



Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Institutional Audit for the University of Cambridge 2008: Student Written Submission (SWS)

This document reviews the learning and teaching of undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Cambridge.

This document has been written with extensive consultation and use of historical information where available.

Based on discussions with Robert Harris, Assistant Director, regarding the 2002 SWS by Cambridge University Students' Union (hereafter CUSU), a cross-campus survey was deemed to be unsuitable. Instead, we undertook extensive focus group work. This included a focus group composed of College Academic Affairs Officers (as elected representatives within Colleges) and Student Faculty Board Members (as elected representatives within Faculties)¹. Consultation was extended electronically, from which further responses were elicited. A focus group was held with college Women's Officers (through CUSU Women's Council) in which around 15 officers participated. Extensive consultation was held with JCR/MCR Presidents and Externals Officers, both through personal meetings and email circulation. An additional group, exploring issues specific to graduate students, has played a key role in the collation of information. Consultation was extended to students beyond those in elected positions, notably through JCR/MCR Open Meetings. Where appropriate, this document will use examples encountered in provision of CUSU's Individual Student Support. CUSU believes consultation to be representative: elected JCR/MCR, faculty and CUSU officers have a high level of interaction with other students and often an acute awareness of specific issues affecting their educational experience.

CUSU Council mandated the CUSU Academic Affairs Officer to author this document. Reports and preliminary drafts have been presented to the Council twice, and the sabbatical team have overseen the composition of the SWS. The document has been the ongoing priority of the CUSU Education Team for Michaelmas Term 2007.

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¹ The structure of student representation in the colleges, faculties and University will be explored later in this document

Introduction

The format of this document differs to that of the 2002 Student Written Submission written by CUSU². It will start by briefly outlining the Cambridge collegiate system, specifically in relation to learning and teaching issues. This is something that CUSU feels necessary: the collegiate system is a defining feature of a Cambridge education and unlike other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) nationally. This context is invaluable to those external to the University. The document will comment on the major aspects of the learning and teaching experience of a student at Cambridge. It intends to cover positive aspects of their education, as well as raising issues and concerns regarding some aspects of students' learning and teaching experience and environment. CUSU believes that, overall, the University of Cambridge provides a world-class environment in which students can learn and study, and that the learning and teaching environment is of a high quality standard. However, as CUSU has reminded the University, the University must not rest on their laurels and must continually strive to improve, ensuring that it remains as a leader nationally and globally in the Higher Education Sector.

The second major section of this document will aim to summarise the previous section into the 4 questions stated in the QAA guide for student representatives³. Unlike in 2002, there will be no explicit reference to the QAA Codes of Practice. However, it is intended that issues raised in this document will clearly relate to the Codes.

Throughout this document, references will be made to the Student Written Submission made by CUSU in 2002. Along with this, CUSU's newly launched Learning & Teaching Strategy 2007-9⁴ will be frequently referenced. The CUSU Learning & Teaching Strategy (LTS) was designed to complement the University's LTS, drawing together existing CUSU Policy on the issues the University had highlighted, as well as formalising CUSU's position on other areas. It was overwhelmingly passed by CUSU Council in Michaelmas IV 2007. Much of this document is useful in providing background and student views on a number of Learning and Teaching issues. Where relevant, the link to the document will be explicitly stated. Where other references are made, electronic links to the material will, where possible, be provided. If no links are provided, please feel free to enquire and I will endeavour to provide further supporting evidence / background documents.

Peter Coulthard would like to thank the CUSU Education Team and the CUSU Sabbaticals for their help and support in the writing of this document.

² All links and documents can be found at: www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/academic/qaa

³ "Institutional audit: a guide for student representatives", p.5

⁴ The CUSU Learning and Teaching Strategy 2007-9: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/academic/cusults/>

Section 1

- **The Cambridge System**
- **The Cambridge Learning and Teaching Experience (the student perspective)**

The Cambridge System

The way in which the University of Cambridge operates is somewhat different to that of the majority of HEIs within the UK. Commonly, CUSU finds itself in a position where counterparts at other institutions are unable to identify with the issues of high importance to students at Cambridge and the different methods and resources required to address these issues. The following sections will outline these differences from the student perspective – as a way of showing where relevant individuals sit in a complicated system.

The Cambridge collegiate system can be broadly broken down into two distinct parts, the Colleges and the University (which incorporates the Faculties).

Colleges

The University comprises 31 separate colleges. Of these, three admit solely women (Lucy Cavendish, New Hall and Newnham), four admit solely mature students (Hughes Hall, Lucy Cavendish, St Edmund's and Wolfson) and two admit solely graduates (Clare Hall and Darwin). All students that CUSU represents are members of colleges (the status of Institute of Continuing Education [ICE] students will be mentioned later on). The collegiate system's strong role in providing identity to students is often overlooked or misunderstood outside Cambridge. Students form close links and relationships within their colleges, and undergraduates in particular tend to identify themselves primarily with their college, ahead of their Faculty or subject. Each college is a separate legal entity providing direct services in addition to housing. Two of the most important are pastoral care (through the Tutorial system, College Nurses and Chaplains amongst others), and the organisation of teaching for individual students (through supervisions, especially in the early years of an undergraduate degree). As a result of this, the educational and social experience a student receives in Cambridge varies not just based on his or her subject but also on the college to which he or she is admitted. Both outside audits and internal reviews will naturally discover variety in student responses across colleges, and this unusual factor should be borne in mind in consideration of the learning and teaching experience of students at Cambridge.

There is a greater level of variation in the experiences of the collegiate system among graduate students. Some graduates develop a link to their college by undertaking supervisions for undergraduates in that college, or through integration in day-to-day and social activities. However, the interaction that many graduates have with their college is often more limited than that of an undergraduate, and consequentially it is common for a graduate student to feel a greater bond to their department or subject and identify themselves accordingly. The collegiate system offers its advantages: it promotes interaction between undergraduate and graduate students and, where this occurs, contributes greatly to the community atmosphere college life engenders.

Student representation within colleges is through college Junior Combination/Common Rooms (JCRs) [usually representing undergraduates] and Middle Common Rooms (MCRs) [usually representing graduates]. Some colleges have combined Student Unions (SUs), or refer to them by a different name. These bodies usually comprise of a committee of varying size (usually between 12 to 25 people), headed by a President. CUSU is “a federal body made up of every college Students’ Union (JCRs/MCRs/SUs)”⁵, and provides support and assistance to affiliated Common Rooms, as well as providing a central voice on student issues to the University. The Sabbatical Officers of CUSU usually have a background of prior involvement in CUSU or their JCRs/MCRs⁶.

University

The University’s primary interaction with most undergraduate students comes through the provision of centralised teaching at a Faculty or Department level. The Faculties/Departments provide lectures for students from all colleges and are also responsible for setting exams. On top of this, it is not uncommon for some Faculties⁷ to arrange supervisions for undergraduates in the later years of their degree, where material often becomes specialised. Some Faculties will organise seminars as one of the primary forms of teaching a particular course (predominantly in Arts subjects), or practical and lab based work (predominantly in Sciences).

For graduates, their Department or Faculty often has a greater impact upon their overall education (as outlined above), and the Department can take a social and pastoral role. A graduate student will often be more integrated within their Department due to their level of study. In addition, graduates in some Departments and Faculties undertake supervisions⁸ on behalf of the Faculty (such as in the Faculty of Economics).

Library Facilities

Facilities available to students should again be viewed in the context of the collegiate system. Often, facilities available to a student at one college may differ to one at another college, though the core provision is the same.

University

The University Library (UL) is available to all students (though 1st and 2nd year undergraduates only have reading rights) and is one of the country’s six legal deposit libraries. As such, it is a tremendous resource and privilege for Cambridge students.

In addition, the University has moved towards the coordination of electronic resources. The compilation of electronic resources through the

⁵ Structure of CUSU: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/union/structure/>

⁶ In 2007-8, the CUSU Sabbatical Team of 6 people comprised of 3 former JCR Presidents, a former part-time CUSU Executive Officer, a former JCR Welfare Officer and someone with previous involvement with the CUSU Women’s Union.

⁷ The use of Faculty/Department is interchangeable as appropriate.

⁸ The definition of a supervision can be found in the “Supervisions” section on page 8.

ejournals@Cambridge and ebooks@Cambridge projects amongst others⁹ show a desire for more coordinated provision across the University, as well as recognition of the benefits of such a resource to students. Some concerns have been raised about the funding of journals within Cambridge, with some graduates being forced to ask friends at other UK HEIs to obtain articles on their behalf. While this is predominantly a problem faced by graduates requiring very specific journals, it remains a concern: as a world-leading institution, Cambridge cannot afford to under-fund journal subscriptions, lest graduates choose to study elsewhere due to the limited availability of resources necessary to their studies.

Each Department/Faculty has a library which predominantly stocks more specialist texts that are encountered in the undergraduate course and for MPhil students. There is a degree of variability in the provision of computer facilities across Faculties. As a result of a survey undertaken in 2005, which highlighted a great disparity in photocopying charges¹⁰, CUSU adopted policy to campaign on a number of library issues: standardisation of library charges across the university, standardisation of photocopying charges across the university, increased funding for libraries to allow them to lengthen their opening hours¹¹.

