



Evaluation Report on the Academic Attainment Programme 2023-24

Lucy Cavendish College's unique online outreach programme aims to raise students' academic attainment from starting their post-16 studies to applying to university. The 14-month Programme supported 752 students in the 2023-24 academic year, providing comprehensive supplementary academic support tailored to their stage in the curriculum and giving them the best chance of achieving their full potential. Throughout the Academic Attainment Programme (AAP), participants develop their key academic skills and subject-specific knowledge, gain an insight into university-level study, and receive expert advice on making competitive applications to highly selective universities like the University of Cambridge. The Programme is conducted entirely online and has a truly national reach, with participants enrolled from every corner of the UK.

Background to the Programme

In 2022, Lucy Cavendish College became the first Cambridge College to admit over 90% of UK students from state schools, welcoming the most socioeconomically diverse cohort in the University's history. To support this historic first, we have developed an outreach programme which empowers high-achieving students from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds to make competitive university applications and achieve their full potential in their current studies. Since its creation in 2021, the AAP has supported over 2000 students in Year 12 (S5 – Scotland/Y13 – N.I.).

Ongoing consultation across the 442 schools we work with reveals a critical need for supplementary academic support tailored towards the highest-achieving students, exacerbated by Covid-19 disruption and a cost-of-living crisis. The AAP directly responds to this need, successfully raising participants' academic attainment and confidence and optimising their A-Level (Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers/IB) results and university applications. This fits exceptionally well with the Government's priority, reflected through the OfS, to raise attainment in state schools.

In June 2023, we were delighted to receive another generous grant from the Isaac Newton Trust Widening Participation and Induction Fund to further expand and improve the AAP. Most significantly, it enabled us to expand the subjects in which tuition was offered and develop a new user-friendly platform to host the online Programme, Zoom Events.

We expanded the range of subjects offering expert tuition from 10 to 15, adding Philosophy, Sociology, French, German, and Spanish. This increase in humanities subjects reflects our effort to create a more balanced attainment-raising provision at the university. With the growth and success of STEM SMART—and the restriction that students can only participate in one program—demand for humanities-focused support among AAP participants has risen. Additionally, the inclusion of modern languages addresses the decline in competitive applicants to these courses, both at Cambridge and across the higher education sector, especially among students from state schools and less advantaged backgrounds.

Previously, the programme operated using a single standard Zoom license alongside the College's website, which presented several challenges. Participants experienced delays in accessing session recordings, difficulties navigating session links and resources across multiple platforms, session cancellations due to login issues for session leaders, and capacity limits that could not accommodate the growing number of students. This year, we transitioned to hosting the entire programme on a single platform: Zoom Events. This change significantly improved participants' access to live events, recordings, resources, and programme updates. It also gave the programme a more professional and cohesive presentation, enhancing the overall experience. Additionally, subject tutors benefited from additional features and increased controls, such as the ability to share files and resources more efficiently, leading to smoother and more interactive sessions.

Programme Outline

The AAP consists of several successive elements, together forming a 13-month Programme of support. This begins with the Summer Preparation Programme which took place in the summer between Year 11 and Year 12 (or equivalent) and supported around 300 students. In October, an additional 450 students were enrolled onto the Programme and took part in the remaining elements which aimed to deepen academic engagement throughout the first year of their A-Level (or equivalent) studies.

Dates	Stage	Details
July - August	Summer Preparation Programme	This includes Study Skills Workshops on a range of important themes such as time management and essay writing, University Readiness Sessions to support students as they plan their next steps to top Universities like Cambridge, and Substantive Knowledge Sessions designed to supplement students' foundational academic knowledge.
November - March	Academic Enrichment Programme	Students attended monthly academic sessions in each core subject - Maths, Further Maths, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, English Literature, History, Economics, Politics, Sociology, Geography, Philosophy, French, German, and Spanish. Each subjects' sessions are carefully designed and delivered by an expert teacher to strengthen students' skills and knowledge, and to enrich and extend A-Level (Scottish Highers/IB) content.



