Master’s Self Evaluation Exercise – 2016-17

This report has been written for College Graduate Tutors, College Tutorial Offices, Faculties and Departments.

It sets out:
- Background context for the Master’s Self-Evaluation process, including a precis of the process in 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2016-17;
- A summary of 2016-17 emerging themes from student submissions;
- A summary of feedback received from academics and administrators regarding the process, and;

1. Background

a) In 2013-14, information from a variety of sources indicated that greater emphasis was required from the Collegiate University in the provision of feedback to Master’s students. This stemmed, in most part, from persistent dissatisfaction amongst Master’s students, evidenced by various student surveys and anonymised information provided by the University Counselling Service. Successive poor results in the PTES also suggested the need for early signaling of potential concerns and close monitoring of graduate progress. Additionally, despite graduate reporting requirements set out in Statutes and Ordinances, supervision reporting was sporadic amongst the graduate population.

b) In 2014-15, the Master’s Self Evaluation exercise was launched for MPhil students. At the division of Michaelmas Term 2014, all MPhil students were contacted and asked to access CamSIS Self Service and write a brief, self-assessment report (based broadly under the terms ‘progress’, ‘problems’ and ‘plans’). Once submitted, an email alert was routed to their assigned Departmental Supervisor and College Graduate Tutor simultaneously to review and comment (as necessary) on the report.

c) The idea of the scheme is to enable the early detection and resolution of any problems or difficulties a Master’s student might be facing, and, in the spirit of transparency and mutual cooperation, to facilitate a dialogue between Colleges and Departments regarding the student.

d) Student participation is voluntary but strongly encouraged in order that students can make their Department and College aware of their progress and raise any issues that might be affecting their studies.

e) 2014-15
The process in 2014-15 led to 915 out of 1517 MPhil students submitting a self-evaluation report (58% response rate). 95% of these students received a response from their Graduate Tutor and 82% received a response from their Departmental Supervisor. The process was deemed highly successful and in May 2015, the General Board’s Education Committee agreed that the pilot self-evaluation project be continued in to Phase II and rolled out to all students embarking upon a full-time Master’s programme with effect from Michaelmas 2015.

f) 2015-16
The process in 2015-16 was a little bumpier, with the expanded population creating unforeseen technical issues in CamSIS. This resulted in students on non-MPhil programmes being unable to access the Master’s Self-Evaluation form due to security access restrictions for a period of 4 weeks. Despite this delay, 1538 of 2496 students submitted a self-evaluation report (61.5%
response rate). 88.5% of these students received a response from their Graduate Tutor and 61% received a response from their Departmental Supervisor.

g) 2016-17
I. Owing to the technical problems in 2015-16, it was decided that the process would be scaled back again to just MPhil students for 2016-17.

II. Collaboration with the Student Registry, Colleges and Departments in advance of the process going live minimised some of the data quality issues within CamSIS which had arisen in 2015-16.

III. The wording of the evaluation form wording was reviewed and a number of small changes were made based on feedback from Graduate Tutors. A copy of the form that students were asked to complete is appended in Annex A.

IV. Technical guidelines and FAQs were developed for academics, administrators and students. The guidelines were distributed by email when the questionnaire opened and a web page was established on the Educational and Student Policy website to house guidance and information about the process:
http://www.educationalpolicy.admin.cam.ac.uk/student-engagement/masters-self-evaluation-process

A video guide for academics was also created by the CamSIS team:
http://www.camsis.cam.ac.uk/academics.

A generic email address ‘self-evaluation@admin.cam.ac.uk’ was used for all correspondence and was managed by the Educational and Student Policy Administrative Officer with responsibility for coordinating the process.

V. Response rates and outcomes
The process led to 847 out of 1678 MPhil students submitting a self-evaluation report (51% response rate). The response rate was lower than in previous years but, given that the Student Barometer pilot had been launched on the same day as the Master’s Self-Evaluation process in Michaelmas Term 2016, the response rate was greater than expected. 95% of students received a response from their Graduate Tutor and 89% received a response from their Departmental Supervisor. Only 10 students (just over 1%) did not receive a response at all.

