

Head Start at Hughes Hall: final report

August 2025

Project overview and aims

Hughes Hall gratefully received funds from the Isaac Newton Trust to add a new strand to the existing Pathways Programme. Called *Head Start at Hughes Hall*, this initiative responded to the needs of prospective and incoming students and aimed to alleviate barriers to access and achievement by:

- encouraging applications to Cambridge (or other Higher Education Institutions) from **prospective students** from non-traditional and under-represented communities
- providing opportunities for support and development for **offer holders and incoming students** across their first year of study.

As a mature College, our prospective and incoming undergraduate students typically have a significant time gap since their last experience in formal education. This was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, with many students deferring application to HE because of financial and personal circumstances. These students can face significant barriers to achievement, including the lack of school support in the application process, the lack of peers or role models applying to (or attending) HE, and the feeling that university (and particularly the University of Cambridge) simply isn't for them. By building positive and welcoming relationships before the application process, introducing students to the range of support available at the College and the University, fostering a sense of belonging and confidence, and providing essential academic preparation, *Head Start at Hughes Hall* was designed to ease the stark transition into Higher Education at Cambridge and set our students up for success in their courses.

Areas of activity

Offer holders and incoming students

- **Online induction modules** were circulated to incoming students in late September 2024, introducing them to Cambridge and the College and providing light-touch academic skills training.
- **Live Zoom calls** for all incoming students were hosted in late September 2024, introducing them to key members of staff and welcoming them to the College.
- **Pre-arrival mock supervisions** (online) with a supervisor or Director of Studies were delivered in late September 2024. These were intended to mitigate the intimidation

of Cambridge supervisions, and were suggested by current students as a beneficial induction activity.

- **College induction** for incoming students, focused on building sustainable academic habits and maintaining personal wellbeing, was hosted 3-5 October 2024. We engaged a graphic artist to produce lasting visual resources based on the day's content, which were then hung in College to create a 'welcome to Hughes Hall' display. Students were given Head Start booklets with details of induction events, term-time workshops, online asynchronous modules, and information about the College and University.
- **Online asynchronous modules** were created on a variety of topics for students to consult throughout the academic year as needed (full list given in Appendix I).
- **Live events and workshops** were delivered throughout the academic year, allowing students to engage with peers and staff around relevant topics (full list given in Appendix II).
- **Peer mentoring** for (home fee) offer holders and first-year undergraduates was provided by upper-year undergraduates, building a sense of community in the transition to Cambridge and over the first year of study.
- **1:1 consultations** were offered to all incoming students with the Head of Student Development.

Section 7 of 7

What's next?

1

Join one of the Head Start Zoom calls! These are an opportunity for you to get to know your fellow Undergraduate students, meet key members of College staff, and get a taste of the friendly Hughes Hall atmosphere. **Tuesday 24th September, 10 - 11 am and 5 - 6 pm UK time.** Zoom links will be circulated via email.

2

Come along to a Pathways workshop in Michaelmas Term (i.e. first term). We're hosting sessions on [Finding resources on your topic](#) and [Getting back into academic writing](#) that can help you start your course right. You are also welcome to join our weekly [College co-work](#) sessions, where Hughes members come together for periods of focused working interspersed with social breaks (and biscuits!).

3

Check out the University's pages for [new students](#) where you can find information about starting your course and your student information. Make sure you also look at the [glossary of Cambridge terminology](#)!

4

Feel free to get in touch by emailing pathways@hughes.cam.ac.uk. If you're already in Cambridge, we'd love for you to drop by and say hi.

Figure 1 Screenshot from pre-arrival Head Start online module

Prospective students

We offered 3-day residential programmes for students on Access to HE courses at local Further Education colleges: introducing them to HE study, offering a taste of university-level learning, and demonstrating the support available at Cambridge and Hughes Hall. Eight students attended across two residentials.

