

Cambridge SU Submission for TEF 2023

1. Approach to evidence-gathering

This submission to the 2023 TEF is being made by Cambridge SU, the students' union at the University of Cambridge. It draws largely upon evidence from student-facing services provided by the students' union and, where data was available, the University. We're grateful to the University for giving us access to their data which we had previously not had, and hope this collaboration continues. We had sight of drafts of the University's TEF submission and they saw a draft of ours. Writing of this submission was undertaken by an intern funded by the University's Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) in collaboration with staff members and elected officers of the Students' Union. No conditions were attached to this funding and we can confirm that the University did not influence the content of our submission.

Data from the NSS is not available for Cambridge. Cambridge SU opposes participation in the NSS because of evidence that the NSS has a negative bias towards female and BME academics. There are also historic links between the NSS, the TEF and increases in tuition fees. However, we have decided to engage with the TEF this year in order to use the student submission to highlight aspects of the student experience that we feel the University of Cambridge may not focus on in its own submission. Our decision to produce a student submission shouldn't be read as an endorsement of the TEF's usage in university rankings, but as an acknowledgement of how valuable universities perceive these awards to be. Had there not been a dedicated student submission, it is unlikely that Cambridge SU would have been involved in this round of the TEF. Cambridge SU and the University of Cambridge continue to oppose any links between the TEF and tuition fees.

However, the absence of NSS data doesn't mean an absence of student-focused data. In our response we have drawn on a range of surveys from 2018 onwards, many covering specific issues such as the Intermission process. We have also reviewed annual reports from Cambridge SU's own Student Advice Service and the Student-Led Teaching Awards (SLTAs). In addition, we have looked at evidence on student views implied by who they elect as Academic Representatives. We have also been able to consult with a small student working group.

Overall, the evidence points to there being some cross-cutting themes in the student perspective which are woven through the response to the TEF criteria. The themes which have emerged and which are mentioned consistently below are:

- **unevenness of academic experience** between Colleges and across schools and faculties, and the absence of clear mechanisms through which this can be addressed, or willingness on the part of the central University to do so;
- **an approach to teaching which is multi-dimensional.** The University's approach emphasises intellectual rigour, but at the expense of a more rounded approach which can enhance the academic experience and support student wellbeing. The evidence shows that students want to retain the intellectual qualities of a Cambridge education but to integrate into it a greater concern for clarity of style and flexibility of approach. Some teaching staff do embody these qualities, but students want greater consistency across individual approaches to teaching;

- **the impact and ramifications of the intensity of student life at Cambridge** arising from the short terms and the workload created by the Cambridge style of teaching. This style has many virtues but comes at a cost, particularly on student mental health which looms as an increasingly worrying issue, and those who fall by the wayside are sometimes neglected by central University services;
- **approaches to teaching and assessment which give a greater role to student choice**, to accommodate a wider range of learning styles and to enhance greater student autonomy and control over their learning;
- **under-use of digital tools and resources to address some of the issues**, building upon gains in flexibility of provision fostered by the university's response to the pandemic, and supporting new forms of learning that foster transitions into increasingly digitised workplaces. The University is reluctant to challenge entrenched and sometimes outmoded attitudes on the part of staff, thereby missing opportunities to support and enhance students' academic experience.

2. Student experience

SE1 How well teaching, feedback and assessment practices support students' learning, progression, and attainment

Cambridge SU's annual SLTAs provide valuable data on what students actually value in University teaching. In 2022 these attracted nearly 400 nominations, with a student panel selecting the shortlisted candidates and the eventual winners. Analysis of past awards demonstrates the key features of teaching that students value as being:

- Challenge: being stretched academically
- Clarity in both explanations of concepts and ideas, and in feedback to students
- Care, demonstrated most of all in staff recognising individual student needs and being as flexible as constraints allow. Students take the view that care can help them get the most out of the academic experience.

Cambridge is rightly proud of many aspects of its unique teaching model which certainly provides intellectual challenge in most cases. The short terms and the intensity of the teaching model, however, pose many issues for students, and for a significant number it can undermine their learning and their ability to progress or achieve at the level they might do in other contexts. The recent introduction of a teaching-focused career pathway for staff is a welcome development, as is the emphasis on developing more inclusive teaching approaches. However the prioritisation of intellectual challenge in the criteria for achieving a Professorship on this pathway implies a continued skewed approach to ensuring that all students can achieve optimal benefit from their academic experience, and implies an underlying philosophy of teaching that is insufficiently student-focused and tailored to individual need alongside academic rigour.