Overall, there is a wealth of resources available to students. This, coupled with the online library catalogues¹², allows the acquisition of necessary texts to be relatively easy. Where texts are unavailable, libraries often make an effort to purchase books, and some libraries actively encourage recommendations. However, it has been noted that it is not unusual for a book to be named on a reading list when there are only a few copies available across the University¹³. It is important that lecturers and supervisors are aware of the availability of books and where necessary inform relevant libraries of the need for further copies. Further, borrowing arrangements, which differ significantly across Faculties and Departmental libraries, are sometimes less than desirable. While some Faculties have well developed policies where more popular (or core) books are in a "Reserve" collection with limited/shorter length borrowing rights, as well as "Open Book" collections which are available on a standard loan, some libraries' loan policies are not so "user-friendly", causing excess difficulties in undertaking studies. This has on occasions led to the perception that libraries are implementing these policies in part due to resource shortages, and indeed using library fines (which are equally variable, and notable in the History Faculty, which has very high fines considering its extremely "stringent" borrowing conditions) as a means of covering this shortfall.

⁹ Further details can be found at: <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/>. Other resources include subscriptions to external academic resources (e.g. OED and DNB).

¹⁰ Library Photocopying Charges in Cambridge University Libraries:
<http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/campaigns/education/libraries/photocopying.pdf>

¹¹ CUSU Current Policy, p.17: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/union/policy/CUSUPolicyJune07.pdf>

¹² Newton Library Catalogue: <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/newton/>

¹³ Response from the Churchill JCR Academic Affairs Officer from his termly meeting with Subject Reps within his college.

Colleges

The provision within colleges differs greatly in both quantity and quality. Primarily, college libraries stock materials that are used in the early years of an undergraduate course, as well as limited texts for later years of courses/for graduates. In many cases, college libraries are solely for the use of members of those colleges, leading to a disparity in access to texts among students on the same course. College libraries will usually offer reading rooms, quiet working areas and computer facilities. As noted in the 2002 SWS, the provision of Ethernet connection within college rooms is now widespread, though charges for accessing the University network vary from college to college.

Teaching Methods

Aspects of the Cambridge Undergraduate teaching system are some of the University's greatest assets. There are three major branches to Cambridge instruction: lectures, supervisions, and practicals.

Lectures

Typically 50 minutes long, the lecture is designed, in principle, to provide the student the core content of the subject they are studying and the knowledge base for a specific paper. The number of lectures varies depending on the subject and paper, and there is no set formula to determine how many lectures take place. Often with more specialised papers, the field of the UTOs and lecturers' specialisation largely determine the content. The Cambridge Tripos system allows undergraduates to often study topics at the frontiers of their subject, benefiting from the members of the Faculty being world-leaders in the subject. The content of papers is predominantly determined by those who lecture it (within certain parameters), and there is the flexibility to allow this to occur.

The purpose of lectures varies slightly depending on the subject. In broad terms, sciences use lectures to impart factual core content across to students, and as such it is of greater importance to attend. Arts subjects can often differ, where lectures are a chance for the lecturer to speak on a particular topic that interests them, and here there is less of an aim to impart factual knowledge to the student, but to offer opinions and discuss something relevant to the course. As such, attendance at an arts lecture is often less critical than at a sciences lecture.

The quality of lecturers is a concern repeatedly raised in consultation prior to the formation of this document. The poor quality of spoken English of some overseas lecturers was identified as an issue that sometimes caused problems. The availability of courses from the Language Centre should be actively promoted where appropriate by Faculties as part of their development of those lecturing

Saturday lectures still occur in the Natural Sciences, Medical & Veterinary Sciences and Maths Triposes. While the Faculties may argue their need due to timetabling constraints, Saturday lectures are often poorly attended in

comparison to lectures on the same topics held during the week, and the cause of consistent complaint by students in various feedback mechanisms. As some students are unable to attend Saturday lectures due to religious reasons, there should be a requirement for lecturers to provide quality handouts and/or online notes so that these students are not unfairly disadvantaged. On the whole, the sciences are better at doing this, though the topic of online notes is discussed in greater detail in a later section of this document.

Supervisions

The supervision provision is perhaps the most renowned aspect of the Cambridge undergraduate system, something that is almost unique to this HEI. Supervisions comprise of very small teaching groups (typically between 1 to 3 students and the supervisor¹⁴) where students have the opportunity to discuss topics arising from the lectures/course and their work with their supervisor (an academic who can range from a PhD student to a Nobel Prize winning Professor). Often, students will be set certain questions or short essays to be undertaken in advance of the supervision, which will then be used as the focus point of the discussion. In theory, it is usual that this will in turn lead to a much wider-ranging debate, stimulating discussion on a variety of topics. The supervision also provides students with ample opportunities to raise issues they struggle to understand or simply wish to discuss further, though this is not always the case. The teaching environment occurs in small groups, providing students very focussed teaching with someone highly knowledgeable in that field. Undergraduates will therefore almost unanimously agree that supervisions are the most productive way to develop knowledge and the best way for them to fully understand the material they study. While supervisions are a valuable asset in the Cambridge system, and one that should continue to be funded as a matter of very high importance, it is fair to say that the supervision system is far from perfect. A large volume of the Individual Student Support provided by CUSU involves some element of issue with the supervision system, and numerous comments were received in the focus groups regarding supervisions and supervisors.

The relationship of students with their supervisors is vital, at both undergraduate and graduate level. At graduate level, the main cause of problem arises where the supervisor and the supervisee suffer some form of strain on their relationship. Due to the specialist nature of the topic that the student may be studying, if the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee breaks down entirely, a situation may arise where there is no-one else within the University to provide adequate supervision, leaving the supervisee unable to complete their studies. This is a situation which is hard for the University (or any university) to resolve, but a suitable Student Complaints Procedure and policies regarding supervisor/supervisee relationships need to be in place. The University has worked towards developing these, but their exact workings have often encountered difficulties; the University must consider whether the procedures which currently exist

¹⁴ The size of a supervision has increased in terms of students per teacher over the last 20 years (or at the very best is perceived to have done).

provide adequate support for problems when practically implemented, as examples have called the effectiveness of the procedure into question. For example, there is no provision over ownership of work where a relationship between a supervisor and student breaks down due to personal reasons, which can often lead to potential litigation especially if the work is then published. A second problem develops when the supervisor of a graduate student is more concerned about the work overall, above the students' individual studies, leading to unrealistic timeframes for completing the necessary work to achieve their qualification, and a sacrifice of the students' welfare in order to further the overall progress of the project. These cases highlight the need for effective alternate lines of contact within the Department. However, where these alternative points of contacts do exist, they have often proved to be less than effective due to the close-knit and often personal friendships between colleagues within a Department. The second supervisor system is subject to this flaw, which strengthens the need for a strong role of colleges and Graduate Tutors. While CUSU acknowledges that the close-knit nature of Departments should indeed be expected, it should be expected that a Department is open enough for students to utilise its alternative routes if necessary, without fear of possible "retribution" later. It is vital that effective and expedient processes are clearly and accessibly in place, should other channels fail.

There are a number of concerns arising from the undergraduate supervision system. As it currently stands, supervisor training is not mandatory. CUSU has current policy on lobbying for mandatory supervisory training and indeed elaborates its case for such training in the CUSU LTS Section 2.1.1¹⁵. Work is due to be undertaken to investigate how many supervisors undertake training, but, to date, this is yet to occur. CUSU believes that there is a strong case for all supervisors to have some form of training. Currently, there is a wide variation in the quality of supervision teaching (though this is not wholly attributable to lack of training). The teaching of an excellent supervisor has the potential to inspire a student, and furthermore improve the marks that student obtains in summative assessment. However, a poor supervisor who is unaware of the course content, has not experienced the Cambridge system or who is lacking in the skills to teach effectively can place a student at a disadvantage. Beyond this, CUSU sees responsibility falling on the Faculties. While general skills can be taught by the central University, the ever changing courses within the Tripos and the lack of experience of some supervisors with the Tripos structures require that Faculties should provide supervisors with *paper specific* training to ensure that they fully understand the requirements of the course, in terms of content as well as assessment.

There is also a need for the ongoing monitoring of standards of supervisors. Many colleges require students to fill in feedback on supervisors and their own progress at the end of each term. This is desirable in order to ensure that the standards of supervisors remain high and any development needs can be identified. This is also especially necessary as many colleges use individuals external to the University. While these individuals may be professionals in the

¹⁵ <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/academic/cusults/>: Section 2.1.1, p.15 and Mission Statement, p.5.

field they are ultimately supervising, the need for training and monitoring of their standards is especially necessary, in order to ensure that students are receiving the quality of education that they deserve. Further, it is necessary for Faculties/Departments to ensure they obtain adequate feedback when supervisions are provided by them, and if necessary gain feedback from colleges through Directors of Studies (DoS) as appropriate.