It was decided to target students in the East Anglia region as research shows that home fee mature students are more likely to apply to universities close to home. We decided to work specifically with FE colleges as they provide Access to HE courses in subjects that are eligible for applications to Cambridge, and we wanted to work collaboratively to build an event that best supported their students and our aims. We also knew from talking with staff in FE colleges that students on their Access courses often come from disadvantaged or difficult backgrounds. As such, working with Access to HE students specifically enabled us to reach our aim of supporting prospective students from non-traditional and under-represented communities.

A full timetable of the residentials is included as Appendix III.

Delivery report

Offer holders and incoming students

Successes

Overall, the Head Start project was a great success and has been taken into regular operations at Hughes Hall for future years. Below are a few particular successes.

Explicitly linking pre-arrival, induction week, and term-time support served to emphasise the **continuity of student experience** between the ‘beginning’ and the ‘business as usual’ of the first year – students were reassured that information would be available throughout the year, not just at induction, and that the development of para-curricular learning and support was an expectation throughout their degree. We achieved this particularly through the Head Start booklet and the ‘Welcome to Hughes Hall’ display of posters from induction workshops, which remained prominently exhibited until February 2025. (The poster display had a further unanticipated benefit, as prospective students on College tours could appreciate the warm welcome for new students and see the range of support opportunities available.)

