

Selwyn College Bridging Course 2024: Final report for the Isaac Newton Trust



Selwyn College Cambridge

With the generous support of the Isaac Newton Trust, Selwyn College has this year run the first iteration of a bridging course for students from Widening Participation backgrounds. The students were in residence at Selwyn for the period 1–7 September. Across the following three weeks, they were provided with ongoing support by subject-specific supervisors who they first met during the residential, with access to resources provided through a dedicated Moodle site. We are extremely grateful to the Isaac Newton Trust for funding a project that has been very well received by participants. It has also been a learning experience that will allow us to implement changes ahead of a second iteration of the course in 2025, which the Trust has also kindly agreed to support.

18 students were originally invited to the course at the same time as they received their Cambridge offers in January. They were selected on the basis of their individual, school, and geodemographic characteristics, using the same eligibility criteria as are used to identify candidates for the August Reconsideration Pool during the admissions process. We did not invite all of our offer-holders who met these criteria for fear of overshooting our capacity of 15, so prioritised greater numbers of flags and paid attention to where an applicant's particular schooling would have been likely to have given them greater opportunities despite the presence of geodemographic flags. Of the original 18 invited, 17 responded positively to the invitation (1 didn't respond and went on to miss their offer). 11 made their offer and confirmed their place on the course, and an additional 4 invitations were made from the Summer/August Reconsideration Pool, all of whom took us up on the late invitation. That left us at our capacity of 15. The subjects represented were: Architecture, Economics, English, Geography, History, History & Politics, HSPS, Maths, Medicine, Natural Sciences (Biological & Physical).

The residential course comprised a mixture of general academic skills sessions, subject-specific supervisions plus independent study time, introductions to facilities and support systems within the College and beyond, and social and orientation activities. In putting this programme together, I was ably and enthusiastically supported by a number of colleagues at Selwyn and from across the wider University, and also by a team of four student ambassadors. The full schedule is included as Appendix B here for the Trust's reference.

We collected feedback on the residential course from participants in written form, and the student ambassadors also facilitated and notated a group discussion at the end of the week to draw out further responses. Student ambassadors provided feedback via an anonymous online survey, and we are in the process of collecting feedback from course teachers too. We plan to collect further feedback from participants as the academic year goes on, not only to get their thoughts on the online elements of the course but also to see how their reflections on

their experience may evolve or change as they face the realities of Tripos and of life at Cambridge.

The feedback collected from students at the end of the residential was both encouraging and useful as we plan future iterations of the course. The headlines were positive. We asked them to record their self-described levels of confidence about starting at Cambridge on a scale of 1 to 10 at the outset of the week, and then again at the end of the week. The average levels of confidence rose from 5.29 to 8.08 as a mean score, or from 5 to 8 as a median. The students also unanimously agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- The residential has helped me to know who I can ask for help in different situations (13 strongly agreed, 2 agreed).
- I'd recommend the Bridging Course to future students from similar backgrounds to me (13 strongly agreed, 2 agreed).
- The residential has helped me to get a better sense of what teaching and learning in Cambridge is like (11 strongly agreed, 4 agreed).

There was general agreement with the following statements, too, though with one or two outliers:

- The residential has helped me to feel that Selwyn College is a place I belong (14 strongly agreed, 1 neither agreed nor disagreed).
- The residential has helped me to feel that I know my way around Selwyn (12 strongly agreed, 1 agreed, 1 neither agreed nor disagreed, 1 did not respond).
- The residential has helped me to feel that I know my way around Cambridge (4 strongly agreed, 9 agreed, 1 disagreed, 1 did not respond).

There were two further statements, however, about which participants were more equivocal:

- The residential has helped me to develop my subject-specific skills (2 strongly agreed, 6 agreed, 3 neither agreed nor disagreed, 4 disagreed).
- The residential has helped me to develop my general academic skills (7 agreed, 7 neither agreed nor disagreed, 1 disagreed).