This section and the previous sections were written by Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer.

Examinations

Three-hour exams are the main form of undergraduate assessment in most subjects; this method brings criticism from both the Women's Union and students with disabilities. Claims suggesting that women underperform in exam situations when compared to coursework and dissertations have brought the Cambridge system under scrutiny for female underachievement. Problems also arise for some students with disabilities who are unable to sit and maintain concentration for the required length of time. Special considerations such as extra time or the use of a computer are, however, in place for these students and will be discussed later in this document.

The timing of exams is also an issue, as many subjects have all of their exams in the same week, causing extreme stress for students whose entire annual assessment takes place in a very short period. Although the timing is somewhat constrained by the short terms, it is CUSU's belief that exams within subjects should be more spread out, even if this means starting them earlier. Examples given in focus groups and from feedback include eight exams in five days for 2nd year Engineering, as well as a student doing Japanese and Chinese being examined in one language in the morning and another in the afternoon for three straight days. The timing of exams also relates to the issue of Saturday Examinations, which is mentioned below.

One of the main issues with exams at the moment is that in some subjects the Marking and Classing Guidelines are vague and unclear, and therefore students are not aware of what is expected of them. There are some examples of good practice, but again this varies from subject to subject. Some base or core definitions of what guidelines must contain would be advisable. Far too often, marking guidelines given for a class consist of a short sentence or two that fails to provide clear ideas as to what is construed as an answer in that class, making it hard for students to aim to tailor their answers appropriately. This is exacerbated by lack of instruction in supervisions about how to write in an exam and how to adapt knowledge to a good exam technique. Further, the lack of exam feedback means that this absence of clarity is not even improved for a student based on learning from previous years.

CUSU has campaigned for return of exam scripts, but the Education Committee declined this request on the grounds that it would not be helpful for students. The Education Committee did recommend the provision of model answers and a breakdown of marks given by question to be provided where

appropriate. CUSU welcomes this but has yet to see these recommendations taken fully on board by Faculties/Departments and urges them to do so. As mentioned above, the current system fails to give students clear guidance as to what makes a good essay. Students are then further disadvantaged through receiving contradictory information from supervisors and academics as to what is a good essay and what is expected in exams. This failing is an effect of the lack of information and training provided to supervisors on the topic of examinations. The fact that supervisors and students are both unsure as to what is expected, provided with vague marking guidelines, denied the return of scripts and often not given model or example answers means that students are being examined without knowing how to demonstrate the knowledge they have learnt when answering a question. This is obviously an unsatisfactory state of affairs, and the University must rectify the situation by appropriately addressing the issue of expected standards in a way that is clear and accessible to students. This issue was of great concern to students and was raised in focus groups as well as in independent feedback undertaken by college JCRs internally.

The way that exam results are currently provided to students is also a matter of ongoing concern. Currently, students' results are published on "class lists" that are posted outside Senate House (or in some cases are read from the balcony of Senate House before being thrown off the balcony to students below¹⁶). This means that students' peers will often be aware of their results before they are and also that their results are publicly known to all. CUSU currently has policy that advocating the right for a student to be the first to know his or her result and to keep it private if the student wishes¹⁷. Currently, it is only possible to have your name not appear on the class lists in extreme circumstances that require navigating a complicated and stressful procedure at a very inopportune time. CUSU believes that anonymous class lists (by candidate number) or students' right to opt out without having to show such exceptional circumstances would be a much improved system, that adequately takes into account the wishes of the student.

This section was written by Nina Walters, CUSU Undergraduate College Education Officer and Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer.

Saturday exams

Saturday examinations pose a more serious problem than Saturday lectures. While many students will feel used to the six days a week structure, Saturday exams cut down preparation time for following exams, which can be an issue with the often cramped and compressed timetabling of exams. But the main concern is for those students who are unable to undertake exams on Saturdays due to religious reasons. Lectures can make use of paper or online handouts to ensure a student is not too-heavily disadvantaged; however, students unable to take Saturday examinations are forced to spend their last revision day incommunicado in an unfamiliar place to satisfy the University that they are not able to read or discuss the exam script in advance. While the

¹⁶ A picture of this can be found on Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Mathmo_results.jpg

¹⁷ CUSU Current Policy, p.21: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/union/policy/CUSUPolicyJune07.pdf>

reasoning behind such a move can be understood the disruption of removing someone from their learning environment and holding them incommunicado for 24 hours is a severe one. Considering that a student's style of revision may be extremely personal and that the Cambridge system is based heavily on the three-hour examinations, forcing candidates to endure this disruption due to their religious beliefs may be placing them at a grave disadvantage¹⁸. Beyond this, the resource cost of such a system (in terms of both setting a separate exam time and providing suitable accommodation) is high. By moving the start of the exam period earlier, such problems could be avoided, leaving candidates on a level footing and ensuring that they have a two-day break at weekends, which is beneficial for both their health and revision. While this would equally have resource implications, it would not require more exam days to be scheduled: they would just be set over a longer period. An earlier start may prove to be cheaper in terms of venue and invigilator costs, as it would not require weekend working/hire. The idea would overcome some special arrangements issues, the resource implications of such arrangements, and the placing of certain students at a disadvantage. CUSU would strongly urge the University to consider these arguments and to seriously consider revising the exam schedule.

This section was written by Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer.

Declared to Deserve Honours (DDH)

One feature of Cambridge exams that is deserving of note is 'Declared to Deserve Honours' (DDH). This is designed for students who are unable to sit their exams or students who achieve a lower grade than predicted, to enable them to continue into the next year without issue (or in the case of finalists, graduate with an honours degree). CUSU understands that, because the Cambridge system does not allow for re-sits (with the exception of Medicine and Veterinary Science), it is necessary to have a system that allows students to progress onto the next year without having taken, or having significantly underperformed in, their one-chance at exams. However, CUSU feels there are a number of problems with the DDH system¹⁹. One of CUSU's major criticisms with DDH is that it is simply not understood or recognised by people both internal and external to the university, and is as such simply unacceptable as a system. This lack of understanding has been encountered particularly among employers, resulting in problems applying for and being accepted in certain jobs. Further, to transfer between subjects is often reliant upon the student achieving certain grades; it has been known for DDH to complicate this issue. Additional problems are encountered where other universities fail to recognise or understand the award of DDH, as it is somewhat unique to Cambridge, thus impacting on the prospects of students moving on to further studies at other HEIs. There is also an example of a student who was awarded DDH against their wishes. This student was then unable to challenge their mark on their exam (which was a fail) as they had been awarded DDH. They were deeply unhappy with the award of DDH due to its implications on their future prospects and because they felt it labelled

¹⁸ CUSU Current Policy, p.20: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/union/policy/CUSUPolicyJune07.pdf>

¹⁹ CUSU Current Policy, p.15: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/union/policy/CUSUPolicyJune07.pdf>

them as having not obtained their qualification legitimately. It took them an extended period of time involving the Student Complaints Procedure to get the University to rescind the award of DDH in order that they could challenge their exam results. It is also the case that awarding DDH does not necessarily correspond to whether the candidate is predicted to have achieved an honours degree. While DDH is an unclassified honours degree (anything between a 1st and a 3rd), the Applications Committee will usually require that the student was performing to a standard of a 2.i/2.ii in supervisions and other work before awarding DDH. Therefore, it is feasible that a candidate predicted to obtain a 3rd or middle/low 2.ii (and who, if they had taken the exam, would likely achieve this), will not be awarded DDH by the Applications Committee as the evidence is not strong enough. This potentially leaves a student who has undertaken 3 years work and who would be likely to graduate with honours, in a position where they are unable to graduate with an honours degree, nor retake or show their true potential and ability.

CUSU would like to see two changes made to the DDH system. Firstly, the introduction of a re-sit system should be thoroughly examined so that those who suffer acute problems during the exam period and recover quickly can take the exams they missed and graduate with a classed degree. Secondly, the "note" system (i.e. supervisors or Directors of Studies providing a note with the students' references explaining DDH and the students' specific issues) should be formalised, especially for those with chronic problems, so that those graduating with a DDH degree can have an official predicted class. While CUSU acknowledges the great resource implications of such a system, and further notes that the introduction of such a system could only feasibly occur as part of a much wider ranging review of the examinations system, CUSU believes that a reform of this system is much needed and long overdue. The resource intensity of the current system of applying to the Applications Committee for special consideration in exams is also high, and there has yet to be a comparative review with any other system.

This section was written by Andrea Walko, CUSU Welfare & Graduates Officer and Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer.