A persistent worry among students has been perceived unevenness of teaching between Colleges. The 2018 Big Cambridge Survey, covering the academic year 2018/19, had a 52% response rate among students. The survey found up to 30% of students at each college believed they received a lower quality of supervision than students in other Colleges. Levels of satisfaction with the teaching and learning experience in individual Colleges varied between 36% and 68%, and also varied between subject areas. One student commented that "The collegiate system can mean you end up

being a student at a College that blatantly doesn't care about your subject, resulting in significantly less support/attention you might otherwise get studying a different subject or at a different college". Unfortunately, the pandemic disrupted the 2019/20 repeat of this survey so no more recent data is available. Ensuring parity of quality in small-group supervisions is a challenge given their volume and relatively informal nature, but it is not clear this is a challenge the University is willing to address.

Another aspect of unevenness of teaching is between STEM and the arts and humanities disciplines: the former can get between two to four times as many hours of personal supervision as the latter. While driven by specific course needs, and acknowledging that the difference is designed to be reflected in hours of independent study, this can nevertheless lead to big differences in learning resources, workload and timetable pressures. On the other hand, for those students with fewer contact hours it can lead to fewer opportunities for support in their learning.

Turning to assessment, in July 2021 a survey was carried out jointly by the SU and the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning to capture student perspectives on diversifying assessment. This was circulated to all students and there were 475 respondents. Of these, 68% failed to agree that end-of-year exams accurately reflected their learning and skills, 62% said they impacted negatively on their mental health, and 58% failed to agree that Cambridge assessments developed and measured useful skills and capabilities. 51% thought the shift to online remote assessment during COVID-19 was a positive change, the main factors cited being having typed exams, the move to open-book format, and longer time-frames for the exams. However 23% disagreed with this, while 19% favoured a return to traditional exams. 44% wanted online assessment retained and 59% wanted a diversity of summative assessment methods, with students being able to choose. 80% thought that more diversity in assessment would have a positive impact on their mental health, and 74% thought it would improve their academic performance and degree outcome.

The University is committed to adopting more diverse assessment methods and recognises that while summative exams allow students to demonstrate their learning and their ability to apply it, doing so under the intense pressure of high-stakes timed assessment is not generally set as a learning outcome. While there are initiatives towards a more diverse mixture of assessment methods, these are focused toward a limited range of disadvantaged groups (Black British students and those with declared mental health conditions, and even for these only in some cases). Overall, assessment practices continue to limit the ability of the full range of students to demonstrate their learning and skills, and lack the real-world contexts in which many of them will be looking to apply them in future. Progress towards improved practices is slow. The use of digital technology to enable a more diverse range of assessment methods is an area which is underdeveloped, and the idea of student choice is not highlighted: the approach continues to be that staff alone control the assessment environment.

SE2 How well course content and delivery engages students in their learning, and stretches students to develop their knowledge and skills

Given the model of teaching at Cambridge, with its emphasis on small-group supervisions, it would be hard to dispute that it both engages students and stretches them. The issues, however, lie in the pressures this system creates through the frequency of supervisions, the intensity resulting from their personal nature, and the shortness of the terms. It favours students who can flourish under, or at least learn to cope with, the constant pressure to respond and perform at a high pace and under a heavy workload: the official advice to students is that they should be spending 42-46

hours a week studying during term-time (including contact time and independent study), which incidentally is significantly higher than the typical working hours in the majority of occupations.

The 2018 Big Cambridge Survey found that only a minority of students thought Cambridge a healthy and positive place to live and study. A 2019 survey into Student Loneliness, with 1679 respondents, found 62% citing the intensity of the academic workload as a cause of loneliness as friendships and social life were crowded out.

Although Cambridge SU opposition has meant that NSS results have been below the 50% publication threshold since 2017, it is at least indicative that only a bare majority of those who do respond (54.8% of respondents in 2020, although only 27.9% of the total student population responded to the survey) agree that the workload is manageable, and consistently only a minority agree that the pressure applied, volume of work, and time allowed for understanding are adequate. Although on their own these figures are flawed they are consistent with, and reinforce, findings from other sources.

We welcome that the University has committed to eliminating identified gaps in continuation and awarding gaps between students with disabilities, especially mental health issues, and also Black students, with the rest of their cohort. However we remain concerned that the University doesn't acknowledge how widespread mental health issues are in the student body, when these issues arise as a result of the intensity of the academic workload and the consequent impact this has on student learning, progression and attainment. In a working group of students convened to review the issues for this submission, concerns about student mental health arising from the academic context emerged as the most urgent issue. The finding from the SLTAs that students highly value flexibility in respect of both teaching approaches and organisation, to meet the full range of student needs, is also relevant in this regard.

