

Review of Part-time Students Preliminary Report

Executive Summary

This preliminary report includes some broad recommendations regarding all part-time students and recommendations focussed on non-matriculated students and provision. The review of part-time students is ongoing and further recommendations, particularly around matriculated students, are expected in the academic year 2023-24.

Recommendations

- Clarify expectations of the students, the Faculty/Department, University, and College
- Promotional material, guidance, and student communications should be written with part-time students and provision in mind
- Part-time students should be considered in policy-making and treated equally in operational matters
- Resource allocation and planning for part-time students needs to be integrated with planning for full time students

Recommendations regarding non-matriculated students

- Secure access to central support services (ADRC and Careers Service) for non-matriculated students
- Include non-matriculated students in the University's alumni network
- Improve consistency of admissions, including review of governance
- Standardise student administration as much as practicable
- New Administering Bodies must comply with the Framework for Administering Bodies
- Colleges to explore if there's an appetite for associate membership for students on non-matriculated courses

Definitions

This review relates only to part-time students who are following courses which lead to a formal qualification from the University, as follows:

At postgraduate level

1. Matriculated research students formally registered on part-time Masters or Doctoral courses
2. Matriculated taught students formally registered on a part-time Masters (or similar) course, at degree, diploma or certificate level.
3. Non-matriculated students at diploma or certificate level, usually registered directly with the Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) or one of a number of other Departments or institutions of the University ("Administering Bodies").

At undergraduate level

4. Non-matriculated students registered for an undergraduate sub-degree award, currently only at ICE and the Language Centre.

Matriculated students with permission to take their full-time course over an extended period (often referred to as ‘double time’), due to their personal circumstances and usually related to a disability or long-term illness, are not part-time and are out of scope.

Non-award-bearing courses, such as those offered by ICE, the Judge Business School, Cambridge Advance Online and other institutions, are also out of scope.

The membership of the steering group and its terms of reference can be found in Appendix A.

Mission Statement

The University offers an extensive portfolio of high quality and specialist part-time provision. Part-time study is expanding at Cambridge and this review presents an opportunity to reframe part-time students rather than simply recategorise them. Cambridge is committed to being an inclusive institution and part-time study is one way to welcome students who might not prefer, or struggle to engage with, a full-time residential model. Cambridge has pledged to offer education which “enhances the ability of students to learn throughout life”.¹ Part-time students are valuable and important members of the Cambridge community, pursuing personal and intellectual success with the same commitment as full-time students. The University offers courses that are specifically designed for part-time study, including in-person study blocks and remote provision. These models are popular with students, who report high levels of satisfaction and achievement.

Detailed report

Context

A review of the part-time student experience at Cambridge is timely given recent changes to regulatory requirements and the shifting landscape of higher education in response to and following the Covid pandemic. The review has a broad scope and this preliminary report updates on progress and sets out immediate actions that can be undertaken.

Part-time courses, supported by the recent developments in blended ways of teaching, bring increased flexibility to Cambridge’s provision and offer opportunities for increasing access and widening participation. An application by the Department of Engineering to become an “Administering Body” prompted concern amongst Colleges at further fragmentation of an already complex and unclear part-time landscape. The review therefore intends to address strategic, governance and operational matters relating to part-time students at Cambridge. These matters are of profound importance to the fabric of the collegiate University, to the reputation of our education, and to the shared and separate roles of the University and the Colleges in the provision of student services, health and welfare, teaching and the broader “Cambridge experience”. The review therefore must be student-centred and consider key concerns such as accessibility, inclusivity, student experience, peer communities and impactful outcomes in terms of personal and professional development.

Some undergraduate qualifications are offered part-time but undergraduate degrees/Tripeses are only available through full-time study. Cambridge offers a variety of postgraduate qualifications via a part-time route, ranging from sub-degree awards to Masters courses. The majority of part-time

¹ [The University’s mission and core values | University of Cambridge](#)

Masters courses either run alongside an existing full-time course (the usual part-time MPhil structure) or are run by/in association with ICE as a Master of Studies programme. Levy-funded apprenticeships are currently only offered at Cambridge at Level 7, although ICE has indicated an interest in technical-vocational delivery at FHEQ Levels 4 and 5. At its March 2021 meeting, General Board’s Education Committee (GBEC) approved a framework for the adoption of a progression model for part-time courses. The agreed framework was a flexible model, in which each course component stacks into a larger whole (a Master of Studies). Academic Standards and Enhancement Committee (ASEC) has approved requests following this model and is anticipating further requests going forward. In April 2021, GBEC approved a recommendation from the Postgraduate Committee that all postgraduate research programmes must be offered part-time as well as full-time. All but 3 PGR programmes were advertised in the 2022-23 postgraduate prospectus as available in part-time and full-time modes. Exemptions were approved for these 3 programmes as their structures cannot easily accommodate PT study (e.g. they include fixed periods of time elsewhere).