131 (15%) of students said that they felt they needed help. This had reduced from 35% of MPhil students in 2015-16. All of the 131 students needing help received a response from their Graduate Tutor, 103 students (79%) received a response from their Supervisor. All students who said they needed help were asked to state explicitly what help was required; a new addition to the form for 2016-17. For 2016-17, the question asking students if they were intending to stay in Cambridge over the Christmas vacation was also made more specific, with students stating if they were planning to stay none, some, most or all of the time. 418 students (49%) indicated that they intended to stay in Cambridge some of the time, 228 (27%) most of the time, 70 (8%) throughout the vacation and 131 (16%) had not intended on staying in Cambridge at all.

2. Emerging Themes
Below are the emerging themes following the review of student responses from 2016-17:

a) PROGRESS
I. Students were asked to consider how they thought they were progressing with their course and settling in to life at Cambridge, as well as reflecting on what they had done and what they had achieved.
II. The vast majority of students were extremely positive about their course and progress, having settled in very well to life at Cambridge.

III. A small proportion of students indicated that they had taken some time to adjust and that this had presented challenges. This was particularly apparent for overseas students. However, most were pleased with the progress they had made in this respect as they neared completion of their first term, having ‘found their feet’ and established a ‘good rhythm’ and ‘routine’ with their studies.

IV. Students who had studied at Cambridge as undergraduates seemed to manage the transition most adeptly, having the distinct advantage of knowing the city and the way the Collegiate University worked. Some noted, however, that it had been more unsettling socially than they expected; having returned to Cambridge without their undergraduate friends.

V. Many students expressed a great deal of passion for their programme of study and clearly enjoyed the intellectual stimulation and freedom it afforded them.

VI. As previously, several noted the intensity and pace of Cambridge and the challenges this brought.

VII. Significant numbers of students indicated they had made progress in developing both academic and transferable skills.

b) PROBLEMS

I. 297 students (35%) confirmed they did not have any problems to report.

II. Students who had encountered problems used the ‘problems’ free-text box largely to expand upon any issues that had been raised under ‘progress’, or to identify specific areas of weakness both in themselves or the course delivery. Almost all of the themes which were apparent in 2015-16 remained so in 2016-17:

- Workload and time management;
- Work/life balance and missing out on extra-curricular activities;
- Balancing workload to meet immediate deadlines as well as preparing appropriately for later exams / dissertation submission; coursework feeling like a distraction to pressing ahead with the dissertation;
- Unrealistic amounts of required-reading;
- PhD application and associated funding deadlines occurring early in the term;
- Personal difficulties such as financial difficulties, illness, bereavement and family circumstances;
- Lack of preparation; being out of study for a period of time; previous academic experience outside of the UK or within institutions that varied significantly from Cambridge; embarking on unfamiliar subject areas or concepts for which previous knowledge had been assumed but was lacking;
- Lack of specific skills (for example, language, academic writing, critical analysis, or using specific IT software);
- Delays to receiving feedback or a general lack of feedback on assessed or unassessed work;
- Too little contact time with Supervisor.

c) PLANS

I. Students were asked to report on their plans, including their aspirations for the course and longer term ambitions, academic or otherwise.

II. Some students’ plans were practical, others were aspirational; many students discussed their specific route to completing their course whilst a number outlined broader research aims.
III. Staying on track, being more organised, creating greater efficiencies in study and keeping up with the reading were also commonly cited aims of students.

IV. Skills development (such as academic writing) were often cited.

V. A large proportion hoped to make original contributions to their areas of study and research.

VI. 492 students (58%) indicated that they were considering or firmly intended to go on to do a PhD, either at Cambridge or elsewhere.

VII. A significant number noted plans to pursue a career in academia (8%).

VIII. Some noted indecision about their longer term plans, seeking help and guidance about the routes available to them.

3. Feedback from Academics & Administrators

a) A technical glitch at the beginning of the process prevented some Academics from being able to view their students’ submitted forms. This issue was picked up and resolved by the CamSIS team within the first week. The issue resulted from a change that had been made within a different area of CamSIS since the process ran in Michaelmas 2015 which had unknowingly impacted the questionnaire functionality within the form.

b) Aside from this minor glitch, the process seemed to run very smoothly with very few issues reported. All issues that did arise were responded to quickly with collaboration between Educational and Student Policy, the Student Registry and the CamSIS team.

c) Feedback from Departments and Colleges on the process was sought as part of the wider consultation reviewing graduate student reporting systems. Comprehensive feedback was provided and is summarised below:

d) Technical Issues

I. A large number of concerns were raised regarding the clunkiness of CamSIS and how un-user-friendly it was to participate in the process.