Plagiarism

The University's current strategy on dealing with plagiarism in both a pedagogic and a punitive sense is highly limited. Concerns raised by the CUSU Academic Affairs Officer 2006-7 in March 2007 led to a "Plagiarism Awareness Day". The lack of a coordinated and developed approach across the University in what has always been a matter of serious concern, but one that is becoming more and more publicised, is worrying²⁰. The Board of Graduate Studies' policy is relatively well developed but the (undergraduate) Board of Examinations less so. The formation of a Plagiarism Working Party (now the Plagiarism Steering Group) was a positive step by the University in both acknowledging the issues and attempting to alleviate them. Progress has, however, ground to a near halt, in part due to the lack of formal

²⁰ The current extent of the University's Plagiarism efforts and policies being a Proctorial Notice (http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/exams/plagiarism/students/proctorial_notice.pdf) which provides little substance of use and the University's plagiarism website (<http://www.cam.ac.uk/plagiarism>).

ownership by the University (it is jointly owned by the Board of Graduate Studies, the Board of Examinations and CUSU): momentum and resources invested have been sadly lacking. While this appears to be slowly changing, the lack of any substantive coherent policies, both in punitive terms (which to date have been unchartered and as a result have been hard to quantify) and in pro-active pedagogic efforts regarding plagiarism (compared to the information provided both electronically and physically by other universities, Cambridge is lagging way behind) has been highly disappointing. In addition, the University subscribes to Turnitin (electronic Plagiarism Detection Equipment) with many Faculties and Departments clamouring to use it²¹. There are, however, no policies to deal with it, nor suitable policies to address some of the legal issues surrounding its use. This, coupled with the necessity to provide better teaching about plagiarism, means that the University is potentially swimming in deep and dangerous waters. CUSU believes that the University must, as a matter of urgency, formulate its policies on dealing with plagiarism, but more importantly improve the resources available and increase the teaching out of plagiarism. The focus should be on prevention, rather than punishment. Further, CUSU has maintained the need for watertight, well publicised and easily accessible policies before the introduction of the full use of Turnitin.²² While CUSU acknowledges the potential for Turnitin, the massive implications and ramifications of its use are scarcely understood by the vast majority of members of the University. To allow its use without clear guidance could lead to pitfalls that will severely damage the University internally and possibly externally.

Online Lecture Notes/Information/e-Learning

The provision of online learning resources and lecture notes is somewhat varied from faculty to faculty. On the whole, the sciences are better than the arts subjects at providing online lecture notes, and CUSU has promoted and lobbied for the availability online of notes where appropriate²³. The position is well summarised in Section 1.3.1 of the CUSU LTS. The benefits of online lecture notes are currently not being exploited by all faculties. Some faculties have taken innovative and pioneering approaches to improving online resources, and the work of the Learning Landscape Project (LLP) will hopefully promote effective and useful ways of undertaking online learning. However, there is currently an apparent resistance from some faculties to embrace the availabilities of these new technologies and resources in which the University is investing (such as CamTools), despite the potential benefits. Furthermore, it is often these faculties where there is the least amount of available information online. Students will rarely refer to course information unless they need to do so, and ever increasingly students will not keep hard copies of such information. With the ease of electronic information to locate precise information, students will primarily choose to use the University intranet to find what they are looking for. As a result, faculties must put relevant information, such as marking and classing guidelines, course information, library opening hours etc. on their intranet or publicly available

²¹ Examples include the Faculty of Economics (General Board Education Committee, 28 Nov 07), but a number of other Faculties have expressed a clear interest.

²² CUSU Current Policy, p.26: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/union/policy/CUSUPolicyJune07.pdf>

²³ <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/academic/cusults/>: Section 1.3.1, p.12-3

sites, as to not do so is to the detriment of those students who expect to be able to find it there (and who in many faculties are able to do so).

The previous 2 sections were written by Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer.

Students with Disabilities

The attitude towards the learning and teaching provisions for students with disabilities within the university is positive. Yet the picture surrounding their academic position within the university is not perfect. There are two major recurring issues surrounding students with disabilities: the first, disclosure and the second, the actual response to disabled students once the university has recognised their disability. These problems are intrinsically linked to poor communication. The Disability Resource Centre provides excellent services for the individual students, but unfortunately does not sell itself properly. There should be greater advertising of the positive and important work they do to support Student with Disabilities, although with their limited resources it is questionable if increased awareness of the service would limit the amount of good work they are able to do.

Prospective students and Disclosure

Disclosure is a tricky issue. In all university forums relating to disability, the concerned bodies aim to encourage early disclosure. However, when analysing the actually application process this does not seem to be put into practice. As the 2002 Student Written Submission highlighted, there are problems with the 'Cambridge Application Form' (CAF). For example, there is only one reference to disability ("Have you indicated that you have a disability/specific learning difficulty on your UCAS application? Y/N" *P.2 CAF*²⁴). This question is not conducive to disclosing, as it simply refers to whether a student has already disclosed on their UCAS form. Given that the Cambridge application process requires an interview, which has implications for students who do not disclose on a practical level, it would be preferable to have a more inviting section on disability and disclosure. CUSU recognises however that plans to abandon the CAF and integrate a Cambridge-specific section on the UCAS form may improve the accessibility for prospective students with Disabilities.

One of the few places that disability is mentioned is in relation to the Special Access Scheme (CSAS). Even in the case of the CSAS, however, disclosure is not encouraged, simply mentioned ("An applicant will be eligible for consideration under the CSAS if the following circumstances apply: [...] The applicant's education has been significantly disrupted or disadvantaged through [...] disability..." *p.1 CSAS Information for Teachers*²⁵). There is also a noticeable omission of what support students with disabilities will get if they do disclose in the leaflet, "Cambridge Interviews: The facts." The application process for students with disabilities is not all bleak: the Cambridge Undergraduate Admissions website is fairly comprehensive in detail about

²⁴ <http://www.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/apply/forms/undergraduate.pdf>

²⁵ <http://www.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/apply/forms/csas.pdf>

what help and support Students with Disabilities will find once they get here, which in itself is encouraging students to disclose.

The graduate admission process is different, and the form allows for more specificity in terms of student needs. On a practical note, the online form allows greater access for students with disabilities. The documents supporting the application are also useful. The graduate applications website has a section dedicated to 'Applicants with disabilities', which links to information about disclosing and the Disability Resource Centre (DRC).

Reasonable Adjustments

Once a student has disclosed, the various university constituents do make, not only reasonable, but sometimes above baseline, adjustments to accommodate those students. For example, provisions made for learning and teaching such as note-takers, handouts in advance, hearing loops in lectures, holding supervisions in accessible rooms etc. However, the one adjustment that is consistently not made is in terms of recording lectures. The vast majority of lecturers refuse to allow their lectures to be recorded, which is understandable due to legal issues, but creates a problem for students who have a learning difficulty. Changing this system would provide essential support, not only for students with disabilities, but benefit all students. The problem is that certain lecturers and supervisors do not understand the concept of 'reasonable adjustments', despite the fact that the DRC do produce booklets with information on this. The university constituents tend to respond to individuals rather than anticipating needs. The only exception to this is in public buildings, where physical access as a whole is improving, despite the many listed buildings the university holds.

Special Exam Conditions

There is an effective system in place to support students who have requirements with examinations, which is especially relevant to students with disabilities. A whole host of support mechanisms can be put into place, not only extra time in exams, but also bringing in food and drink, having supervised rests, taking exams in college/an alternative place. The university has now arranged that students with simple special conditions, such as extra time, take their exams together in the University Centre where possible. This pooling of resources is a positive measure.

The deadline for arranging these conditions is the 31st January, although the DRC are fairly good at accepting late applications, especially if the reason is a late diagnosis. The main problem is communicating this deadline to people who need it. CUSU is doing everything it can to highlight this: through the website, and the Individual Student Support Service.

Specific Learning Difficulties

The fact that the DRC employs a full-time Disability Advisor for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) shows the extent of need in Cambridge. The adviser does an excellent job but both s/he and the students s/he works with would benefit from earlier disclosure. As aforementioned, this is an issue which CUSU has worked with senior members of the university to try and

tackle, but which we also feel the University could do more about. Encouraging students to disclose as early as possible would allow for the DRC to deal with problems in a more effective way. Whilst CUSU recognises this is hard, all areas of the admissions process must be geared towards creating an environment where disclosure is not seen as an obstacle but rather a positive by prospective students. This is especially relevant for students with SpLDs given the slightly hidden nature of their disability. By showing prospective and current students the benefits of early disclosure i.e. by highlighting that this is in order to put students at the same level as those without a disability, both students and the DRC would be in a better position.

The DRC produces a booklet for students with SpLDs called 'Information for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties'²⁶. It is very helpful for finding out about the different types of SpLDs, as well as giving a summary of how the University can help support these students. It is well presented and clear, and the only criticism of it could be that it is not made more widespread. For example, it may be useful to change the title and call it Information about SpLDs and then distribute it to Tutors, DoSs and faculties in order for them to better understand the system. There is no point in having an effective system in place if the people students turn to for help do not know about it. Because the DRC receive referrals, in particular for 'hidden disabilities' such as SpLDs, it is important to get as much information out to those who do the referrals as possible. In other words, as many other issues surrounding Students with Disabilities, the DRC needs to sell itself better.

This section was written by Andrea Walko, CUSU Welfare & Graduates Officer.