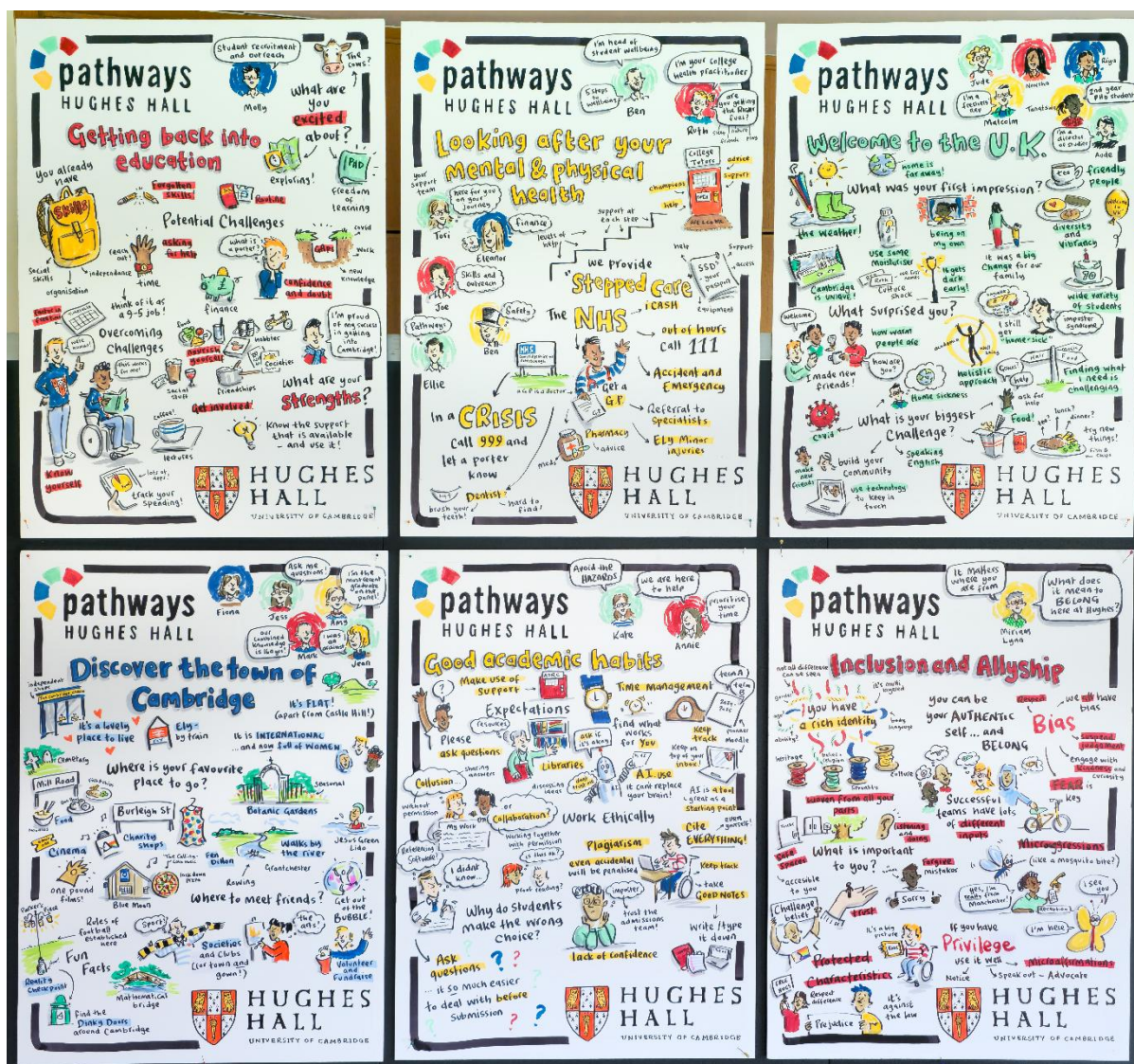


Figure 2 Poster display created during induction

The just-in-time availability of **digital modules** further underscored the ongoing availability of support and reduced the sense of information overload during induction week. The asynchronous resources enabled a scaffolded and spiralling approach to learning, as students could revisit material when needed and practice deploying skills in novel contexts. Additionally, the asynchronous element allowed us to build resources that fitted alongside all courses and subjects to ensure the inclusion of our diverse student population who may struggle to attend in-person events.

We saw an increase in student participation in all aspects of academic and wellbeing support across MT (compared to the previous year), building on a strong start at induction. Although we could not reliably attribute this solely to the booklets and posters, anecdotal evidence from students suggested that the **continuity of available support** across the first few days, weeks, and months gave a sense of security and confidence.

One of our goals was to purposely solicit ‘stupid questions’ to create a sense of **psychological safety** and reveal the areas of student worry. During the pre-arrival Zoom calls we promoted an anonymous digital forum on Padlet where students could share their concerns and ask questions of staff and each other. This turned into a very popular space for organic discussion and connection, with students (for example) suggesting group activities and borrowing hair dryers and staff discovering that future induction weeks should include more information about College laundry facilities! We have successfully integrated these insights into our induction activities for MT25, with an increased emphasis on support for students living independently and moving to a new country for the first time: digital modules on how to plan and prepare meals, student-led College tours and improved signage in the first few weeks, and term-time cultural exchange events with students sharing traditions and foods from their home countries.