Reading into the qualitative comments that participants added to these responses, it seems their equivocation on these last two statements was for a slightly different reason in each case. The subject-specific support we offered, by way of two supervisions with subject specialists during the residential week, was in fact highly valued by the participants. Their ambivalence as to whether they had developed their subject-specific skills during the course, therefore, seems to come from the fact that they wanted more of this kind of activity rather than that they hadn't found it useful. I suspect that the additional online supervisions that the students have been offered in subsequent weeks might go some way to resolving this, but we will take further feedback on that point in due course. By contrast, their ambivalence about the general academic skills support seems to stem from the fact that they felt that there was too much time dedicated to this kind of activity with only limited benefit. There were recurring comments questioning the length of these sessions (each was 2.5–3 hours, including a break) and the

novelty of the information provided. Other themes arising from the qualitative feedback that we might take into account for the future included:

- STEM students perhaps felt less well catered for than arts and humanities students.
 - They felt that the writing masterclass was not well suited to them and would rather have spent more time on problem sheets or lab skills.
 - An attempt to group Economics, Mathematics, and Natural Sciences students for a joint supervision on a mathematical problem sheet fell a bit flat.
 - They identified a discrepancy in supervision workloads (the perception was that arts and humanities students if anything had too much to do, while they had too little).
 - They felt that they missed out in not joining the tour of the University Library undertaken by arts and humanities students.
- Students perhaps felt better oriented within the College than within the city/University and might have liked more time to explore.
- Some students suggested that they would have liked more concrete ideas about what their Tripos timetables might look like and about how to plan for supervision work, classes, and exams at the level of the week/term/year.
- A couple of students wanted more time dedicated to a discussion of finances and bursaries.
- Students only received the timetables for the week once they arrived for the residential; they may have found it useful and less daunting to have access to these beforehand.
- One or two comments focused on the fact that we might have provided more specialist support for disabled students (though it should be noted that none of the students had formally declared conditions prior to the course that might have led us to provide additional or more specialist support, despite being given multiple opportunities to do so).

There were plenty of positive comments too, reflecting the overall sense that the students had found the week very valuable. Students were thankful for a week described variously as “wonderful” and “amazing,” and one or two have expressed early interest in taking on ambassadorial roles for next year. Particular highlights identified in the feedback included the supervisions, a session on effective communication, a session led by an alumnus on their Cambridge experience and subsequent career, a ‘backstage’ tour of the College led by our Operations Manager, and evening social events including the ‘formal’ dinner with which we ended the week. Participants felt that College staff were friendly and welcoming, and praised the student ambassadors in particular for their role in demystifying Cambridge and challenging preconceptions. Students felt that the course was well organised and had given them a good idea of what to expect, offering them the chance to start developing useful habits and to feel at home in the College. A particularly interesting comment suggested that one student had learned to see Cambridge as “a network of resources,” which I think speaks to the fact that the course allowed students to begin to take ownership of the College and the University and to see how they might make use of all these institutions have to offer.

Student ambassadors' feedback followed many of the same contours as that of the students. They praised the organisation of the course, though had some constructive comments about pre-course communication. They affirmed that the students "loved" the course and found it a "great experience," overcoming some negative preconceptions and gaining confidence. They were unanimous in their strong agreement that the course should be an annual event. They agreed with the participants that the skills sessions in particular were not quite pitched correctly, and they additionally felt that some sessions offering practical information were too basic and/or repetitive of content that would be heard again in Freshers' Week. Some of this time, they suggested, would have been better spent on more specific academic content or on orientation within Cambridge. Ambassadors also said that it would have been nice to see more of College staff outside of formal sessions, though were sure that staff had left a positive impression nonetheless.

One somewhat unexpected issue arising during the week concerned a student with potentially quite severe additional needs about which we knew little before the week began. Although we had a tutorial system in place with two dedicated volunteer Tutors on hand, the student ambassadors sometimes felt like they had been left on the frontline in learning about and dealing with the needs of this student, occupying a slightly awkward dual position as both paid College representatives and peers. Although we were able to take some constructive steps as the week went on, we will want to do more to pre-empt these kinds of situations in the future for the sake of both the participants and the student ambassadors. There were also a couple of concerns expressed about the intense and intimate environment in which the students were getting to know one another, and about the potential for judgements to spread quickly or for awkward questions to be asked, especially concerning one another's WP criteria. It may be prudent to be more up-front about where the boundary lines should lie in any such conversations as part of next year's welcome talk.