II. Whilst academics receive a notification when a student submits their evaluation and alerts them to respond, there is no similar mechanism to alert students to a response being available from their Supervisor or Graduate Tutor. Likewise, Graduate Tutors and Supervisors are not alerted when the other Academic has submitted a response. There is therefore a sense that the feedback loop is never fully closed as it is difficult to discern who has viewed the form and at what stage.

III. Both Academics and Administrators noted that it was very hard to retrieve a report after the response had been submitted by the Academic. The interface that allows this needs to be significantly improved. A further issue Administrators have noted with this is the difficulty in filtering these reports by the relevant year.

IV. Linked to the above, there is currently no easy way for Academics and Administrators to view all information regarding submitted reports by cohort (either at College, Department or programme level). It was felt that the ability to filter and search within the list of submitted student reports (for example by programme, Graduate Tutor or Supervisor) with clear visibility of where reports were missing and where action was required would be much more useful.

V. Linked to the above, several Academics and Administrators noted that there was very little capability within the system to support management reporting and information – it was therefore very difficult to observe emerging trends, patterns and themes in student’s responses, and to consider possible areas for improvement, without laboriously going through each student’s submission.
VI. The current formatting of the text boxes within the form makes drafting and reading reports difficult – there are very small separate boxes for each section with individual scroll bars in each box. Administrators particularly found this element frustrating as they were often tasked with collating the information within each of the forms for various interested parties to review. This is a painstaking and very manual process.

VII. A further quirk of CamSIS is that it shows a slightly different version of itself depending on an individual’s role (Academic, Faculty and College Administrator or central Administrator), it can therefore be hard to know exactly what other parties can see. This is particularly problematic when trying to resolve an issue.

VIII. Academics noted that it would be very helpful to be able to view information about the student in parallel with responding to the student’s report. Currently an error occurs if an attempt is made to open the evaluation form along with another window to view the student’s 360° record in CamSIS. This makes it very difficult to put the student’s report in context - particularly where having to read a large number of forms.

IX. Changes to academics mid-way through the process also caused some issues. Once a student submits their report it becomes very difficult to reallocate this to another academic, using different functionality to the Maintain Adviser screen where Supervisor and Tutor changes are actioned in CamSIS. Not all issues of this nature were fully resolved.

X. There were several cases where incorrect email addresses were stored for academics within CamSIS which prevented emails alerting them to waiting reports from getting through. In the majority of cases error messages to the self-evaluation inbox highlighted where this has occurred and a work around was arranged. However, it became apparent on investigation that a hidden applet within CamSIS was actually responsible for generating the email address within the questionnaire work flow functionality (rather than the Maintain Adviser applet which also stores email addresses) and Administrators were, understandably, unaware of this fact.

XI. Although Academics were given until 12 January 2017 to respond to students (allowing 8 weeks for responses after the student deadline of 27 November 2016), for technical reasons the form had to remain open to students as well as Academics during this time too and some noted that the student deadline of 27 November 2016 was not adhered to.

e) Other issues

I. Several Academics regretted that the process remained voluntary; being a student led initiative, reporting requirements were unlikely to be met using this process if this remained the case.

II. Minor suggestions to revise the wording of form were made to help generate the most useful information and manage student expectations.

III. Several Academics worried that students were facing more and more demand on their time to respond to surveys and provide feedback. Despite an informed decision being taken regarding the timing of the process, concerns were raised that the Student Barometer significantly clashed with the evaluation process and together with PTES/PRES, there was a danger of survey fatigue amongst students.

IV. It became apparent that a number of Colleges operate a mentoring scheme for their graduate students. Two noted with regret that there was no facility for mentors to be able to review the reports in CamSIS, with mentors often having more day to day contact with the student than the Graduate Tutor. Similarly in Departments, it was not always clear cut as to whom should be responding to the student, with diversity across
programmes with respect to the timing and allocation of Supervisors, the role of Supervisors and Course Directors and, in some Departments, the role of Advisers.

V. Concerns about unnecessary bureaucracy were also raised including worries that the process minimised genuine intellectual conversation to a box ticking exercise and failed to recognise and emphasise the greater importance of regular informal feedback and contact with academics and their Department.

VI. Feedback from both Departments and Colleges indicated that greater clarity regarding roles and responsibilities in responding to the student’s reports would also be welcome. Graduate Tutors noted that they often relied on the Supervisor’s response to inform theirs as the majority of issues raised were academic rather than pastoral in nature.

