

Cambridge Colleges – a guide for graduate students

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Related web link:

Educational provision of the Cambridge Colleges

www.admin.cam.ac.uk/committee/seniortutors/guidance/education.pdf

1. Introduction

Graduate study at Cambridge should be a life-changing experience. You may become an academic pushing at the global frontiers of research and teaching, or a leader in a profession, public service or commercial enterprise for which a post-graduate course has equipped you with essential skills. Whatever your ambitions for the future, you will benefit from participating here as fully as you can in each of the communities, large and small, to which you belong. By doing so, of course, you will also contribute to the future of the institutions with which your life here is involved. Most of those institutions will sound familiar to you. Departments, Faculties, Museums, Libraries and Laboratories: one or more of these will be where your course is taught, where your research is undertaken and supervised, by specialists in your discipline.

But like every Cambridge student and many of the academic staff, you are also a member of a College, where enthusiasts from every discipline meet and enrich each other across subject boundaries and generations, and you will remain a member of your College for life.

Throughout its history, Cambridge has had Colleges, which are intimate social and intellectual communities of scholars. They are educational charities, each with a particular mission and character, and they have evolved in response to different social pressures. They remain flexible, reacting to the changing needs of their members. But all are devoted to study and research across the range of disciplines and generations. They are governed by Fellows, who are mostly academics employed in the University. Those Fellows have chosen to take on the additional responsibilities involved because they believe in the values of community and interdisciplinary practice. Colleges promote and sustain these values through the care they offer to their students, individually and collectively. In addition, every member of a College takes pride in these often very beautiful places.

Colleges remain integral to the University's educational and research environment today. They can offer you a home, and services that other Universities provide

centrally. They also give you experiences and opportunities that are unique to Cambridge. A key element of College life is the Middle Common Room (MCR)¹, a term widely used both for the graduate student body, and for the shared space and associated facilities that graduate students enjoy in College. Using such facilities and participating in your College's graduate society can be rewarding -- and you can make a real difference by ensuring that the College knows about current and future student needs.

This document describes the benefits and responsibilities of College membership. If you embrace it, your College experience can be one of the most important and memorable you develop in Cambridge. You may choose not to access some of the services to which you are entitled, and you may not need to. But you do need to know they are there for you. The fee you pay the Collegiate University includes a College element that reflects the importance of College membership. This brief introduction to the basics of College life is intended to encourage you to make as much of your College as possible.

Some of the advantages of College membership are material, and obvious. These include induction in your first weeks, through printed and online material, and a series of social and orientation sessions; ongoing academic and pastoral support from your Tutor and Graduate Office; accommodation and catering; financial advice and assistance; social, cultural and sporting facilities; opportunities for research, teaching, and professional development, through interdisciplinary seminars or intergenerational networks of College members. Colleges administer formal processes, including matriculation (formally joining the University and College), monitoring international students' status for visa purposes, and graduation. But they also work closely with the University's central bodies to shape University policy on a range of educational and financial issues affecting graduates, and to negotiate with the University on behalf of their own students.

And some benefits of College membership are intangible, but just as real, and equally indispensable to your experience of Cambridge: conversations and friendships that take you out of your area of expertise and stimulate new ideas; the satisfaction of representing your fellow graduates in College or the University. The friendship and advice individual graduate students find in Colleges make these communities indispensable elements of your Cambridge life.

The College has obligations to you as a member of its community. But your membership also entails responsibilities for you: to respect its rules and conventions; to have regard to the rights and needs of others; to honour commitments. As a member of the College community, you will gain much by helping to make it function effectively.

2. Pastoral, welfare and academic support through the Tutorial system

As a graduate member of a College, you will have access to a Tutor – a College Fellow – who is there to give you advice about any pastoral, academic, financial or emotional problems you may be experiencing. This individual may be a part of a team of Tutors. Get to know your Tutor, and introduce yourself. Then keep all relevant contact details to hand, and update him or her with your progress and any difficulties you might encounter.

¹ Not all Colleges have an MCR. Some Colleges have their own variant of this term, such as College Student Associations at Darwin and Wolfson Colleges.