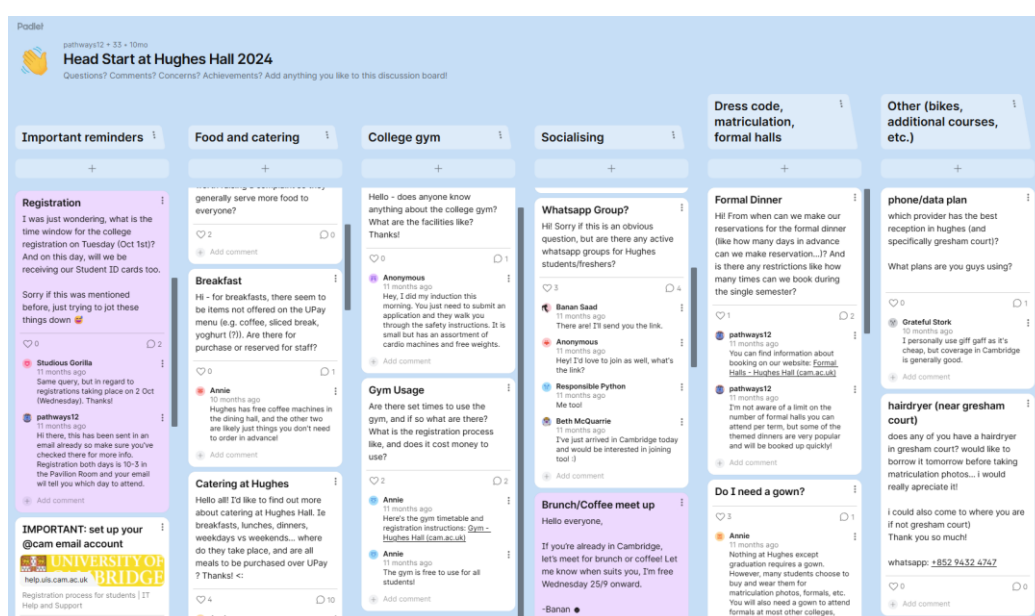


Figure 3 Anonymous question forum

The **1:1 consultations**, although demanding in terms of staff time and resources, were an invaluable aspect of the project and were likely the area of greatest impact for students. Some of the take-up was self-referrals from students, and some came from referrals by tutors and DoSs. Additionally, some students were referred for a one-off consultation and others were offered a series of 3-5 hour-long sessions. The flexibility of these 1:1 consultations allowed us to ensure they were targeted and relevant to the students with greatest needs, responding to previous academic experience and supplementing on-course learning.

Starting this individualised transition support at the **pre-arrival stage** was also very beneficial. Several students were identified in September as benefiting from 1:1 support before their courses began, and we were able to provide a strong starting point for them.

It was these students who saw the greatest impact in terms of academic performance and confidence in Michaelmas Term, working with their DoSs and the Head of Student Development in tandem. Early provision of proactive support in this way is one of the greatest successes of the Head Start project, and has now been taken into the College's admissions and pre-arrival procedures for incoming students.

'I so appreciate this [programme]. It already feels like I chose the right college.'

'I appreciate the lack of shaming myself for not having these skills. [This] is a judgement free zone which I desperately need and appreciate in my life.'

Improvements

Across a project of this scale there will always be areas to improve, and we have noted a few points of learning below.

For practical reasons we opted to run mock supervisions online before students arrived (in late September), but it would have been better to do them in person as this is more akin to the genuine experience. Additionally, DoSs reported that much of the time was spent talking about what supervisions are for and what they should be like – in future years, we will allow additional flexibility for these supervisions for supervisors to explain the process and the purpose of a supervision. Another area for improvement in the mock supervisions is the subject groups. In a few cases we elected to do them in groups of related subjects, intending for no one to be in a supervision on their own even if they were the only first year student in their tripos. This created a challenge for DoSs/supervisors and also reduced the usefulness of the meeting as students could not ask questions related to learning in their particular subject. In future, we will offer these at the tripos level (no matter how small the group) so that students will have a more tailored experience.

A second area for potential improvement is the drop-off in engagement we saw from new students after the end of Michaelmas Term. Although we continued to offer the same level of support throughout Lent and Easter Terms (group workshops, digital modules, and 1:1 consultations), we saw significantly lower levels of engagement. Part of this could be attributed to the reduced need for further support after a strong start to the year, but in future years we hope to elicit continued strong engagement across the whole year. To this end, we will create booklets for each term with full details of events and will host a mini-induction week in early Lent and Easter Terms to remind students of support and help them reset and recommit after disappointing results, missed work, or simply shifting mental gears after holidays.

Prospective students

Successes

A major success was the specific targeting of Access students. Whilst talking with attendees, several of them commented on how much they appreciated that there was a residential aimed specifically at Access to HE students. One attendee informed us that on many universities' websites information about how they regard Access courses is not readily available and they felt like Access students are often overlooked. This is an interesting area to research further into: do students on Access to HE courses feel forgotten about by universities? Does this perception change depending on the Access course and university? This could help inform our practice moving forward, and we plan to explore this further as we sustain and scale up the residential programme in future years.