Summary data demonstrates that the number of part-time students at Cambridge is growing and modes of study have also expanded to include things like apprenticeships and fully online delivery. In regard to undergraduate study, these figures run counter to national trends which have shown a drop in the number of PT UG students.² The increase in part-time postgraduate study mirrors national trends. In 2020, the Finance Division supplemented its regular collection of student number plans with several strategic questions intended to inform the work of the “size and shape” group. The consolidated responses from all six Schools indicated an aspiration to increase matriculated, part-time postgraduate entrants as follows:

	2019-20 actual	+5 years	+10 years
Non-doctoral	640	1,100	1,400
Doctoral	42	100	100

A further update on plans for growing matriculated part-time student numbers is due by the end of Lent Term 2024. The Student Numbers Management Group is working to develop planning numbers in the context of School plans.

The number of non-matriculated students is also growing (over 65% increase from c. 917 in 2017-18 to 1,531 in 2021-22 with 2022-23 figures as 1,446). Current Administering Bodies include the Judge Business School, the Faculty of Divinity, The Faculty of Education, the Institute of Continuing Education, Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership and the Language Centre. The Faculty of Engineering will become an Administering Body with the introduction of its Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma in Healthcare Innovation (following a progression model leading to an MSt administered by ICE) in 2024. ASEC and GBEC have raised concerns about the lack of internal clarity regarding expectations of Administering Bodies in terms of provision for non-matriculated students (meeting February 2022). The Office for Students expects parity of experience for all registered students, regardless of mode of study, and does not recognise a distinction between matriculated and non-matriculated students. GBEC requested that a framework be developed and current provision by all Administering Bodies be evaluated against that framework. The Review Steering Group supported this work and a Framework for Administering Bodies was considered by GBEC at its May 2023 meeting and approved at the June meeting of General Board.

² ‘Part-time undergraduate students in England’. S. Hubble and P. Bolton. House of Commons Library. 2022. [Part-time undergraduate students in England - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/library/research-briefings/briefing/snippets/2022/part-time-undergraduate-students-in-england). Accessed 04/09/2023.

Student consultation

ICE, with the support of the Review Steering Group, led a project to capture the voice of part-time and mature students which completed in Michaelmas Term 2022. The project reviewed existing scholarship on part-time mature students and conducted a qualitative research project with 58 current and former students. Students from a number of institutes and departments were invited to participate, including ICE, the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), Judge Business School, the Department of Engineering and Faculty of Education. A broad range of students consented to participate, including both matriculated and non-matriculated students. Student participants were consulted via focus groups, one-to-one interviews and an online survey. Discussions were informed by themes identified through the literature review, such as: influences and barriers; identity transformation and time management.

The project concluded that part-time mature students choosing to study at Cambridge are informed by the reputation of the University and its academic staff. They have clear goals in mind and tend to be more confident than the literature review would suggest. As would be expected, these students likely have other responsibilities (professional, familial etc) which need to be considered when planning and delivering courses. Overall, it seems that the hybrid approach of the MSt programmes and the online approach of the undergraduate and postgraduate sub-degree awards is well received by part-time students and were key motivating factors in choosing Cambridge.

The project noted the following learning points, based on its consultation with students:

1. Whilst the ability for all students to study online has improved access to learning, particularly since the pandemic, improvements could still be made in:
 - a) The presentation of on-line materials by tutors;
 - b) Access to course materials particularly the library could be more timely, broader in scope and allow for longer access;
 - c) Improving the structure, fluidity and consistency of use of the VLE;
2. Key areas of communication which need to be developed, including:
 - a) Poor and confused communication between ICE and some colleges;
 - b) Consistent information advice and guidance around the structure of courses and related credit system (particularly for UG/PG students) at admissions and on-course;
 - c) Communication aimed at part-time students which needs to be more tailored to their needs;
3. Those studying part-time and from abroad do not always feel they belong to the university and miss opportunities to participate in social or enrichment activities;
4. The induction process lacks appropriate guidance on course overview, learning support, library resources, use of the VLE and key dates;
5. UG/PG students expressed that they would like the opportunity to build credits and achieve a full degree from the undergraduate certificates or diplomas.