Your Tutor will try to assist you in cases of financial difficulty, both in exploring the availability of the College's resources, and by tapping into the variety of centrally provided and external services available to graduate students.

Your Tutor is also a source of general advice and support on academic matters. He or she is always happy to listen to your experiences of studying and research, to offer advice where appropriate, and to introduce you to academic staff and students in College with similar interests. Your Tutor will have access to CGSRS (Cambridge Graduate Supervision Reporting System) reports submitted online by your supervisor concerning your academic progress, and to any self-assessment exercise you complete via CamSIS and will liaise where necessary with academic supervisors and departments/faculties, particularly if you are experiencing difficulties. If you are worried by what a report says, or want a different perspective on any aspect of your work, go and talk to your Tutor. In the rare cases when things go wrong, and you need to make a formal complaint or appeal against a University department, your Tutor may have an important role as advocate, and will guide you through the formal procedures.

More commonly, if you are ill or your work has been disrupted or you need to take time out for personal reasons, your Tutor will help you ensure that your application is presented properly to the relevant university bodies. Your Tutor will also be able to write tutorial references for you.

In most Colleges, there is a single individual (the Graduate Tutor or the Senior Tutor) who has overall responsibility for the whole community of graduate students. Tutors meet regularly within College, and Graduate Tutors meet their counterparts in other Colleges along with senior University officers, representatives of the Student Registry, the Graduate Union and the Colleges' Graduate Secretaries. This means they can all share information to ensure a coordinated and effective response to issues affecting graduate students.

Another key figure in many Colleges is the Graduate Secretary, in some cases known as a Graduate Officer or Administrator. Available in College during office hours, the Graduate Secretary works closely with Tutors, and will often be able to provide immediate answers to questions on routine but essential practical matters. S/he acts as a contact point for international students and advises on the availability of other members of the College's support staff. Most Colleges have a nurse who can advise you on routine medical difficulties; many also have a chaplain and/or a counsellor, who helps students of all faiths and none.

Together, this team of people provides an invaluable resource. They assist with problems that arise when a student has just arrived in Cambridge, and are available to help in the event of personal, domestic or family difficulties.

3. Assistance and information for student parents

For graduate students with families, the colleges work with the University to support a Childcare Adviser, who is based in the University's Childcare Office, located at 25, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1QA, Tel: 01223 332249. The Childcare Adviser can provide information on University and local childcare options for children of all ages, as well as information on financial assistance and details of College family accommodation.

The Childcare Adviser also organises welcome meetings for students with children at the beginning of each academic year, and runs a parent email list to keep student parents up to date with relevant information and events. A number of colleges also have established nurseries to which student parents may have access.

Contact the Childcare Adviser: Childcare Office
21 Trumpington Street Cambridge, CB2 1QA
Email: childcare@admin.cam.ac.uk

For more information, see also the Cambridge Guide for Student Parents at www.admin.cam.ac.uk/univ/childcare/studentparentguide.html

4. Accommodation and catering

4.1. Accommodation

It is crucial for graduate students to have affordable and convenient accommodation. College-owned accommodation has long played the leading role in meeting this need. Living in College accommodation enhances social life and, together with communal catering, contributes to efficient study. But not all graduate students want to be housed in college accommodation; some prefer, particularly in their later years, to move into the town, renting a flat or sharing a house with friends or family.

Managing graduate accommodation is a complex business, and Colleges try their best to be flexible and fair in their use of this precious resource. Different taught courses start at different dates, and last for different periods of time. Doctoral students may start at several different points in the year, may finish at any time of year, and may spend periods working away from Cambridge. Doctoral students who over-run their allotted period, even if they no longer pay fees, may still hope to be accommodated by their College. Professional and part-time courses involve periods of residence that run on their own different rhythms.

Colleges always consult with MCRs to determine their priorities in allocating accommodation and the details of the contracts they offer. Giving good notice of your likely needs will increase your chances of being offered accommodation.

Your College will try, within its available resources, to meet accommodation needs at different phases of your career. For instance, if you are a single student new to Cambridge who has met the academic and financial conditions of your offer and requested accommodation by 31 July, Colleges will normally provide you with accommodation for your first year; you are however advised to confirm this in writing with your College. Partnered or married students and students with families have their own specific requirements. Here, it may be more difficult for colleges to match supply and demand. Colleges nevertheless try to help families find accommodation, both through other Colleges and through the University's Accommodation Syndicate and by advising on the private rental market.