We were further able to tailor the residentials around the specific needs of Access students as a result of a focus group we ran in July 2024 with staff from local FE colleges. The purpose of this focus group was to gather input from colleagues in FE colleges about how the residential could best support their students whilst still meeting Hughes Hall's outreach aims. Staff at Hughes Hall used the feedback from the focus group to develop the timetable and evaluation framework for the residentials. Feedback gathered from student participants reflected the success of the focus group, with comments and ratings indicating that the time of year and topics covered were relevant and engaging. This underscores the importance of collaboration across FE and HE, with input from across the full student journey.

Attendees were asked to complete a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the residential using sections of the [TASO Access and Success Questionnaire](#) and free text questions. All of the attendees were considering attending university for a variety of reasons, the most common being 'bettering themselves' and improving career prospects. Overall, there was an increase in interest in studying at university and at Cambridge. In the feedback we measured attendees' knowledge of HE and sense of belonging both at university and at Cambridge, both of which saw the increase we hoped for. Attendees were asked what their favourite part of the residential was, with the answers to this question falling into two themes: the intellectual, learning side and the social, living side. The themes correlated with the key expected outcomes of the residential and so it is positive to see that our event delivered our goals through the sessions we held.

Participant feedback: 'It was really friendly and welcoming, especially the staff and student ambassadors. I enjoyed the college experience, it really demystified what that could feel like. I like also touring the departments, other colleges, and the city. The exemplar lectures and supervisions were engaging, stimulating and insightful.'

'I learned so much and it made university feel so much more accessible, it feels like an option, and I am really grateful that you offer the residential.'

Improvements

Hughes Hall will continue to offer these December residentials for Access students in future years and will make adjustments and improvements based on feedback and experience.

The first of these changes will build on positive feedback from participants about current student ambassadors. In future we will involve current students more (particularly students who completed an Access course before starting at Cambridge), including formal and informal contact. (For example, we will ask ambassadors rather than staff to accompany attendees to different locations to encourage casual conversation.)

A second area of improvement relates to group size. Fifteen places were available across the two residentials, but due to late dropouts group 1 had five participants and group 2 had three. While the small groups were not disastrous, and indeed accurately reflected the small-group teaching at Cambridge, in future we hope to reach more Access students. To achieve this we will issue more invitations for each residential. We will also continue to build on relationships with local FE colleges and will expand further out into East Anglia to develop new relationships with FE colleges, further embedding the residentials within a broader programme of outreach in the region.

Finances

The WPIF grant was for £49,254.75 and final cost was £49,582.52. Overspend was covered by Hughes Hall. A summary of expenses is given below:

Expense	Cost
Staff salaries	£37,966.01
Software licences	£1,824
Peer mentoring	£1,626
Outreach residentials	£2,241.60
Mock supervisions	£479.71
Event costs	£1,500
Graphic facilitator	£3,328.20
Printing costs	£617
Total	£49,582.52

Appendices

Appendix I: List of asynchronous digital modules

Title	Release date	Length
Making good notes	LT 2024	15 mins
Introduction to undergraduate supervisions	LT 2024	20 mins
The basics of referencing	LT 2024	18 mins
Dealing with writer's block	LT 2024	9 mins
How to read an article quickly	LT 2024	8 mins
How to read a book quickly	LT 2024	5 mins
Making the most of lecture recordings	ET 2024	7 mins
Academic writing: planning a supervision essay	LT 2024	10 mins
Academic writing: producing a supervision essay	LT 2024	5 mins
Present your work with effective slides	ET 2024	12 mins
Managing your research process	ET 2024	10 mins
Getting started with peer editing	ET 2024	8 mins
Time management 1: breaking things down	ET 2024	10 mins
Time management 2: prioritising and planning	ET 2024	15 mins
Time management 3: your productivity patterns	ET 2024	15 mins
Focus and flow	ET 2024	10 mins
Catching up on missed work	ET 2024	10 mins
Revision and exam preparation	LT 2024	15 mins
Exam writing strategies	ET 2024	15 mins
Making good use of feedback	LT 2024	15 mins
Introduction to wellbeing support at Hughes Hall	LT 2024	4 mins
Managing stress	LT 2024	5 mins
Anxiety and depression	LT 2024	5 mins