In response to these issues the SU has been campaigning for a reform of the Cambridge term, including the introduction of a reading week. A University Working Group including SU representation was formed in 2021. In early 2022 a referendum open to all students gauged support for this change. 4330 students participated with 2763, or 63.8%, voting in favour. As a result, backing in principle was obtained from the University's two most senior governing committees and a formal proposal to introduce a reading week is being put forward in Lent Term 2023, with a pilot provisionally in the 2024-25 academic year.

Overall, the point is that the strengths of the Cambridge approach to teaching and learning comes at a cost to many which in turn impacts on their engagement with their learning and on their outcomes. The introduction of a reading week will go some way to ease these issues but is far from a complete panacea for the problems students face, and its implementation remains uncertain. We will reflect below on the support offered to students on such issues, both in-person and through digital technology. Addressing these concerns is crucial to improving access and outcomes for disadvantaged groups.

SE3 How far research in relevant disciplines, innovation, scholarship, professional practice and/or employer engagement contribute to the student academic experience

It's true that teaching at Cambridge is research-led with many leading academics among the teaching staff. 17% of undergraduate supervisions are led by postgraduate students but this

doesn't seem out of line with other institutions in the UK and elsewhere. Employer engagement at Cambridge tends to be focused in the Careers Service with work-based learning opportunities being limited, and employer involvement in learning is focused on the most obviously vocational courses. They would in any case be hard to encompass given the already intense workload.

Opportunities for overseas study are important for widening knowledge as well as personal development. The evidence shows that such opportunities at Cambridge lag behind the sector. According to Universities UK, 7.4% of UK undergraduates spend time abroad as part of their degree programme, studying, working or volunteering. For Cambridge, the University's figures report an average of 176 students a year studying abroad during their degree, around 5% of the total cohort. Moreover this is from a limited range of programmes - Language courses, Law, Engineering, and Asian and Middle Eastern Studies - rather than being available across all courses. Cambridge SU is keen that all students have the opportunity to incorporate a year abroad into their studies and hopes that this is something the University can be persuaded to take up.

SE4 How well the university or college supports staff professional development and academic practice

The University is paying increasing attention to the development of teaching skills among staff and, as mentioned above, has introduced a teaching-focused career pathway. The University has its own awards for high-quality and innovative teaching as well as supporting the SLTAs. What is less clear, however, is how well new teaching approaches and best practice are disseminated and their adoption encouraged in a systematic fashion across the University. A new data-driven Education Monitoring and Review has just been introduced, but it is unclear to what extent, if at all, this will help address teaching staff development. Moreover, as discussed above, the University's approach to CPD of teaching staff tends to be focused on research, and where it addresses teaching is focused on the dimension of intellectual rigour and not on an integrated approach that seeks to optimise the all-round academic experience for students, embracing clarity of explanation and flexibility of provision as well as intellectual quality.

We would also hope that the use of digital technology to help address these aspects of the student experience is in future more fully integrated into staff training and CPD on approaches to teaching, and not left as an optional extra dependent on staff interest and knowledge, which can be patchy.

SE5 How supportive the learning environment is, and how far students can access the academic support they need

We would refer back here to points already made above, especially around the variations in experience across courses and Colleges, and how much is left to individual members of teaching staff when it comes to issues such as flexibility in response to student needs and accessibility to students outside of timetabled hours. Of relevance here also, but discussed further below, is the limited use the University makes of its Moodle virtual learning environment, which is again left largely to the preferences of individual staff members. The University's Institute for Continuing Education has continued, post-pandemic, to run some entirely online courses, thus greatly expanding the reach of the opportunities it offers to remote students. The quality of these are very high and their combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities could offer many lessons to the rest of the University, and reassurance that the use of digital technology need not dilute the intellectual quality of teaching and learning. However, this experience remains in an

isolated silo. We hope this is addressed in the University's slow progress towards a vision for blended learning.