Colleges vary in their approach to students from another College who might be renting their accommodation, but are not members of that College. Consequently students residing in the accommodation of a College other than their own should check what their entitlements are in terms of access to facilities such as dining facilities, gyms, library and IT. You should not assume that you are entitled to use any facilities in your host college apart from the room you are renting.

4.2. Catering

All colleges enable their members to eat and drink together informally as a matter of routine. Sharing a meal provides a chance for relaxation and a social focus away from work. The priority of college catering is to provide you with a range of food at reasonable cost at least during term time, and to provide some catering throughout the year (with the exception of well-advertised closure for staff vacation). Colleges also arrange occasional, formal dining events, some of which may also enable you to invite a guest or listen to a distinguished outside speaker.

4.3. Rent and catering charges

Payment of fees does not cover your rent if you live in College-owned accommodation or the costs of food. So far as catering is concerned, costs arise both as "fixed costs" (operating a kitchen and a dining hall, and employing the necessary staff) and as "variable costs" according to the number of meals provided. Colleges make charges for catering in slightly different ways. However they do it, they need to recover both the fixed costs and the variable costs. The former are often recovered by means of a "kitchen fixed charge", payable on a termly basis.

5. Academic enrichment, study and transferable skills

The focus of most of your academic engagement and advice will be your Faculty or Department. You should not expect formal teaching or organization of essential supervision on your research project to be provided by the College. (Colleges do however provide a Director of Studies for students taking Clinical Medicine, Clinical Veterinary Medicine and the MMath/MASt and the LLM.) But as multi-disciplinary communities, Colleges have a distinctive complementary role to play in helping you acquire general transferable skills, as well as in allowing you to test your ideas in conversation with those at a challenging distance from your area of expertise.

Colleges are relatively small, allowing members to get to know one another at any and every point of the day, in term and during vacations. Sharing a meal, a drink or a common room allows graduates, undergraduates and Fellows with a wide variety of academic interests and cultural origins to come together, stimulating the cross-fertilisation of ideas. The College setting can provide opportunities for you to organise and participate in informal seminars (where you can learn, for example, how to communicate your research to a supportive audience outside your subject); to run societies; and to network with alumni of the College or other College guests.

Colleges want to facilitate interaction between senior members and their graduate students. In some colleges, Fellows act as discipline-based mentors to a small number of graduate students – an arrangement which complements the more general pastoral role of Tutors, and the project-specific responsibilities of research supervisors. Some colleges provide opportunities for research presentations, poster exhibitions and the chance these bring to answer curious questions from peers in other disciplines. As the institutions responsible for providing supervisions of undergraduate students in Cambridge, Colleges may also provide opportunities for graduate students to gain experience in small-group teaching, especially valuable for those wishing to pursue academic careers. Colleges and Departments also work together to provide discipline-specific mentoring and teaching opportunities. These opportunities take different forms across Cambridge, and may involve you teaching in and for another College. If you are interested in gaining such teaching experience you should discuss possibilities with your Tutor and with your own research supervisor.

Students benefit from life membership of their College. Some offer opportunities for internships, travel awards, research and professional placements. Most of them award post-doctoral Research Fellowships as a first rung on the academic career ladder. These posts may be funded from the College's endowment or made possible through private gifts to the College, often from alumni.

All colleges provide library and IT facilities, complementing specialist departmental and Faculty holdings, and providing you with another quiet place to study. Colleges may also provide study skills or academic writing sessions, though you should look to the University's Language Centre or your Department or Faculty for specific language work, either in the academic use of English or in a foreign language. However, you should not expect your College to underwrite the costs of additional English language teaching.