Fantastic brain chemicals and where to find them	LT 2024	5 mins
Social and interpersonal wellbeing	LT 2024	5 mins
Staying active	ET 2024	6 mins
Sleep and rest	ET 2024	5 mins
Nutrition	ET 2024	10 mins
Don't fall for fake news	ET 2024	10 mins
Forming habits and routines	MT 2024	12 mins
Managing your money	MT 2024	15 mins
Building self-compassion	MT 2024	20 mins
Searching for a job or internship	ET 2024	8 mins
Understanding and leveraging your strengths	ET 2024	10 mins
How to write a good email	MT 2024	10 mins
Effective email management	MT 2024	15 mins
Guide to the 2024 UK General Election	ET 2024	5 mins

Appendix II: Live events and workshops

Title	Date
Revision and exam preparation	7 March 2024
Community wellbeing: botanic gardens tour	19 March 2024
Revision and exam preparation	25 April 2024
Wellbeing during exams	1 May 2024
Head Start Zoom sessions	24 September 2024 (morning and afternoon sessions)
Inclusion and allyship (induction)	3-4 October (three repeated sessions)
Welcome to the UK (induction)	3-4 October (three repeated sessions)
Looking after your mental and physical health (induction)	3-4 October (three repeated sessions)
Good academic habits (induction)	3-4 October (three repeated sessions)
Discover the town of Cambridge (induction)	3-4 October (three repeated sessions)
Getting back into education (induction)	3-4 October (three repeated sessions)
University Library tour	10 October 2024
Community wellbeing: plant sale	18 October 2024
Finding resources on your topic	24 October 2024
Get back into academic writing	29 October 2024

University Library tour	29 October 2024
Finding resources on your topic	12 November 2024
Get back into academic writing	21 November 2024
Mini induction for Lent Term starters	20 January 2025
Writing for EAL students	23 January 2025
AI tools to enhance your studies	27 January 2025
Writing strong supervision essays	30 January 2025
AI tools to enhance your studies	4 February 2025
Introduction to Zotero	12 February 2025

Appendix III: December residential timetable

Day 1:

16:00+: arrival and check in at the Porter's Lodge

17:00-18:00: Welcome session including icebreaker activities

18:00-19:00: Dinner in Hall with student ambassadors

19:30-20:00: Overview of support available at Cambridge

20:00-21:00: Current student meet and greet

21:00: Free time/bedtime

Day 2:

08:00-09:00: Breakfast

09:00-09:30: Tour of Hughes Hall

09:30: Walk to Law Department through Cambridge (taxis provided if needed)

10:00-11:00: Law taster: interactive code breaking activity lead by the Squire Librarians

11:00-11:30: Tour of Law faculty

11:30-12:00: Tour of Sidgwick Site or tour of University Library

12:00-12:30: Walk back to Hughes Hall (taxis provided if needed)

12:30-13:30: Lunch at Hughes Hall

13:30: Walk from Hughes Hall to Free School Lane (taxis provided if needed)

14:00: Human Social and Political Sciences seminar session on the Anthropology of City life lead by Dr Andrew Sanchez

15:30: Evening task explained – analysing two texts on the themes of gender, sex and womanhood. This is in preparation for the English Literature supervision tomorrow.

16:30+: Free time in Cambridge

18:00-19:00: Dinner at Hughes Hall

19:00: Free time for evening activity – students will have access to the library

20:00: Informal time with current students

Day 3:

08:00-09:00: Breakfast and luggage storage

09:00-10:00: English Literature supervision

10:00-10:15: Break

10:15-11:00: Introduction to the Cambridge Foundation Year or applying to Cambridge overview

11:00-11:45: Student ambassador Q&A

11:45-12:15: Final reflections and feedback collection

12:15-13:00: Lunch

13:00: Taxi to Wolfson College

13:15+: Tour of Wolfson College led by student ambassador