Student Feedback

The issue of student feedback is one that has been the subject of some debate over the previous 6 months²⁷. Currently, Cambridge is the only institution in the country not to reach the threshold for publishing of National Student Survey (NSS) results, in the main due to an active campaign against the survey by CUSU²⁸. CUSU has been working with the University in an effort to try to reach a compromise between the University's wish for inclusion and CUSU's inherent objections to the survey. The fact that the survey failed to account for the collegiate nature of the University was one of these objections, an issue which CUSU raised with the National Union of Students (NUS) and asked them to lobby for. The University itself raised the issue with the NSS Steering Group and, through the Pro Vice Chancellor (Education), announced to the General Board in July 2007 that it had been agreed that collegiate questions could be included on the survey. However, due to inaction on the part of the University and the NSS in following this up, despite positive signs and offers of cooperation and assistance from CUSU, these questions have failed to materialise on this year's survey. Indeed, CUSU was forced to raise the issue of collegiate questions again and form an unofficial group (consisting of CUSU and certain senior members of the University) to

²⁶ <http://www.cam.ac.uk/cambuniv/disability/students/>

²⁷ <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/academic/cusults/>: Section 1.5, p.16-7

²⁸ The press release for 2006/7: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/academic/qaa/nss-press-release.pdf>

write some potential questions itself in late November 2007. This lack of action and the fact that CUSU has been taking the initiative in order to look to change its existing position (one that the University disagrees with, but which CUSU could feasibly maintain if the status quo prevailed) seems to be somewhat perverse. The issue of student feedback has featured heavily in this discussion. CUSU has over the last year pushed strongly for the University to undertake a Cambridge Specific Survey, to cover the vast gaps of the NSS in order to reflect the collegiate experience. However, this was rejected by the General Board's Education Committee at the start of October. In its rejection, and in prior discussions, the University pointed to the vast layers of feedback already undertaken at both college and faculty level.

While the layers of feedback that are already in place are encouraging and welcomed, there is often a perception that nothing is done with this feedback. This varies from department to department, college to college and indeed even within those bodies across year groups, but general consensus from focus groups was that students felt they were often giving feedback purely for the sake of giving feedback, and that tangible results were not seen from this process. This is indeed worrying, as it in turn leads to a decline in the quality and quantity of feedback provided. While there are examples of good practice in acting on feedback²⁹, far too often feedback is either not acted upon, or it appears that it is not acted upon. Faculties and colleges must work harder to close the loop, ensuring that they inform students of what the feedback says and what they have done to act upon and rectify and issues brought up, as well as, where necessary, promote the good practices and reward elements that are identified as being good³⁰.

The lack of University-wide survey data is an issue which means that there are potentially some issues that are not readily identified by current feedback mechanisms as they do not currently fit into either the feedback obtained by colleges or by faculties. For example, there is no mention of communication between colleges and faculties as they are separate entities, but to the student they are both an integral part of their studies. CUSU is looking to incorporate some of the institution-wide questions it wished to ask in a Cambridge specific survey into other questionnaires, but whether this will happen, and its success, remains to be seen. While Oxford has an exit survey (OSCEQ)³¹, Cambridge appears to be one of the few (if not only) universities that doesn't have any institution-wide survey. With the changes in the HE sector, the fact that students now pay fees, and the high demands of a Cambridge degree, the inability to gauge the answers on questions such as those asked in OSCEQ is worrying (although the NSS may provide some data on this, it will only answer the questions asked). Furthermore, the timing of OSCEQ is much more favourable in comparison to the NSS, allowing students to fully reflect on their time at university, whilst not working up to their finals.

²⁹ For example, Sidney Sussex College will sit down and discuss the feedback with the student, and where action is taken the student is informed.

³⁰ "Closing the Loop" was identified by the University as being a helpful way of engaging students in their LTS Newsletter 9: <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/lts/news/ltsn9.pdf>

³¹ <http://ceq.oucs.ox.ac.uk/>

Due to the localised nature of feedback, the University relies on cobbling together various parts of evidence to try to answer broader questions regarding the undergraduate educational experience. However, there is no central collection of this data, thus the University is unable to gauge the overall picture. While it may have answers through a myriad of separate questions which it could piece together to provide an answer to some of these institution-wide questions, the data is not centrally available or collected and, as a result, this does not occur. This has been another area on which CUSU has been dissatisfied and another justification for a Cambridge Specific Survey. Due to the very limited resources of the Students' Union, and the lack of any block grant from the University (it is funded by contributions from affiliated common rooms; the University provides it with a building), CUSU is unable to run surveys of its own accord, making it somewhat different to a number of comparable Student Unions who have their own questionnaires, usually funded by the University. This faces CUSU with a larger problem: due to the lack of central collation of current feedback, CUSU currently is forced to rely on anecdotal evidence, casework and the fact that it is "in touch" with the student population through CUSU Council and the various networks run by CUSU Officers in order to gauge feeling on certain issues. This is not a healthy and sustainable way for a Union with so few resources to prioritise its campaign efforts. CUSU welcomes the indications given by both the University and Colleges to try to alleviate this problem, but is currently sceptical as to how effective this will be, though CUSU hopes that in time we will reach a situation where useful data will be obtained for all parties.

Feedback to students regarding their work is covered in both Examinations section for exam feedback and in Supervisions section for supervision feedback.

PDPs

There has been very poor uptake of the use of PDPs that the University has developed. PDPs have been very poorly advertised and communicated to students, and as such uptake has started from a very low base of those who are aware of PDPs. PDPs have the potential to provide a context to tutor and supervisor feedback in terms of the student's own perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, improved uptake would allow the University to obtain centralised data on what students perceive to be their strengths and weaknesses and thus identify any failings in the current system. However, as it currently stands, the University relies on trying to piece together localised feedback to identify issues and as a result often fails to fully realise important issues (such as exam skills, study skills) that could feasibly be the responsibility of either Colleges or Faculties. On top of this, it then places a burden on CUSU to raise any issues that it discovers. However, as CUSU has found out, the lack of data it then has to support any representations it makes means that many suggestions either stall or are rejected in committees. The University needs to address this issue, and also consider whether it should pay more credence to issues raised by CUSU even without supporting data, especially if it is unwilling to provide the resources for CUSU to obtain this data.

Student Representation

Student representation within the University could be seen as vast by many outsiders. If the full extent of college JCRs and MCRs, the Graduate Union, student Faculty Board Members, CUSU Executive Officers and Autonomous Campaign Officers are counted, Cambridge can often be seen as having one of the most thriving student political arenas. However, the issue of student members on committees is a different matter. This report will refer to University representation only, in part due to the differing natures of representation within colleges and also due to the limited influence that the Audit has over colleges³².

Currently, there is student representation on nearly all the relevant committees where students can provide valuable input. With respect to educational matters, students sit on Faculty Boards as full members (three on each board, apart from Veterinary Medicine where it is two), as well as often further student representation on consultative committees or teaching committees below the Faculty Board. At the top end, there is student representation on the General Board's Education Committee in the form of the CUSU Academic Affairs Officer, who sits *ex-officio*. There is also one elected undergraduate member and one elected graduate member sitting on General Board, the University's highest committee with regards to educational matters. However, at this present point in time, there is no student representation on the intermediary level between the General Board and the Faculty. The Councils of Schools, the level below the General Board, comprises of a number of Faculties (varying dependent on the School). Currently, there are no student members on the Schools (apart from Medicine where the Faculty Board is also the Council of the School). This is something that is becoming of greater importance as the Schools take on an ever more important role in both allocation of resources and planning. Whereas before, the Schools had a more limited function, they are now increasingly involved in decisions which in turn can greatly impact on students at a Faculty level. As a result, it is imperative that the University allows some full student membership of the Schools, in order to ensure effective representation of student views at the level where their input matters. The changing of University Ordinances to allow this to occur has been backed by the Standing Advisory Committee on Student Matters (SACSM), and it is vital that the University ensures that this necessary adjustment takes place, in order to correct what is now a glaring anomaly in student representation.

On a University level, there is relevant student representation on nearly all committees into which student input can be useful or where there are potential educational issues or implications. The current exception however is the Bursars' Committee. The Bursars' Committee is extremely powerful due to its ability to control financial and strategic resources for projects that contain any need for college funding. Despite several campaigns by CUSU to obtain representation on this committee, it has yet to be granted and indeed has been resisted. The ability of such a committee to block important educational

³² A diagram attempting to illustrate the scope of student representation in the University is attached as Appendix 1.

issues without any input from students is a worrying situation and should be rectified as soon as is practically possible.