6. Financial support

6.1. General finance

You should have arrived in Cambridge with financial resources available in £ sterling to cover all course, research, accommodation and incidental requirements. The fees for almost all Graduate students (excluding the MBA and MFin, and some MSt courses) are collected by Colleges and include elements reflecting both University and College costs. If you cannot meet the financial obligations of the course your College may require you to leave the University temporarily (intermit) until sufficient sources of funding can be found. You are not allowed to undertake paid work outside the University or a college while you are studying full-time, and you should not expect to accrue additional income in this way. See <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/gradstud/fees/funding/employment.html>.

6.2. Unforeseen hardship

All colleges do, however, provide some form of financial support if you encounter unforeseen and unforeseeable hardship. Causes might include the collapse of a commercial sponsor, or a sudden major illness. Colleges may be able to access sources of hardship funding, adjust rent or fee payment schedules, or make a loan or a hardship grant. Seek advice from your Tutor in the first instance, and expect to provide full details of your circumstances and how they have changed. They will be treated in confidence, and will enable the Tutor to help you as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

PhD students who take longer than the normal allotted time to complete their theses should not expect their College to contribute financial support for the period of the overrun. You should do your utmost, working with your supervisors, to meet the target completion date set by the Student Registry, acting on behalf of the Board of Graduate Studies; if you need to renegotiate that date, consult your student profile on CamSIS, the University's student records database.

6.3. Research-related expenditure associated with your research and career development

All colleges try to contribute towards the cost of exceptional individual research-related expenditure. This might include attending an international conference to present an academic paper, visiting an archive, undertaking fieldwork, or a medical/veterinary elective. You should expect to assemble a portfolio of funding to support these activities from your department, from the University itself (through the Student Registry), and your funding body or sponsor, as well as from your College. You might also be asked to dip into your own private resources.

Do not expect your College to contribute towards teaching-related costs (e.g. chemical reagents, equipment, essential photocopying) you incur as an integral part of your course, or towards travel on course-organised trips. These costs are normally supported by the Faculty or Department concerned. Please note, however, that sometimes they are specifically mentioned in the prospectus or offer of admission as additional costs to be borne by the student or otherwise.

7. Social, recreational and sporting facilities

Many social and recreational activities in Cambridge are College-based: concerts, plays, competitive inter-college sports, aerobics, dance classes, and social events, discos and balls. There is also an extensive and complementary range of specialised University-level societies. Musical activities often play a prominent role in college, involving performance at a high standard. Clubs and groups exist for many other pursuits, both intellectual and practical, catering for a huge range of tastes and abilities. Colleges provide the infrastructure support: common rooms, TV and games rooms, bars, gyms, boathouses and sports fields, while students run many of the activities.

Whatever the mix of Fellows, graduates and undergraduates at your College, you can be as fully integrated as you wish into the social, recreational and sporting life of the community. And though many activities are located in your College, it is normal for students to attend events at other Colleges. Doing so enables you to appreciate the identity and individuality that is characteristic of Cambridge's small College communities.

8. Administration

Colleges carry out most of the registration and financial procedures required in relation to your admission. They also deal with administrative matters concerning your status within the University, from when you formally register to when you gain your degree.

The Graduate Admissions Office, acting on behalf of the Board of Graduate Studies, (or for the MBA and MFin in the Judge Business School) will supply you with an estimate of your likely costs and will request signed confirmation of your ability to meet the costs of coming to Cambridge. Colleges collect fees on their own behalf and for the University: these fees reflect the costs associated with the support for which you are eligible and the benefits and facilities they hope you will enjoy. Colleges also act as the channel by which the 'maintenance' or living expense element of scholarships, bursaries and loans reach the pockets of individual students. They liaise extensively with various funding bodies, as well as monitoring your own account with the College for catering and other services.

This financial relationship with your College imposes responsibilities on both sides. Colleges have duties to be clear about their own finances. They publish financial accounts, which are available on request; they also regularly consult with the MCR or graduate society on charges, and about the arrangement for paying them. Your College will take appropriate action if you get into arrears without prior negotiation, and special payment arrangements of debts to the College or the University may be required as a condition for your staying in residence. You may also be required to leave until you can produce the necessary funding. Non-payment of fees can lead to the termination of your course of study or research. So you are responsible for keeping your College informed of your financial situation, and are strongly advised to discuss serious financial problems with your Tutor at an early stage. Staying silent

will not make these problems go away; confronting them makes them manageable – and your Tutor is there to help you.