VII. Some concerns were voiced regarding the timing of the process, with worries that many students would not have received any assessed work by the time the process launched to know whether there were any problems that needed addressing and how they were progressing.

VIII. One Departmental Administrator noted that the fact that the Master’s Self-Evaluation process was limited to MPhils was causing inequity with other Master’s courses within the same Faculty who had been excluded from the process due to CamSIS limitations.

g) Academics and Administrators can provide any further feedback or comments they wish to be considered to Katherine Springthorpe (kas88@admin.cam.ac.uk).

4. Recommendations

a) At its meeting on 10 May 2017, the General Board’s Education Committee approved the following recommendations:

I. That a Summary Report for 2016-17 be circulated to Departments and Faculties, as well as to Graduate Tutors’ Committee.

II. At an earlier meeting of the Education Committee, a proposal to develop a new reporting system for graduate students had been approved (Minute 526.3.3, Paper E5696). This will include a student-initiated report in Michaelmas Term for all graduate students to build on the success of and supersede the Master’s Self-Evaluation project. As such, the feedback outlined above will be considered, together with feedback gleaned regarding CGSRS, to inform the development of a new system via the CamSIS Improvement Project which will ultimately replace MSE and CGSRS.

III. It is hoped that this new system might be in place by as soon 2018. It is therefore intended that the Master’s Self-Evaluation process will run for a final year in MT 2017 for MPhil students with minimal change, before being superseded by the new system and associated reporting arrangements.

IV. The comments made regarding student survey fatigue will be given due consideration by the Education Committee when reviewing the continuance and potential timing of the Student Barometer, PTES and other student surveys.

V. In 2015-16, the Committee agreed to follow up on concerns regarding student workload (following the review of undergraduate student workload) to gain a greater understanding of workload expectations across Master’s programmes and whether these were realistic and reasonable. Unfortunately resource had not allowed for this work to commence in 2016-17 but will be carried forward to 2017-18 for the Educational and Student Policy Team to progress.
Next Steps for 2017-18:

a) Trends:
Faculties and Departments are kindly asked to consider the Emerging Themes section and, in dialogue with Master’s students, identify any relevant areas for improvement.

b) Student population:
The exercise in 2017-18 will again be limited to MPhil students.

c) Preparation:
I. Departmental Supervisors and Graduate Tutors should be assigned in CamSIS for all MPhil students admitted in Michaelmas 2017 by the end of October 2017 at the latest. The Departmental Supervisor can be any named individual with Departmental responsibility for the student’s academic progress (such as dissertation supervisor, course director etc.). Guidance documents on allocating academics in CamSIS can be found at the links below:
http://www.camsis.cam.ac.uk/cam-only/support_and_training/user_guides/College_Tutorial_TRAIN_2013.pdf
N.B that College allocation should be to the College Graduate Tutor field, rather than College Tutor field to ensure the CamSIS workflow functionality works.

II. MPhil student handbooks should highlight that the process will be taking place with a brief overview of the purpose of the exercise, the expected timing outlined below and encouragement to submit the report.

III. Departments and Tutorial Offices are asked to ensure that new Supervisors and Graduate Tutors who will support MPhil students with the self-evaluation exercise are briefed in advance of the process going live in Michaelmas 2017. This should include the background to the exercise, its purpose, the expected timing outlined below and encouragement to respond to all submissions in a timely fashion.

d) Timescales:
I. Departments and Graduate Tutors will be contacted in September 2017 with a reminder to ensure Departmental Supervisors and Graduate Tutors are allocated to MPhil students in CamSIS by the end of October.

II. In early October 2017, technical guidance on the process will be sent to Departments and Graduate Tutors, along with posters to advertise the process to students. Reminders will be sent to ensure MPhil students have Supervisors and Graduate Tutors allocated in CamSIS.

III. Any MPhil student who does not have a Graduate Tutor or Departmental Supervisor allocated on 8 November 2017 will be excluded from the process and will not receive the email asking them to submit the evaluation form.

IV. On 13 November 2017 the questionnaire will go live. All MPhil students will be contacted by email on this date outlining the process and what they need to do in order to complete their self-evaluation form. Students will be given until 26 November 2017 to submit their form. A draft of the email students will receive is provided in Annex B, for information.