The project made the following recommendations:

1. A communication strategy, including a part-time student induction is developed that would ensure that students receive relevant information in a timely fashion and know where to turn to for support;
2. A student experience strategy is developed to specifically meet the needs of part-time students;
3. The induction process is reviewed to reflect the needs of students that may not have studied for some time particularly ensuring that there is easy access to information regarding course structure and access to support for study skills;
4. Online facilities are reviewed to ensure that they are sufficient to meet the needs of students as identified in the research, e.g. e-books, the VLE;
5. Consideration is given to facilitating undergraduate students to build credits through certificates and diplomas to achieve a University of Cambridge degree.

Recommendations

Recommendations for consideration by the Collegiate University are detailed below, with references made to the University's Risk Register as appropriate and a brief comment on the status of actions taken so far.

Recommendation 1: Clarify expectations of the students, the Faculty/Department, University, and College

Part-time students are often not as visible as their full-time peers, given the nature of their study and that there is no minimum residence requirement for part-time students detailed in *Statutes and Ordinances*. Part-time students can therefore be poorly understood by parts of the Collegiate University.

Previous reviews and the student consultation carried out to inform this work highlight that poor communication between Colleges, central services and Faculties/Departments negatively impacts on the student experience. This is a longstanding challenge and can be confusing for student, College and Faculty/Department alike. Part-time students should be able to navigate the structure of the Collegiate University. Work is needed to consider the relationship between matriculated part-time students, Departments, central services, and the Colleges, including tutorial support, expectations of accommodation provision and general levels of service to be provided by Colleges. Clarifying expectations and responsibilities will therefore support all parties. Professionalising this work will be key to its success.

Risk 4 on the University Risk Register (*failure to communicate effectively within Cambridge and the community*) refers.

Status: Revising or replacing the existing Mutual Expectations document would support students and staff. See Terms of Reference for Phase 2.

Recommendation 2: Promotional material, student communications, and guidance should be written with part-time students and education in mind.

Part-time students should be able to see themselves as Cambridge students. The absence of part-time students in prospectus and promotional material may create the impression that there are few/no part-time students at Cambridge or that they are not valued. Poor communication practices, such as all-student emails that focus entirely on full-time undergraduate experiences and concerns, 'other' part-time students and contribute to feeling excluded from the Cambridge community. Similarly, part-time students can be absent in advice/guidance (which often foregrounds full-time Tripos students). The applicability of advice and guidance relating to part-time students is therefore often misunderstood. Writing these documents with explicit consideration of, and where needed reference to, part-time students would ensure transparency, helping staff and part-time students better understand their status at Cambridge.

Risk 4 on the University Risk Register (*failure to communicate effectively within Cambridge and the community*) refers.

Status: Work to improve content on the University's website and intranet is ongoing as part of the Digital Presence Strategy. This includes a clearer top level introduction on routes to study at Cambridge, which should help make part-time study more visible.

Local guidance and communication should be reviewed to ensure that it is clear if/how they relate to part-time students. The Code of Practice for Taught Masters Students has been revised for 2023-24 to better refer to part-time students, for example. This work should be taken forward if agreement is reached at the appropriate level.

Recommendation 3: Part-time students should be explicitly considered in policy-making and treated equally in operational matters.

Part-time students should not be positioned as lesser than or inferior to full-time students. Given the alignment between part-time provision and non-matriculation, and how prominently widening participation features in discussions around part-time provision, there is a risk that the University will be seen to offer a lesser status to students that are more likely to come from WP backgrounds. As an example, only matriculated students were within the scope of the strategic review of mental health provision at the university and can engage with the current Reach Out campaign, which helps students navigate the support services available to them through College membership. That non-matriculated students do not have access to the campaign is not made clear in the promotional material. All policies should make explicit whether they apply to both full and part-time students and if/where they do not. A clear statement regarding full/part-time students could also be included in the scoping document for future projects and reviews.

Additionally, part-time students can be deprioritised on an operational level. For example, part-time students (matriculated and non-matriculated) can wait for months longer than their peers to receive their certificates and are not always given access to online transcripts. This is despite an explicit agreement that such matters be handled centrally.

Risk 6 on the University Risk Register (*failure to be an inclusive and diverse university*) refers.