Turning to the more pastoral side of support for learning, the SU's Student Advice Service supported 366 students in 2020/21, broadly consistent with numbers pre-pandemic (during the pandemic there was a slight increase in students approaching the Advice Service). 49% of these were undergraduates, an increase on previous years (41% in 2019/20, for instance). This means that roughly 5% of undergraduates face issues severe enough to drive them to talk to the Advice Service. These figures do not consider those who access the multiple self-help pages the Service provides, based on the Service's philosophy that most students needing help can find what they need autonomously, with those who need additional support reaching out for personal contact and guidance. The help guides are reactive to trends appointment topics, and so can also provide an insight into the areas in which students are most frequently seeking out support or guidance. The guides are grouped into the areas of Academic Life, Exams and Assessments, Accommodation, Finance, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Wellbeing, and changes to University procedures. Over the most recent two years for which figures exist the three main issues the service deals with for undergraduates through personal appointments are examination-related issues, issues around intermission and re-entry (on which see more below), and complaints. Prior to the pandemic the third issue was that of reasonable adjustments being made for disability in university teaching.

The University is engaged in a multi-year programme to improve its welfare provision, especially on mental health issues, and we will need to see what impact this has. The scope of this initiative reflects the concern that exists in the University about the issues created for students, especially mental health issues. The University's approach remains reactive, however. It is possible to use digital technology to enable early spotting of students having issues and to enable proactive staff intervention, although such systems have to be sensitively deployed to avoid invasion of privacy issues. We'd like to see more exploration of the scope for early intervention in recognition that sometimes there are barriers, both internal and external, that prevent individuals from seeking help proactively, especially if they feel that this in some way indicates they are failing as a Cambridge student. Meanwhile the Student Advice Service also supports those not eligible for other University services, including in many cases intermitting students, past students, ICE students, and visiting students. These amount to 13% of Advice Service users, pointing to a gap in University provision.

In May and June 2022 the SU surveyed all undergraduate and postgraduate students, plus alumni, seeking feedback on student experiences with the process of Intermission - the process whereby students can take time out from their studies of a term or more for medical or other serious issues. There were 350 responses, with a report published in November 2022. Intermitting students continue to be a gap in University welfare provision and were outside the scope of the University's recent Strategic Review of Mental Health. Clearly intermission is a process which students only resort to in extreme circumstances of personal pressure, yet the survey shows that the process only adds to mental health pressures on already distressed students. 60% of those who had experienced Intermission agreed that it was not well integrated into existing welfare systems, and 75% thought there was inadequate support from the University during intermission. 44% of those who had experienced the process thought it was unfair, and many commented that during the process they faced difficulties and uncertainty that only exacerbated the problems they were facing. Several students said that concerns they tried to raise at an earlier point were "ignored", "not taken seriously" or that their Colleges were "dismissive". Generally the Examination Access and Mitigation Committee (EAMC) doesn't allow intermission during the Easter Term and this

forces students for whom intermission is the preferred option to go through the Examination Allowance process, which may not provide the best outcome for them. Applications for intermission by undergraduates have to be made via Colleges rather than students being able to apply directly, which further limits their control over the process and ability to make decisions which crucially affect their future.

The survey also found students reporting that they had been discouraged from attempting to access Double Time, reasonable adjustments, and extensions by College staff; some students noted that the advice of College staff conflicted with that given by their Accessibility and Disability Resource Centre advisor. Students also have to apply afresh for each reasonable adjustment every year, repeating a lengthy and intensive process, rather than a more streamlined review process being available once the initial case has been approved.

Moreover, 55% reported that they faced problems re-integrating into their courses after returning from Intermission. There appear to be considerable disparities in student experiences of intermission. Sometimes the EAMC will recommend intermitting without regard for its practicality, for example where this would mean that the student has missed crucial course content, resulting in students who already face study issues either having to put in extra effort to catch up, or suffering an adverse impact on their exam results. This indicates scope for improving communication between the EAMC, Colleges and departments before decisions are made, and the need for greater involvement by the students themselves in the decisions affecting them. 54% of respondents felt they lacked autonomy and control during the process, and 50% were not made aware of alternative options to intermitting. Given that mental health and welfare issues are the reasons why intermission is undertaken in many cases, the absence of integration into University support services is a serious failing.