V. From 13 November 2017, emails will be routed from CamSIS to Supervisors and Graduate Tutors alerting them as each student submits their form. Academics are asked to respond to submissions within a reasonable timescale, particularly where the student indicates they are in need of help or support.

VI. The form will close on Friday 12 January 2018.

VII. A timeline overview is provided in Annex C.
**Instructions**

In order for the Collegiate University to support you in your studies, please let us know how you are getting on by completing the form below.

Please complete all the fields in this form and submit it by 27th November 2016. There is an upper limit of 250 words per section. Your responses will be read by your assigned Course Director/Supervisor and your College Graduate Tutor and their responses will be visible to you, in your CamSIS self-service account, until mid-January 2017.

**Progress**

Please tell us how you think you are progressing with your course and settling in to life at Cambridge. Reflect on what you have done so far and what you have achieved.

Your progress:

How many times have you seen your Course Director/Supervisor so far?

0

**Problems**

Please tell us about any problems or challenges you have encountered since starting your course.

Any problems:

Do you feel that you need any help?

- Yes
- No

If you need help, please try to specify the kind of assistance or support you need:

**Plans**

Please tell us about your plans for the future. What are your aspirations for the course? What are your longer term ambitions, academic or other?

Your plans:

Do you intend to stay in Cambridge during the Christmas vacation? Please confirm whether you intend to stay none, some, most or all of the vacation.

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Dear MPhil Students,

**Self-Evaluation Form - Please submit by 26 November 2017**

In order for the Collegiate University to support you in your studies, we would like you to let us know how you are getting on by completing a self-evaluation form. You can access the form by following the link to the self-service section in CamSIS provided at the bottom of this email.

We are asking you to participate in this exercise so that we can see how you are progressing and, if necessary, provide advice and support to help you with your studies.

You can tell us anything you would like to; how you feel you are getting on, any good news about your progress or to ask for advice if you have a concern or worry. You are not required to say anything that you do not feel comfortable disclosing. Completing the form is not mandatory but we do strongly encourage you to submit it so we know how you are getting on. We can also resolve any difficulties you may be experiencing quickly. Please ensure that you have submitted your form by **26 November 2017**. We will send a quick reminder before this deadline.

You can work on your report, save it and return to it before submitting. However, once you have submitted it, no further editing will be possible. On submission, your report will be made available to your Supervisor and your College Graduate Tutor for them to add any comments and confirm that they have read your report.

Please bear in mind that all comments will be visible to you, your Supervisor and your College Graduate Tutor. However, your report will **not** be seen by your examiners or form any part of your formal academic assessment; it is intended only to support you with your studies. The questionnaire will be open to your Graduate Tutor and Departmental Supervisor to respond until 12 January 2018.

If you have concerns but do not wish to submit the form, your Faculty or Department will be keen to help you resolve any issues quickly so do seek support at your earliest opportunity. Equally, your College Tutorial Office will be able to offer guidance if you are having difficulties within your College that you do not wish to disclose in the form.

Thank you for taking the time to complete your self-evaluation form – it helps us to help you!

To complete the form, please log in to CamSIS Self Service:
[http://www.camsis.cam.ac.uk/cam-only/index.shtml](http://www.camsis.cam.ac.uk/cam-only/index.shtml)

**Technical guidance and frequently asked questions are provided in the attached.**

With best wishes

Professor Graham Virgo
Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education
Before Michaelmas Term 2017

- College Tutorial Offices and Departments will be reminded to ensure that MPhil students are allocated to a Principal Supervisor and Graduate Tutor by 31 October 2017.
- New MPhil Supervisors and Graduate Tutors briefed about the process for 2017-18 including purpose and timing.
- MPhil student handbooks should be updated to refer to the MSE process, its purpose and timing for 2017-18.

October 2017

- Technical guidance will be sent to College Tutorial Offices and Departments regarding the process.
- Reminder emails will be sent to Departments and College Tutorial Offices asking for MPhil students to be allocated a Supervisor and Graduate Tutor in CamSIS by 31 October.
- Posters for display in Departments and Colleges will be sent out.

November 2017

- MPhil students without a Supervisor or Graduate Tutor in CamSIS by 8 November will be excluded from the process.
- MPhil students will be emailed on 13 November advising that the self-evaluation form is open.
- MPhil students will be asked to submit the form by 26 November.
- Emails will be triggered to Departmental Supervisor and Graduate Tutor as and when the student submits their form.

January 2018

- The form will close on 12 January 2018.