Status: Local policies and processes should be reviewed to ensure that it is clear how policies impact on part-time students and that they are not inadvertently disadvantaged by current practice. This work should be taken forward if agreement is reached at the appropriate level.

Recommendation 4: Resource allocation and planning for part-time students needs to be integrated with planning for full-time students

Part-time provision represents a challenge for numbers and resource planning, given the variety of students undertaking part-time courses and the type/structure of courses. Integrating allocation and planning for part-time students with planning for full-time students will provide a holistic view and enable better strategies around part-time students and provision. Consultation with Colleges in relation to numbers planning and matriculated students is essential given the support expected by students. The Steering Group has noted that College support for part-time students should be considered broadly, as administrative support and tutorial office functions (as well as discipline) were often omitted from these discussions.

Status: The Academic Financial Planning and Analysis team (AFPA) did not previously receive a consistent amount of information from Administering Bodies. AFPA has prioritised securing comprehensive returns from Schools and added supplementary questions to gather information that the planning round had not previously covered (on non-matriculated students, for example).

Recommendation 5: Non-matriculated students should have access to central support services

Non-matriculated part-time students are currently excluded from the Accessibility and Disability Resource Centre and Careers Service provision. Support for disabled students at the Institute for Continuing Education (ICE), Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), and the Faculty of Education is provided locally, and informal advice is often sought from the ADRC. This is not a satisfactory position from the perspective of disabled students, and puts the University at risk with regard to compliance with OfS conditions and equality legislation. Parity of student experience and support would be most effectively achieved by securing access to central support services and the Steering Group supports current work towards this goal. Furthermore, centralisation of support services would ease concerns around inconsistent information in offer and registration documents.

Risk 6 on the University Risk Register (*failure to be an inclusive and diverse university*) refers.

Status: “Development of a model to provide support from the Accessibility and Disability Resource Centre (ADRC) to non-matriculated part-time students” had previously been specified as a future mitigation action against Risk 6. This work has been taken forward and resources to secure access to the ADRC and Careers Service have been agreed by the University’s Planning and Resource Committee for academic year 2023-24. Detailed operating models are being developed and recruitment to the agreed posts has begun, with a view to delivery being possible from early 2024.

Access to the ADRC and Careers Services has been prioritised given regulatory requirements on this front, but the University should consider whether it is appropriate to explore incorporating central wellbeing services (such as the University’s Counselling Service).

Recommendation 6: Include non-matriculated students in the University’s alumni network

Unlike their matriculated peers, former non-matriculated students are not currently part of the University's Alumni Network and therefore do not have access to its attached benefits.

Risk 6 on the University Risk Register (*failure to be an inclusive and diverse university*) refers.

Status: Education Services have met with Cambridge University Development and Alumni Relations to discuss the alumni status of former non-matriculated students, with a view to adding students completing from the academic year 2023-24 automatically and other students retrospectively by request. This will require clarification on the definition of an alumnus/alumna, further consultation around resourcing and the necessary approvals.

Recommendation 7: Standardise admissions processes for non-matriculated students as much as practicable and review governance arrangements for admissions processes

The process of applying for a part-time course is inconsistent across the Collegiate University. Administering Bodies often have their own local platforms and processes that differ to those followed by PAO or each other. Isolated admissions functions are viewed with suspicion by regulatory bodies and risks include potential inconsistency between the admissions documentation issued by PAO and Administering Bodies, which may leave the University exposed to different expectations and commitments. Moving towards either centralised processing or, more limitedly, a single shared process (e.g. more bodies using the Graduate Applicant Portal to accept applications and/ or GAObase to define and advertise courses) would help address this issue and improve the applicant/student experience. However, considerable expertise is concentrated in ICE admissions and a one-size-fits-all approach that does not consider the particular concerns and needs of part-time students might not be appropriate. Given regulators' concerns, mitigation will be needed if moves towards centralisation are not adopted.

Governance of postgraduate admissions processes and policies is provided by Postgraduate Admissions Committee (PAC) as a sub-committee of GBEC. However, by practice PAC business concentrates on the processes and policies of PAO and it does not, at present, cover non-matriculated courses. Clarifying the remit of PAC as the senior body for PG admissions covering all Administering Bodies would provide more holistic oversight and help drive common practice. The representation of all Administering Bodies on PAC would also provide them with reassurance about the quality of service provided through centralised or shared processes and systems. Engagement with its Terms of Admission Working Group could also be beneficial for Administering Bodies.