SE6 How well physical and virtual learning resources support teaching and learning

Prompted especially by the pandemic the University has been introducing more digital resources into its teaching practices. Post-pandemic, the University has pledged to develop a vision for blended learning and has a policy of expecting, but not requiring, the recording of lectures, with scope for faculties and departments to choose not to implement this for some or all courses. The Faculty of Human, Social and Political Science in particular has decided against the recording of lectures as standard, and as of 19th January 2023 an open letter from students asking the Faculty to record lectures has over 340 signatures, over 60% being those studying HSPS in whole or part, with the remainder on other courses. In a survey accompanying the letter 40.3% of all students responding report that their lectures are never recorded and just 31.2% have their lectures always or mostly recorded. There is also variation in practice even when recording does occur: some recordings are audio only, and some recordings are only made available to students with a disability. This situation exacerbates the issue of the uneven experience of students and lack of respect for students as self-directing learners. Moreover, many disabled students have lecture recording as part of the access arrangements recommended on their Student Support Document - for instance, in October 2022 this was the case for 71% of the students contacting the Student Advice Service about this issue - and so where lectures are not recording this diagnosed need remains unmet. Lecture recordings also help those with undiagnosed support needs and those waiting for an NHS diagnosis. It is also apparent that the University does not draw upon those areas which do have experience with lecture recording in order to inform the debate more widely, to reassure those with concerns and to address misconceptions about online provision. As a result

staff practices and attitudes on this issue are reported by students in the survey to vary widely. There seems to be an unwillingness to provide leadership and direction in these areas in the face of staff reluctance, even where this would benefit and enhance the student experience.

Indeed, while students welcome the return to in-person teaching post-pandemic, there is clear evidence that here as elsewhere students want flexibility and choice. For example, we analysed the manifestos for the most recent successful candidates to be Academic Representatives in Schools and Faculties, where these exist, for mentions of issues to do with teaching and learning. The retention of lecture recording emerged as the single most mentioned issue of academic practice, being highlighted in around a third of the manifestos. Often this was alongside other aspects of online provision such as forums and handouts. The primary rationale was to help students cope with the workload of Cambridge study, with mental health also arising as a frequently mentioned concern. There was also support for retaining more flexible exams, such as use of the open book format. In the preceding two years, alongside concerns raised by the pandemic and the wish to retain many of the flexibilities introduced then alongside the return to in-person teaching, there were many more mentions of issues to do with the content of the curriculum: by 2022 this had faded as an issue.

The provision of online resources is clearly something many students value as a way of supporting their learning, enhancing flexibility and easing workload concerns. University progress on this continues to be very slow and often, as in the lecture recording issue, reflects a view that academic staff have sole ownership of the process of learning with students seen as passive recipients. This contradicts the University's goal of fostering the skills of independent study, in which students can make decisions about and manage their own learning.

SE7 How well the university or college engages with its students, leading to improvements to the experiences and outcomes of its students

In the Academic Representative manifestos referred to above there was also repeated mention of the need for greater student voice on changes to courses and in giving feedback on lectures. While students provide feedback after each run of a course, and during course change processes, there is a desire for greater consistency across schools, faculties and departments in ensuring that the student voice is heard and, most importantly, that it demonstrably shapes the teaching and administration across all courses. The inconsistencies and staff attitudes shown around lecture recording are a good example of where this openness is not being shown.

The success of students also depends on their having adequate financial circumstances. A recent survey on undergraduate Cost of Living issues had 292 responses. Data is still being analysed, but 21.6% of respondents were undertaking part-time work during term-time of which 9.6% were employed outside the University, which is officially against regulations. These numbers indicate that the ban on term-time employment is outdated, and it would be better to accept this reality which is only likely to grow in the current economic circumstances. The issues raised could then be properly addressed in welfare provision and staff could be encouraged to adapt flexibly when this can be done to benefit and not undermine learning. It has been promising to see members of University staff engage with Cambridge SU's Cost of Living campaign over the past six months, especially as demands about bursary and hardship provision relate directly to this question of term-time employment. We look forward to continuing these discussions and seeing how the University can continue to grow its support for students.

Overall, the picture emerging from the evidence gathered above is that the University has a narrow view of what is valuable in education, which focuses on intellectual quality alone rather than a more rounded view of what makes for successful teaching and learning. It believes in driving students hard and is less concerned with the mental health and welfare issues which result, or the well-being of those who fall by the wayside. We suggest that this is a limited view of what makes for good teaching and that the Cambridge experience for students would be greatly improved by a greater focus on achieving optimal outcomes for all students.

3. Student Outcomes

SO1 How well the university or college supports its students to succeed in and progress beyond their studies

As outlined above, the University has a mixed record of supporting students to succeed and progress. It very much focuses on those students who can flourish under the pressure of an intense workload and inflexible approaches to teaching and assessment. Those who fall by the wayside or who succeed only at great cost to their personal well-being are less regarded, as shown by the gaps in the University's own welfare provision (e.g. for intermitting students), the lack of mechanisms for pre-emptive intervention, and the resistance to providing for a reading week and to deploying online provision to support more flexible modes of learning.