		<p>Alongside these subject-specific sessions, students also attended monthly peer discussion groups. In these sessions, students were asked to think about UN Sustainable Development Goals and share their ideas with a group of their peers studying a range of subjects. These sessions aimed to provide students with the opportunity to build confidence, sample the discussion-based teaching which is at the heart of Cambridge, and develop their problem-solving skills and enquiring mindset.</p> <p>Students additionally attended monthly practical university readiness sessions, which provided information, advice, and guidance on how to make a competitive application to Cambridge and other top universities.</p>
February	Subject Exploration Workshop	40 taster sessions were offered in a range of subjects, including Astrophysics, Law, and Medicine, and students selected at least 3 sessions relevant to their subject interests to attend. These sessions aimed to provide students with the opportunity to sample university-style teaching, explore the wide range of subjects available, kickstart their supracurricular exploration, and to start thinking more seriously about their future university choices.
May	Skills Workshop	Students attend 7 sessions designed to provide them with the skills necessary to complete their Supracurricular Exploration Projects and succeed at A-Level.
May - August	Supracurricular Exploration Project	<p>Students researched an academic topic relevant to their future degree choices, produced an academic poster about their research, and then presented this poster and their findings to their peers and subject experts in a Poster Presentation Session, with opportunities for questions and discussion. The Project aimed to offer students the opportunity to consolidate their independent subject exploration, develop key skills necessary to achieve the top grades at A-Level (Scottish Highers/IB), boost their university applications, and share ideas with other students with similar aspirations and subject interests.</p> <p>Students attended 5 sessions designed to provide them with the skills necessary to complete their Supracurricular Exploration Projects and succeed at A-Level. Drop-in sessions were also available for individual guidance.</p>
July - September	Summer Application Bootcamp	Students attended a wide range of general and subject-specific sessions designed to help them make competitive applications to Cambridge and other top universities. This included personal statement workshops, interview preparation workshops, and admissions assessment sessions.

Qualitative Evaluation

Qualitative evaluation was conducted using a pre-Programme survey in October 2023, two mid-Programme surveys in December 2023 and April 2024, and an end-of-Programme survey in September 2024. Analysis of the survey responses reveal that the Programme has more than achieved its aims, as the following figures demonstrate:

Aim	Findings
To raise attainment in participants' current studies.	<p>9 in 10 participants felt that taking part in the AAP has helped them to be more confident in their A-Level (or equivalent) studies, and 9 in 10 felt that the AAP helped them achieve their full potential in their A-Level (or equivalent) studies.</p> <p>Over the course of the Programme, the percentage of students who felt they had the resources and support to achieve top grades at A-Level (or equivalent) increased from 79% to 97%.</p>
To support students to develop their key academic skills, such as oracy.	Over the course of the Programme, the percentage of students who felt confident sharing their ideas and articulating them clearly and fluently when speaking in academic settings increased from just 61% to 90%.
To support students to explore their subject interests independently.	<p>Over the course of the Programme, the percentage of students who felt confident exploring their subject independently increased from 74% to 97%. Furthermore, the percentage of students who felt they had a good understanding of what the course(s) in which they are interested consist of at university level increased from just 58% to 96%.</p> <p>Nearly 400 students (over half of the cohort) submitted a Supracurricular Exploration Project and 327 of these students presented their projects to their peers and Lucy Cavendish College academics.</p>
To support students to make competitive applications to high-tariff universities.	95% of respondents feel they know how to make a competitive application to Cambridge and other top universities. At the start of the Programme, just 37% of participants felt confident in their knowledge of top universities, and 28% about applying to Cambridge.



	Following the Programme, 91% of participants felt confident in their knowledge of applying to Cambridge and other top universities. At the start of the Programme, just 41% felt confident in their knowledge of top universities, and 29% about applying to Cambridge.
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Quantitative Evaluation

Due to the timescale for the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) applicant matching, we have not yet been able to identify AAP 2023-24 students who applied to the University of Cambridge. We plan to complete our complete analysis of applicants to Cambridge in March, once the full dataset becomes available. Additionally, we plan to complete a UCAS Outreach Evaluator analysis of the full cohort in September 2026, once the full data on their applications, offers, and acceptances is available.

Conclusion

It should be emphasised that a complete evaluation of the AAP 2023-24 cannot be completed until STROBE and HEAT data is returned to us, allowing us to track participants' applications to and offers from other highly selective HEIs. However, the currently available data suggest the AAP has been highly successful in raising students' attainment in their current studies, developing their key academic skills, and supporting them to make highly competitive applications to the University of Cambridge.

It was not possible to regularly track attendance in the AAP 2023-24 due to limited staff capacity. However, the recruitment of a second full-time administrator in August 2024 will enable continuous attendance tracking in future Programmes. This will further investigation into any correlation between flags and attendance and engagement in the Programme. Furthermore, we will be able to identify and provide additional support to any students who may be struggling with the academic and/or scheduling demands of the Programme.

The AAP has achieved impact at scale and geographical reach: since 2021, student numbers have increased by 36% and the AAP has reached 20% of schools in England. As the AAP's impact continues to be demonstrated, demand from schools and students continues to grow. This year, we turned away 512 potential participants who fully met the widening participation and strict academic criteria for inclusion in the AAP. In future years, we hope to increase the AAP's capacity to meet this demand and increase the number of students who can benefit from the support and tuition offered by the Programme.