Risk 5 on the University Risk Register (*failure to have administrative processes and structures that are fit-for-purpose, now and for the future*) refers.

Status: Further work is needed to understand and resource the best route forward. See Terms of Reference for Phase 2. Governance review yet to be undertaken.

Recommendation 8: Standardise student and course administration as much as practicable

Administration for part-time courses is inconsistent across the University, as Student Registry currently only sets up some records for some of the Administering Bodies. Administering Bodies do not necessarily follow the same practice and any proliferation of Administering Bodies would compound this issue. Administering Bodies have at times needed an outsized amount of support from Student Records and the Business Information Team. Most of the issues with the student

records stem from local arrangements for admission, where practices vary and data needed to complete the record is not always collected in full. These are highlighted through the 'quick admit' system which is a manual process that has to be done for students who are not admitted through the central University PG admissions system. This can present challenges for statutory reporting (HESA). Clarity of process is needed in order to better manage risk and consolidated processes should mean consolidated data. This could be achieved by either standardising practice across the Collegiate University or centralising student administration in Education Services. Modelling would be needed to explore what additional resources are needed.

Risk 5 on the University Risk Register (*failure to have administrative processes and structures that are fit-for-purpose, now and for the future*) refers.

Status: Further work is needed to understand and resource the best route forward. See Terms of Reference for Phase 2.

Recommendation 9: New Administering Bodies must comply with the Framework for Administering Bodies

A Framework for Administering Bodies was considered by GBEC at its May 2023 meeting and approved at the June meeting of General Board, following consultation with representatives from Administering Bodies. The Framework clarifies responsibilities around recruitment and admissions, student support, learning resources, and the management of student records and data. Existing and new Administering Bodies are required to comply with this framework from October 2023.

Risk 5 on the University Risk Register (*failure to have administrative processes and structures that are fit-for-purpose, now and for the future*) refers.

Status: The framework has been approved, circulated to Administering Bodies, and made available on the Education Quality and Policy Office's website. Education Services has agreed to facilitate semi-regular and informal meetings of representatives from Administering Bodies that would enable ongoing discussion of challenges and sharing of best practice.

Recommendation 10: Colleges to explore if there's an appetite for offering associate membership to students on non-matriculated courses

The University currently offers a number of awards that do not carry College membership. Some (but not all) students on these courses have expressed an interest in College membership. A model of College membership, such as associate membership, would enable them to join and contribute to a College community in Cambridge. A student could be offered associate membership which, in return for a fee, would give them access to social facilities (the gym, College dinners and catering, the College bar) but not pastoral support or College accommodation.

Status: Issues relating to part-time students and College membership were discussed at a Colleges' Committee Café in March 2023. Colleges showed little appetite for offering associate membership to students taking non-member awards given their limited resources/capacity. Associate membership, or an equivalent provided by the University for non-matriculated students, could be explored. Further discussion is needed to clarify whether this should be taken forward.

Appendix A: Steering Group membership and Terms of Reference

The Steering Group consists of:

Chair – Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education)

A representative of the Colleges' Committee – Professor Athene Donald (CHU)

A Head or Deputy Head of School from a School with significant experience of part-time students – Dr Ella McPherson (AH)

A representative from an Administering Body – Dr Jim Gazzard (ICE)

A College Bursar from a College with significant experience of part-time students - Ms Jo Cheffins (W)

A Senior Tutor from a College with significant experience of part-time students - Dr Mike Sewell (SE)

Head of Education Services – Alice Benton

Head of Office of Intercollegiate Services – Dr Matthew Russell

A representative from the Cambridge Students Union - Kevin Ip

The Group would

(i) oversee and provide strategic leadership on a programme of work on

- a. Categorisation of part-time students and student status (matriculated and non-matriculated)
- b. Numbers planning
- c. Admissions
- d. Course and student administration
- e. and f. Access to student services in the University and the Colleges and expectations of baseline provision
- g. Fees

(ii) be responsible for consideration of recommendations made under each workstream, before they are put forward to the responsible committees for decision

- to ensure that due consideration has been given to the impact of recommendations on other workstreams
- to ensure that recommendations across the programme of work are consistent.

Scope of the review

The review encompasses all students on part-time award-bearing programmes, which includes:

- Postgraduate research students

- Postgraduate taught students (including those on sub-degree courses registered directly with Administering Bodies) on part-time courses
- Students registered for an undergraduate level award with an Administering Body, such as those delivered at the Institute of Continuing Education and the Language Centre