While there is a great deal of student representation across the University, the effectiveness of the representation is, in some cases, questionable. In previous years, CUSU has struggled to obtain the names of all the student members on Faculty Boards. As a result, it has been unable to effectively communicate with them, which leaves it unable to support and train them fully. This year, this was rectified through the joint efforts of CUSU Officers and members of the University's Education Section, and it is hoped that this will continue for the foreseeable future. Beyond this, the training and support provided to student members varies across Faculties. There is a minimum expectation of what each faculty should provide (the Chair or Secretary sitting down with the student members and explaining how the Faculty Board works and the procedures, as well as acting as a port of call for questions at a later date if necessary), and CUSU will be looking to reinforce it this year. However, focus groups have shown examples of good practice, where Faculty Boards have gone further to help promote the role. Examples include the provision to talk to year groups at the start of a lecture at the beginning of the year to introduce themselves, the ability to send e-mails to the whole cohort studying in that faculty³³, the set up of generic e-mail addresses so that student members are easily contactable even if the students are unsure as to who they are³⁴, and even a website for them³⁵. These examples show how the students can be aided in their effectiveness as representatives, but also allow the role to be more publicised. Many students are unaware that the position of student members on Faculty Boards even exists, never mind what their role is! Traditionally, turnout for these elections has been extremely low (the best example being a graduate election for the former Faculty of Oriental Studies in which neither candidate gained a single vote), and positions have been hard to fill. The need to promote these roles is vital if Faculties wish for their student representation to be more than just a token one.

Beyond this, the ability that student members have to speak on issues and their comfort in doing so is varied, and in some cases is unacceptably poor. There is an issue of the ability of students to contribute to the discussions of long-standing projects that may have appeared before the committee on a number of occasions before. It is vital that students are made fully aware of previous discussions, viewpoints and opinions expressed, especially of their predecessors, in order to be able to contribute to the discussion. It is often the case that student members feel unable to contribute and ask questions as they are aware that the other members of the committee have been present for the previous discussions and as a result are likely to be aware of the answer to their question already. The issue of Reserved Business is raised following this section, but beyond this the atmosphere of some committees is occasionally hostile to the views of student members, which can leave them

³³ Examples given by Music Faculty student members during the Focus Group session.

³⁴ Faculties such as MML do this, but it has been suggested in the LTS Newsletter 9 from April 2007: <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/education/lts/news/ltsn9.pdf>

³⁵ The following is an example from Maths. While this may in turn reflect the keenness of the student members, it demonstrates what potentially can be done and what faculties should consider helping and supporting students to do: <http://www.damtp.cam.ac.uk/user/studrep/>

severely discouraged to try and effectively undertake their role or even to add relevant input where necessary. It is vital that committees are never such that student members are left in a position where they feel unable to speak, but it is unfortunately the case that this arises. The University needs to ensure that those on committees are fully aware of the fact that students are full members, and are equally entitled to take a view that may be in disagreement to their own. Furthermore, it would be hoped that committee etiquette would be something that all members are expected to observe, and indeed the outlining of such an etiquette (as occurs at General Board through its Standing Orders) may be desirable, subject to suitable student consultation on the issue.

The previous 3 sections were written by Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer.

Reserved Business

There is an extremely variable use of Reserved Business between Faculties in their meetings. Its intention is to allow the Faculty to discuss issues such as recruitment and disciplinary procedures without the student representatives being present. The use of Reserved Business has been something that in the past has been implemented to take decisions on important matters without student representatives in the room. However, CUSU welcomed the clarifying of the use of Reserved Business from the University's Education Section, and would urge it to continue to monitor what business is taken as reserved and to take action where necessary. Whilst CUSU disagrees of the use of Reserved Business, CUSU would promote the inclusion (as good practice) of a brief note to student members on agendas noting business to be covered, so that while the substantive of it may fall with the University statutes on Reserved Business, a confidence that the student is not being kept in the dark on a decision of some importance to them can be maintained.

CUSU's only other concern arising out of Reserved Business is the liability of student members who sit on the University or College Governing Body. As it stands under current UK Law, there is the potential for student members to be liable for business for which they are not even allowed to be party to (the decisions taken in Reserved Business by that Body). CUSU would urge those Governing Bodies where this can be the case to suitably indemnify student members against any liability for decisions for which they are expressly forbidden to be party to, or for those Bodies to ensure that all business is taken as Unreserved.

This section was written by Nina Walters, CUSU Undergraduate College Education Officer and Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer.

Freshers' Induction Programmes and Study Skills

The vast changes to the pre-University qualifications system in the UK (predominantly A Levels) has meant that undergraduates starting at Cambridge now have a vastly differing set of learning skills to their counterparts 10 years ago. Yet the Part I Tripos' have barely changed. There have been limited measures undertaken to address some of the issues arising

from this. While some faculties offer pre-term induction programmes³⁶, they are not taken by all students from all colleges, to an extent exacerbating the differences in early weeks. On top of this, many science subjects are noticing that students are coming ill-equipped to handle the maths content of the course, and are thus struggling. The need to address this problem was noted by the Senior Tutors' Committee, and a Working Group has been set up with representation from faculties, colleges and CUSU to look into current provision to identify areas where skills' training is needed and to examine possible future provision. These skills range much beyond the traditional exam skills sessions which will be mentioned later on, and cover a wide range of core skills that undergraduates are currently missing, such as lecture note taking, essay writing, journal reading and time management. With some undergraduates currently not possessing these necessary skills, there is a burden on the University to provide them with the ability to acquire them in order to fulfil their potential. If this means that there is a need to revise the Tripos in Part I to allow for these courses to be built in, then this must be seriously considered.

Exam skills provision within the University is also patchy. Currently, CUSU undertakes a large proportion of the exam skills training available generally within the University, though has publicly declared its intention to phase this out over the next 2 years, pointing out that it is an abnormality nationally for the Students' Union to undertake this, and also a drain on the very limited resources CUSU has and should concentrate on support and representation. However, over the past year through College Academic Affairs Officers suggestions and through CUSU lobbying, many colleges have started to make provisions, and others have reviewed their existing provisions. The provision of exam skills sessions is vital; with the Cambridge system differing so greatly from the system people are used to prior to Cambridge. There is a responsibility on the faculties and colleges between them to fully inform and prepare their students for the examination process, so that their performance is a reflection of their knowledge and understanding, and not just their ability to fit into the format of the Cambridge exam system.

This section was written by Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer.

Graduates

The issues faced by graduate students appear to have changed little from when CUSU wrote its last SWS back in 2002. The focus group was shown the report as written then, and the consensus from those present was that the issues that were raised in 2002 were still ongoing in 2007. This seems to indicate either a worrying failure to respond to the issues, a slowness in doing so or a failure to visibly tackle and communicate any changes undertaken to students.

Academic and Pastoral Support

Whether a graduate student receives enough academic support varies massively between Faculties. Some faculties are good in providing a system

³⁶ Notably Classics and Engineering

whereby supervisors are in close contact with their supervisee, as well as creating a social atmosphere for graduates to interact within their department or faculty. Unfortunately, some push their students into isolation by failing to provide both academic support and feedback as well as social events important for graduate students. In general, those doing arts-based research or taught courses are those who feel less supported, presumably because of the difference between working in a team and focusing on one's own research.

Supervisions

When it works, the graduate supervision system is to be applauded. Graduate students may receive up to 4 hours of their supervisor's time a week, which clearly gives them stimulus and feedback on their work. However, as highlighted in the 2002 SWS, some students may only see their supervisor once a term. There can therefore be certain problems with a system which ultimately is as flexible as the supervisor wants it to be.

CUSU does a significant amount of casework for graduates for whom the supervisor system has failed them. One of the main problems is when a personality clash leaves a student with nobody to turn to, academically or pastorally. In a small community, such as a laboratory or a small department, for example, people may take sides and this can turn nasty, causing both academic and welfare problems. At PhD level another problem is that, if a personality or academic clash does occur, the student will often have nobody to supervise them if the relationship finishes. Often there will only be a limited amount of academics qualified to supervise on a particular topic, and in extreme cases, the student may have to give up their doctorate and move elsewhere.

Board of Graduate Studies

Although there is currently a Review of Graduate Education, which CUSU recognises as positive, criticism of the BoGS must still be made clear. Focus Groups have noted that they often take a very long time to deal with routine enquires and do not communicate effectively. The 2002 Student Written Submission called them "unapproachable" and "unprofessional", and there have been occasions where CUSU Executive Team's experience has been just that (although notably there have been occasions where this has not been the case). CUSU sabbaticals have needed to chase up cases of lost files, procedures taking so long that a student was forced to defer their entry and simple enquiries taking up to 10 emails and a similar amount of phone calls to get an answer. CUSU hopes that the Review of Graduate Education will address these issues by making it clearer where responsibility lies and allocating enough resources where they are needed.

Colleges

The issue regarding graduates paying the college fee is still alive. Often they do not see what they receive from it. Colleges need to sell their services better if they want to attract graduate students. Discussion shows that, although a significant proportion of graduate students feel an affinity to their college, the majority do not feel they belong to their college as much as an

undergraduate student might. Part of this is due to the fact that fewer graduates live in college accommodation, partly by choice, and therefore do not have as much day-to-day contact with the college. Some graduates feel that the pastoral care is too aimed undergraduates. For example, there is often simply one 'graduate tutor' for every student, whereas undergraduates have one of up to 15 tutors assigned to them. Although the numbers are smaller, this highlights that undergraduate models are simply being extended for graduates, but in many cases failing. Many graduates would prefer their college to provide affordable childcare or accommodation for example. Often the major source of contact is the MCR, the physical space and facilities they use but also the people and the structure which provides both social interaction and support. The Review of Graduate Education is looking into this matter, and it will be interesting to see the outcomes of this. The benefits of the collegiate system have been mentioned earlier, and CUSU believes them to be at the heart of the Cambridge experience. It is necessary, though, that colleges suitably serve the needs of all their students, and a review of how they are doing so and possible need for change must be welcomed.