According to the 2018 Big Cambridge Survey, only 61% of non-disabled students are satisfied with their educational experience, falling to between 39-50% among those with learning difficulties, health issues or disabilities. 50% of students reported mental health issues during their studies. A majority of students in minority groups disagreed that Cambridge is a healthy and positive place to live and study. Concerns about student mental health are rising across the HE sector, with recent sector-wide surveys reporting that 47% of all HE students in the UK say that mental health issues negatively impact on their studies. Given that the figure for Cambridge was already higher than this in the 2018/19 survey, before the pandemic, the fear is that the current figure for Cambridge is likely to be much higher. These statistics attest to the toll which the way Cambridge approaches academic success takes on many of its students.

SO2 How good students' rates of continuation and completion are

One point to note here, also relevant to SO3 below, is that without the Intermission process the rates of continuation and completion would likely be lower. This demonstrates how integral that process is to the success of a significant number of students and the importance of regularising the process and ending its isolation from other welfare provision.

SO3 How good students' rates of progression to skilled employment, further study or other positive outcomes are

The main advantage Cambridge graduates gain when it comes to employment is the training in the intellectual and argumentative skills gained through the small-group supervision teaching, and certainly the figures for progression into employment are good, but how well the Cambridge environment prepares students for the real-life world of work is not really transparent. The Global Employability University Ranking and Survey of international recruiters ranks Cambridge first in the UK for employability and fourth in the world, with soft and digital skills emerging as the top driver for employability in the post-pandemic work environment. The Cambridge 'brand' and the networks built up while at the University probably count a lot with employers. Further comment would require

drilling down into detailed data, from the University Careers Service in particular, which is not available to the SU. However it seems undoubtable that most graduates who find work outside the world of academia are unlikely ever again to encounter the environment they have experienced at Cambridge and will have to learn new skills to thrive in the workplace. The expectation is that Cambridge graduates are generally bright enough to do so and do not need specific preparation in this respect during their time at the University, although given the variations in the academic experience it is not clear that this is true or sufficient for all students.

For students with disabilities or other special circumstances the process for Examination Allowances can be lengthy. The EAMC reports that in the 2020/21 academic year 1,271 applications, just over 10% of the student undergraduate population, were received for Examination Allowances, of which 73% were for mental health reasons with 85% being approved. Delays in the process affect student chances for positive progression: for example, one recent student with a borderline First applied to have one paper disregarded due to mitigating circumstances. This was eventually granted but only after a process lasting over fifteen months, leading to a two-year delay in their applying for an MA. In another case a current student wanted to intermit but was not backed by their College: they failed their exams. After a protracted process the EAMC agreed to their repeating the year but this decision did not come until three weeks into the eight-week term. As this would add the stress of catching up to their other issues the student asked for their return to be deferred to the following academic year. The EAMC turned down this request and the student has appealed: so far this process has been going on for over six months and is still unresolved. By this stage, if the EAMC still decides not to allow the deferral, the student will have to re-apply to Cambridge for the year after if they want to continue their studies. There are other examples of such delays in resolving issues adding to already existing health issues and also leading to lengthy gaps in study.

SO4 What educational gains the university or college intends its students to achieve, and how relevant these are to its students; SO5 How well the university or college supports its students to achieve these gains; SO6 How far the university or college evaluates and demonstrates the gains made by its students

The University is proposing to establish a generic undergraduate skills framework that applies across academic disciplines and against which students can benchmark themselves upon entry and self-assess their progress during their time at Cambridge. It is anticipated that most of these skills will be developed through normal academic study but some supplementary materials may be provided to plug gaps. The Students' Union hopes that students will be engaged in the further development of this proposal and that it will be piloted and evaluated prior to full implementation. We are concerned that the proposal will add to the already pressurised workload on students. Neither is it clear how the results of this process will be demonstrated (SO6), whether they will fit all disciplines equally, and how they will sit alongside traditional academic achievement.

Moreover the proposal doesn't seem to address the key issue of demonstrating educational gain in academic study given that applying class distribution norms at Cambridge can result in individuals gaining a lower class degree than they might at other institutions where the range of ability upon entry is wider. In some cases, e.g. Maths, the approach to marking requires a distribution of degree classes on a bell curve meaning, for instance, third class degree for students who might well achieve more highly at another institution. It would take further analysis of positive outcome data and cross-sector comparison to establish the extent to which this is an issue that affects the destinations of students after leaving the University.