9. College Rules and Statutes

Every College has rules about individual and communal discipline, as well as mechanisms enabling students to complain and to offer feedback about any aspect of their College. Observe the rules and make use of feedback mechanisms. The University also has a comprehensive suggestions and complaints procedure that students can access through the Student Registry. And the Graduate Union is always ready to offer advice and support to individual students.

If neither the College's nor the University's internal procedures have resolved a complaint, you can take it to the national body that investigates complaints, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (see their website: <http://www.oiahe.org.uk>).

10. Conclusion

Colleges vary in the detail of their provision, atmosphere and culture, but work together to provide essential benefits to their members. The shared academic resources, experience and practical support that colleges make available to their graduate students add another dimension to the academic provision of the University. You will gain most from your College by contributing as fully as you can to the shared intellectual and social life it offers.

11. Summary of what you can expect from your College

Welfare and practical support

- A Tutor to monitor your progress, to provide prompt information and advice on academic and pastoral matters, and to act as an advocate when necessary.
- An induction programme shortly after arrival, helping you understand how the College works, and how students fit within the wider context of the University, funding organisations, the city and so on.
- Tutorial references and other official letters (e.g. to confirm residence, student status, etc.) during and after your time in College.
- Assistance in response to special needs and disability.
- Advice and information concerning the provision of childcare in Cambridge.

Accommodation and catering

- Normally, the option of college-owned or college-managed accommodation for (at least) one year to those students, new to Cambridge, who have been confirmed for admission and applied for single accommodation by 31 July. This provision currently applies only to students coming to Cambridge without a partner or family.
- Advice and information on accommodation available elsewhere in Cambridge.
- College catering, formal and informal, at reasonable prices.

Academic enrichment and support

- Library (complementing the more specialised faculty and department libraries) and IT facilities.
- Opportunities to exchange experiences across disciplines and generations in an informal setting
- Assistance in communicating with University authorities on academic and other matters.
- For students taking certain courses (such as Clinical Medicine), direction of studies and supervisions.
- In combination with Faculty schemes and/or discussion with your supervisor, opportunities to supervise undergraduates and apply for College Research Fellowships

Finance and funding

- Advice on identifying and obtaining financial assistance, whether for ongoing study (e.g. funding a PhD course), fieldwork expenses, or presenting work at international academic conferences.
- Help in cases of unforeseen and unforeseeable financial difficulties (as distinct from failure to access funds which were guaranteed as part of the admissions procedure).
- Such help may be in the form of adjusted payment schedules or a loan, or, in cases of serious hardship, a non-returnable grant.

A strong social focus

- A student association or graduate society (typically the Middle Common Room (MCR)), run by students but with support from the College.
- Opportunities, typically through the College's MCR, to run and participate in seminars and other events, , and to develop presentational skills
- Opportunities for standing for election to the MCR and/or other representative bodies.
- Suitable facilities for students' social, cultural and recreational activities (e.g. sports, music, etc.)

Administration

- Administrative services concerning a student's registration in the University and progress through it, from initial matriculation through to presentation for a degree.
- Advice, where needed, concerning relationships with funding bodies; and advice and where necessary action concerning a student's financial engagement with the College and the University.
- Mechanisms for feedback, suggestions and complaints, to the College.
- Membership of a network of old members, and of the College, for life.

12. What your College may expect from you

- Full and accurate information at admission, for example, about academic and other qualifications (including English language competence); and ability to pay for the course undertaken and other expenses while in Cambridge.

- Regular contact with the College, including the Tutor, and providing contact details when absent from Cambridge.
- Informing the Tutor of any material changes in circumstances.
- Prompt responses to requests for information from the College.
- Full engagement with the academic programme, and (where appropriate) participation in other aspects of College life.
- Meeting completion dates and similar targets.
- Meeting financial obligations to the College and University, paying fees and settling bills within the deadlines specified.
- Keeping to accommodation contracts or, if this becomes impossible for unforeseen reasons, negotiating any changes with the College.
- Respecting the rules and conventions of the College.
- Respecting the rights and needs of others in the College, staff as well as fellow students.