MPhil Students

There are an ever-expanding number of MPhil Courses offered by the University, reflecting their popularity. As post-graduate education becomes more expensive, these shorter courses will become even more popular. As highlighted in the 2002 SWS, these students still need a relevant and useful programme of induction into both their colleges and department/faculty/subject as well as proper representation, especially due to the fact that they are often here for such a short period of time.

Admissions

One of the main criticisms from graduates in terms of Admissions is the lack of clarity. Students who have been undergraduates at the University find it much easier to find themselves a supervisor and apply because they know a bit more about the system (academics, colleges etc). Other comments about admission were that people could not follow the process, although CUSU hopes that once CAMSIS is running smoothly this will be improved. The timing is also not clear and confirmation often comes too late (i.e. July/August) so that graduates are both unsure of their position for a long time and then rushed into a decision.

The above section was written by Andrea Walko, CUSU Welfare & Graduates Officer and Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer, from the discussions of a focus group on graduate issues and the previous SWS section on Graduate Experience. The group composed of Leo Shidai Liu (Graduate Union President), Kam Mohaddes (CUSU Graduates Officer), James Thaventhiran (King's MCR President), Grey Baker (CUSU Secretary and MPhil Student), Jo Huddleston (Fitzwilliam MCR Vice-President), Mark Fletcher (CUSU President), Andrea Walko (CUSU Welfare and Graduates Officer) and Pete Coulthard (CUSU Academic Affairs Officer).

Institute of Continuing Education (ICE)

The students of the Institute of Continuing Education (or ICE) are currently not members of CUSU (barring those who are studying courses such as M.St. for which they are affiliated to a Cambridge college and therefore members of CUSU through that college). As a result, CUSU does not represent them on student issues. This was something that former CUSU Education Officer (2006-7), Jacob Head, looked into. However, the situation as it currently stands is too complex and would require too many resources on behalf of CUSU for it to be viable to explore the issue further. This does highlight however an ongoing problem that CUSU has found and that needs to be addressed urgently by the University, which is who exactly are students of the University. As it stands, CUSU doesn't represent these students as their status is not clearly defined, this equally extends to the Theological Colleges/Federation. The implications on CUSU of whether these students are members of the University are vast in terms of both the number of people CUSU represents, and also the prioritisation of resources in undertaking its work. The University must clarify the status of these students clearly, in order to clarify whether CUSU should indeed be representing them.

Communication with Students

An issue raised by many students and the cause of a number of cases that CUSU becomes involved in on a Faculty level is due to the lack of communication that occurs between the faculty and students. Beyond this, many issues that CUSU has encountered on educational matters has occurred where the University has failed to communicate to the student body what it is doing³⁷. There is a necessity for Faculties and the University to fully communicate with the student body on what is going on and on decisions which will impact on their education and student experience. The fact that this does not currently occur, and also that it is one of the major problems cited by students, is worrying. It is often the case that where faculties are doing things, students are unaware because it is not communicated to them. Furthermore, routine but important information that students should get as a matter of course is often not received (examples include Marking & Classing Guidelines, Lecture Cancellations, Lecture Rearrangements, potential alternative options on exam papers). Faculties need to ensure that this basic undertaking is performed as a matter of urgency.

It is also telling that a large number of the issues raised throughout this SWS relate back to the potential or actual lack of communication on the issue to students. This appears to be a major failing of the University, one that seems to stem from the highest echelons where effective communication on issues fails to occur adequately in order to get things done (such as on the NSS) and then prevails throughout the University in Faculties and Departments, as well as central University bodies. It is something that the University must address centrally, and not just at a localised level.

³⁷ For example, the issue with Portuguese last year arose from lack of initial student consultation, discussed further in the Small Subjects section.

The previous 2 sections were written by Pete Coulthard, CUSU Academic Affairs Officer.

Admissions

Transparency of the Applications Process

The University continues to struggle against common misperceptions of its applications process, often perpetuated by media portrayal of interviews and admissions. Despite this, the University (through the Cambridge Admissions Office, the colleges, faculties and the student body) continues to endeavour to break down the myths surrounding Cambridge admissions by producing and promoting detailed information and by providing applicants with preparation resources. The University, its colleges, faculties and CUSU continue to engage in a substantial amount of outreach work.

The University's admissions policy is easily accessible, both in terms of its position in published material and the University website and in its clarity of phrasing.

Interviews continue to be conducted with professionalism and care and, despite the level of hostility that the interview process often encounters in the public domain, interviews demonstrate the level of attention taken in the admission process. There are, however, minor areas where there is a lack of consistency in adherence to University policy among interviewers. The *Information for Admissions Interviewers for the Cambridge Colleges* specifies in 3.3 4 that:

The Admissions Forum has agreed that applicants should not be asked why they have chosen to apply to a particular College, as some will have submitted an Open application and therefore been allocated to rather than choosing a particular College. It is also difficult to see how such a question will elicit any worthwhile information about the applicant's academic ability or potential.

Despite this instruction, the question is consistently used by interviewers across the colleges. Whether the answer is given credence, it is important that, if the interview process is to be demystified, interviewers act in accordance with the guidance given out to prospective students. Whilst the decentralisation of interviews to the colleges undoubtedly reaps benefits, it is important that there is an active procedure to bring interviewers into line with University policy.

Publications and Recruitment Material

Cambridge University produces a wide range of recruitment material, including the annual University prospectuses, college prospectuses and fact sheets on interviews and bursaries. The University website, particularly the Undergraduate Applications pages, offers advice to prospective students preparing an application. The recent development of podcasts and interview videos is very welcome and should be built upon as a means of producing accurate and accessible information to schools and students. In addition, CUSU produces an Alternative Prospectus and offers a carefully-monitored

'Ask a Student' scheme, through which prospective students are encouraged to question a current undergraduate.

CUSU believes that the information published through the Undergraduate prospectus and other recruitment material is accurate. The outlines of courses and colleges are consistent with student experience, and published material does not generally engage in hyperbole, a benefit of the University's ability to rely upon its reputation as a centre of educational excellence.

This section was written by Charlotte Richer, CUSU Access Officer.

Women at Cambridge

Women's Academic Achievement

This has been a topical issue for some time, as it is argued that men get more Firsts at Cambridge due to the style of the Tripos system. It is believed that males suit the 3-hour exam system by following one argument aggressively, whereas females tend to display breadth of knowledge rather than depth. In addition, it has also been shown that women do better in the coursework aspects of Tripos, such as dissertations. This has caused concern for some members of the University, most notably the Women's Union. However, it is worth taking into account that the style of Tripos exams has not changed in hundreds of years, and when the Tompkins table started measuring academic achievement of the colleges, it was the all-female colleges (Newnham and Girton) that excelled. It is assumed that this is due to the changing nature of the college system. When all-female colleges were first set up, they were the first of their kind, and truly had the *crème-de-la-crème* applying to them and only them. With every college now accepting women, the all-female colleges are occasionally seen as the colleges that students are pooled to. This is not to say they do not play an important role. Without the all-women colleges the ratio of male : female students within the university would be much more worrying for example. Similarly, these colleges are necessary for providing for those students who, for religious or cultural reasons prefer to be in an all-female environment, and to a certain extent an all-female learning environment. However, the fact that the percentage of firsts awarded at an all-female college is on average lower, is a worrying statistic.

The 2007 Examination Statistics³⁸ show that despite there being only 5.3% more female undergraduates than male (47.3% : 52.7%), the percentage of males getting First Class Degrees is over 10% more than women (in 2007, 26.7% of men and 17.3% of women.) What is even more striking is the actual numbers involved. In 2007, 1 400 men received First Class degrees, compared to just 813 women. However, there are a larger percentage of men receiving Third Class degrees than women, although the difference is very small (2.8% compared to 2.6%). This indicates that women on the whole tend to cluster around Second Class Degree results. Indeed, 54.8% of women receive II:1 degrees, as opposed to 46.1% of men. These statistics prove that women are underachieving academically compared to their male

³⁸ University of Cambridge Examination Results Statistics 2007

counterparts, as was highlighted in the 2002 SwS, however what the university is doing about this is much harder to pinpoint.

Creating more coursework-based sections within the Tripos would be particularly useful in attempting to accommodate the types of teaching and learning that women tend to prefer. However, it is wrong to assume that this is the case for all female students. In many cases, problems such as power-dynamics in supervisions or inadequate training for supervisors in terms of gender awareness. This will be expanded upon below.

