in a video call.

We aimed to improve:

- Self-advocacy
- Self-efficacy
- Confidence
- Belonging

Intended Outcome

Students would be better able to cope with the demands of undergraduate study at Cambridge, they would be more confident in themselves and in their academic ability which would lead to them achieving more success and being less likely to withdraw from University.

Evaluation of programme elements

All of those who responded to our feedback survey said that they found the introductory workshop either very helpful or somewhat helpful and all but one participant found the essay writing workshop helpful. Responses concerning the mental health/imposter syndrome workshop and the academic resilience workshop were more mixed.

The essay task was described as neutral or somewhat challenging by all those who submitted feedback. All but one participant said that the feedback they received on their essay was very helpful.

There were mixed responses on the effectiveness of mentors, with one participant selecting that the mentoring was not helpful at all. Others offered positive comments including "my mentor was amazing, she kept answering all our questions and made sure we were settled once we were in college. She has been the best" and "she has been brilliant in helping me settle into St Edmund's and the HSPS course". Mentors were selected by drawing up lists of current students studying the same courses as programme participants, vetting these lists and then contacting all suitable students asking them to take part.

Most respondents claimed that the programme had helped them improve their confidence towards their studies and prepare for their course.

By the end of the programme, all respondents said that they could organise their study time effectively, knew how to prioritise tasks to meet deadlines and all but one knew how to write and communicate in an academic style. Responses to these points in the pre-programme survey indicated that many already felt confident with these skills.

When asked what they enjoyed about the programme, participants cited meeting other students, writing the essay, having something to fill the gap between receiving their offer and starting their course and that it improved their confidence about starting their course after time out of education.

Half of the respondents said that their perception of the University of Cambridge had changed following the programme and when asked to elaborate mentioned that there was more support in place than they had realised.

We surveyed and interviewed the DoSs who were involved in the programme. In all but one case, they reported that the essays produced by the participants were of the same or lower quality than they would expect from an undergraduate at the beginning of their course. The DoSs felt that the criteria for selecting participants had been appropriate as some participants were clearly in need of this additional support

In agreement with the responses to the student survey, most DoSs stated that they were able to give participants useful feedback to help them with future essays and felt that the task had prepared the students well for their courses. It was reported that where a DoS taught the student themselves, they were able to tackle course content straight away in the first supervision rather than spending the time introducing the Cambridge system and essay writing techniques.

The DoSs felt that the programme successfully helped to foster confidence at the start of the course as it gave students some cultural knowledge of the University of Cambridge and its teaching system before they started. They agree that this helped the students to feel at home in Cambridge once their courses began. It was commented that these students settled into their studies faster than those from similar backgrounds. DoSs thought that the programme provided a good opportunity for students to begin academic writing and start to use other academic skills before their courses started. The DoSs found it useful to see work that the student had done outside of the application and interview process, before starting to teach them. They commented that the programme enabled them to build a relationship with the students before their course began.

The DoSs reported that the students are performing either as well as or better than expected in Michaelmas term.

There have been various suggestions from DoSs to improve the programme, including adding a 1:1 call with the student to set and explain the essay task first. They have suggested framing the task differently so students have a choice of topics or tasks and can pick one they are familiar with. Alternatively, information from My Cambridge could be used to set a task in an area the student is already familiar with. It was proposed that there should be a chance for the person delivering the essay writing workshop to follow up with the students after the

task. Both DoSs and students felt that the essay writing workshops could be more subject specific. Although other study skills were covered in the sessions, the focus was most significantly on essay writing. It has been suggested that sessions on critical thinking and making notes from secondary reading would also benefit many students as after essay writing, these are the most common areas of difficulty for undergraduates according to some DoSs.

Summary

Overall, most participants and DoSs felt that the programme was beneficial. From the survey responses, it can clearly be seen that the programme helped increase the confidence of participants ahead of starting their degree courses at Cambridge, especially for those who had been out of an academic environment for a while.

The programme changed some participants perceptions of Cambridge for the better, particularly in relation to the support available to them. Flagging this support to students early was an additional aim of the programme and it is pleasing to note that these students are now better informed about this. It is possible that those whose perceptions of Cambridge did not change, simply had their positive perceptions re-affirmed.

The essay writing workshop and task was widely regarded as beneficial. It provided a structured way for students to practise their writing skills and receive useful feedback which in many cases increased their confidence about writing their first course essays at Cambridge. It allowed students to become familiar with the supervision style teaching at Cambridge before they arrived. Tweaks to the way this element of the programme was set up and delivered would have allowed students to benefit even more from this.

Some elements of the programme were less impactful than we had hoped, for example the session on academic resilience and the mental health workshop. Whilst these were of value to some participants, they were not helpful for everyone. This was despite many current students identifying these as areas they wished they had had more support with before applying when asked in a survey conducted when setting up this programme. One of the DoSs suggested running these later in the term when students may have started to experience stress or concerns around their studies, rather than before they start when they are overtly positive and not yet familiar with the rigours of studying at Cambridge.

The mixed response to mentoring can be attributed to the different personalities of student mentors and their differing levels of commitment to the programme. A more stringent process for selecting student mentors could have helped to screen out those who were not as committed to the programme, however it is worth noting that both mature colleges have relatively small pools of undergraduates to draw from which narrows significantly when subject specialisms are considered. Perhaps offering a training session for mentors would have helped them better understand and carry out their roles.

All students who took part in the programme matriculated in Michaelmas Term as expected and there have been no withdrawals from the University.