The Gender Equality Scheme

In April, as with every public body, the university was legally required to produce a 'Gender Equality Scheme' (GES)³⁹. This scheme explicitly relates to both staff and students. Many of the policies in the GES are much welcomed by students and it is clear the university consulted appropriately and efficiently with students on academic and pastoral issues. Although an important document, the main problem with it is that nobody has real ownership over putting it into place, or if there is CUSU has neither been approached nor informed of its progress. For example,

Unfortunately, one of CUSU's primary concerns regarding the learning and teaching of women – the differential performance of male and female students – was given only 'medium' priority, and again, there has not been much consultation with the Students' Union over these issues.

Supervisor Training and Women

A major focus of the consultation with the Women's Union was the need for supervisor training in relation to gender issues. The GES states that the university should: 'develop a better understanding of gender issues in learning amongst undergraduate students of both sexes' and it highlights the need to raise 'awareness in supervisor training'. This clause is given a 'high' priority. Supervisor Training is, as aforementioned, a problem throughout the university because it is not compulsory. One important step towards raising awareness of issues such as the use of appropriate language, recognising harassment and victimisation, would be to integrate it into the university and faculty supervisor training as a norm. Although the training is not compulsory, it would be a step in the right direction. The university's work towards 'Dignity at Study and Work: Students'⁴⁰ Policy proves its commitment to these issues, however simply creating the policy is not enough, and more ways of raising awareness need to be thought up.

This section was written by Andrea Walko, CUSU Welfare and Graduates Officer (2007-8), Nina Walters, CUSU Undergraduate College Education Officer (2007-8) and Elly Shepherd, CUSU Women's Officer (2007-8)

³⁹ <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/personnel/equality/gender/activity.pdf>

⁴⁰ <http://www.gradunion.cam.ac.uk/gradunion/council/2007-03-01/dignityatwork.pdf>

Exchange programmes

There are a few Exchange programmes within the University, the most notable being the MIT Exchange and the ERASMUS programme. These are both popular and successful, which suggests it is something that we should continue to promote.

This section was written by Nina Walters, CUSU Undergraduate College Education Officer (2007-8)

Small subjects

Despite their label, a substantial number of students study in these departments. Unfortunately however, recently they appear to be under threat. 2007 saw the re-organisation of Oriental Studies, just over a year after threats to close the Architecture faculty. Recently the Modern and Medieval Languages faculty planned to suspend Portuguese, on grounds that teaching provision for the full Tripos could not be assured based on current resources. These initial proposals, borne from a working party lacking student representation, failed to consider implications for the University's reputation and competitiveness. It was only after arguments set out by the CUSU Academic Affairs Officer, as well as an effective campaign by Portuguese students to highlight the flaws in the proposal to members of that committee in advance of the meeting, that the Board of Education committee asked the Faculty Board to add students to the Working Group and to further investigate the options. Their final report in May then secured the future of Portuguese.

It is noteworthy that the University structures and procedures were well placed to identify and deal with such a policy, as demonstrable by its recognition and eventual rejection. The involvement of students during the decision making process should have come at an earlier opportunity. Nevertheless, blanket representation on all Working Groups would not be sensible, as many of them do not directly pertain to matters of student concerns. It is hoped that Faculties have learned from the experience and that student views and where necessary representation will be sought at an appropriate stage.

CUSU remains a staunch supporter of minority subjects and the system of student representation. It will continue to defend this position, for the sanctity of academia itself and to advertise the current risks to minority subjects, and celebrate their diversity.

This section was written by Harveer Dev, CUSU Education Officer.

Architecture

A subject of particular concern during consultation for this document is Architecture. Students have complained that they are often given large projects to complete at short notice or with irregular deadlines on top of their usual workload. This often leads to long working hours, which can be unsafe, particularly when using certain items of equipment. Concerns were also raised about the number of materials that students are required to purchase for their projects, and, whilst it was noted that some Colleges have tried to help

alleviate this burden by providing some financial support, this often does not cover the total costs and can leave students badly out of pocket. A further concern raised was that some Colleges do not provide a suitable area for architects to carry out their work, particularly that which involved creating large models. In addition, students often encounter difficulties transporting their work from their College to their Department. This may be an area the Department wishes to address.

In addition, the Architecture Faculty undertook a lot of building work last year. It was noted there was a lack of communication as to what was happening, resulting in the perception that the faculty were more concerned with cost than student welfare.

This section was written by Mark Fletcher, CUSU President.

Section 2

- The QAA guide for student representatives: The 4 questions
 - Summary

The 4 QAA Questions

The following section will aim to briefly highlight areas in the SWS which answer the 4 questions that appear in the guide for student representatives produced by the QAA. It is not intended to answer these questions in full, but to draw attention to relevant discussions within the document. Areas that are not highlighted below should be taken as equally important and of value, and indeed may relate to these questions in a more indirect manner. It will then aim to produce a short summary of the points raised in the submission.

▪ How accurate is the information that the institution publishes about itself, such as prospectuses, programme descriptors and advertisements?

Overall, published information is accurate, in both prospectuses and internally in describing courses, as discussed in the Admissions section. The main problem that often arises in published information is lack of detail, such as in Marking & Classing Guidelines.

▪ Do students know what is expected of them in order to be successful?

As discussed in the Examinations section, exactly what is required of students in order to achieve a certain class or to succeed in exams is vague, and whilst students have a rough idea of what they must do, they are unable to describe or understand fully exactly what they must do in order to succeed. On top of this, a consistent view is not necessarily relayed to students from supervisors, indicating a lack of clarity and communication at this level, as well as a possible lack of supervisor training in the issue. The provision of study skills training and exam skills is linked closely to this issue.

▪ What is the student experience as a learner like, including teaching and learning opportunities, support received and access to learning facilities?

The Cambridge experience is somewhat unique. It is however an exceptional University to attend, with many benefits, such as the supervision system. The Cambridge experience in terms of learning and teaching is described fully early on, and issues arising within the experience are elaborated throughout.

▪ Do students have a voice in the institution and is it listened to?

Students have a voice in terms of both feedback and also through sitting on committees at nearly every level. However, concerns about the effectiveness of student feedback are raised in the Student Feedback section, particularly whether the feedback is listened to and acted upon. On committees, students are represented at nearly every level, though the effectiveness of their voice varies, and there are known occasions where students feel unable to speak due to the nature of the committee or actions of those on that committee. Also It is sometimes felt that their voice is heard, whether the voice is listened to, or just heard. The use of Reserved Business is also an issue to note. This is all raised in the Student Representation section.

Summary of issues

- The Cambridge collegiate system is unique and it is vital to fully understand the Cambridge learning and teaching experience. The experience of an undergraduate and graduate at Cambridge differs substantially, and their allegiance to their College and Faculty/Department varies accordingly.
- Communication throughout the University must be improved. Currently communication from the top levels down to the bottom is inadequate: students are often unaware of basic everyday things, as well as issues such as action as a response to their feedback. The issue of communication (or lack of it) underpins many issues that arise in this SWS, and improvements in communication could lead to a number of these issues being resolved more expediently or not arising in the first place.
- Student representation needs to be effective and adequately supported throughout the University. The student voice needs to be listened to, and not just heard. Equally, the different needs of student members in terms of turnover of members and the support they require needs to be borne in mind.
- Student feedback needs to be examined throughout the University and existing feedback mechanisms should be scrutinised to examine their effectiveness. Greater efforts also need to be made to obtain centralised feedback to aide decision making at University levels.
- The supervision system is undoubtedly one of the great assets of the Cambridge undergraduate experience, and should be sufficiently resourced to acknowledge this. However, there are currently shortcomings with the system that need to be addressed, including the lack of training of some supervisors and the failure of others to fully understand the system (supervision, the University and the Tripos).
- The University is lagging behind with regards to plagiarism. With the introduction of Turnitin, the University must urgently ensure that it has appropriate policies in place to allow the use of such software, as well as to develop and improve its current teaching and policies on plagiarism. Until such time, it must not attempt to further roll-out or extend the use of Turnitin, due to the potential implications of any challenges made on the University's use of the software.
- The examinations system, including Saturday exams and DDH needs to be examined as a whole to see whether there are not better ways to undertake formative assessment within the University and to address the problems that arise out of the current system.
- There needs to be an increase in the work done to promote, support and equip students with study skills, transition skills and examination skills to address the widening gap between the A-Level system and the Tripos.
- The specific issues relating to graduates, women and students with disabilities need to be taken forward and addressed.

Appendix 1

This appendix provides a slightly simplified diagram showing student representation within the University.

A key to the diagram is as follows:

- BOXES indicate **committees or bodies**.
- CIRCLES indicate **student representatives** (either individuals or bodies)

- BLACK BOXES (thin lines) indicate **University committees/bodies**.
- BLUE BOXES (thicker lines) indicate **CUSU bodies/networks**.
- RED CIRCLES indicate **student representatives**
- RED and BLUE CIRCLES indicate **student representatives who are CUSU Officers (or autonomous campaigns)**.
- THE STAR in a **blue box by the JCRs and MCRs and in CUSU Networks** indicates a connection not shown on the diagram for neatness. Therefore, JCRs and MCRs sit on the CUSU Networks (such as the "Access & Funding Network").
- RED LINES indicate student **representation on committees/bodies**.