Taking into account everything we have learned, the key points arising for me as we move towards planning the 2025 course are as follows:

- General academic skills sessions in particular should be shorter and possibly fewer. We followed a lecture/seminar + interactive activity model for skills sessions this year, but my sense is that next year we should move to sessions of 60–90 minutes that are led almost entirely by interactive activities. It will be far more productive, I think, to start by giving students concrete examples – reading lists, lectures, essay questions or essays, problem sheets, timetables, etc. – and to get them to reflect on and draw general principles from them. They didn't seem to benefit much from abstract/theoretical discussion of general skills.
 - The time freed up by reducing the prominence of these sessions could then be used to address recurring comments about supervision workload and about limited time for orientation within the city.
- Provision for STEM students needs to be refined – they could be doing more on labs or problem sheets while arts and humanities students are working on writing, for example.

- Related to this point, supervisions should remain subject-specific if at all possible – grouped supervisions across subjects were not felt to be particularly helpful.
- Students should be given a better sense of exactly what to expect from the week (in the form of a timetable) prior to arrival.
- The role of the student ambassadors should be more clearly defined as it relates to dealing with particular student needs. One concrete step will be to give ambassadors some guidance and training on active listening and effective signposting, making clearer the steps they should take in the event that someone comes to them with a potentially serious or complex problem. Another will be to make clearer to the participants themselves that student ambassadors are *not* College staff – they should feel free to talk to them, but they are not trained experts and may have to direct elsewhere for more concrete or ‘official’ support.

In general, I consider the course to have been a great success. I am grateful to the students and ambassadors alike for valuing the course enough to take the act of giving constructive feedback seriously, and we have plenty to work with as we look to meet the needs of WP students in even more targeted ways in future years. Once again, I would like to thank the Isaac Newton Trust for supporting the course so generously.

Dr Tom Smith

Admissions Tutor and Bridging Course Director

September 2024

Appendix A: Planned and actual spend

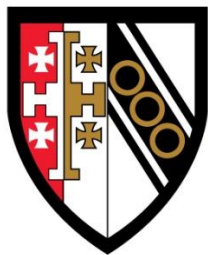
Item	Planned spend	Actual spend
Accommodation including breakfast (planned for 7 nights at £47.78pp per night; actual only 6 nights)	£5017.00	£3816.00
Meals (planned for £27.30pp per day for 5 days for lunch and dinner, £13.65pp for dinner upon arrival, and £13.65pp for lunch on day of formal hall; actual includes refreshments for group sessions)	£2457.00	£2761.30
Group tuition (planned for 20 contact hours split into two groups, paid at £50/hour; actual is for lower overall number of hours as there were fewer split sessions than planned, with some small expenses claims added)	£2000.00	£1149.74
One-to-one tuition (planned for 5 contact hours across 4 weeks, paid at £50/hour; actual is for lower overall number of hours as some supervisions were grouped)	£3750.00	£2350.00
Student bursary to defray lost income from summer jobs (£250pp)	£3750.00	£3750.00
Allowance to cover student travel costs (planned for up to £150pp, paid as expenses; actual number accounts for low take-up on maximum amount)	£2250.00	£867.56
Friday formal hall for 35 people, including teachers and organizers, at £30.63pp (actual number accounts for only 30 people in the end, but includes drinks)	£1072.00	£1084.06
Sundries, including academic materials (£25pp)	£375.00	£127.91
Course director salary (7.5% of university's spine point 57)	£4204.00	£4204.00
Student ambassadors (planned for 4 ambassadors doing 50 hours' work each at £10.90/hr, plus food and accommodation across 7 days on same plan as students; actual number accounts for only 6 days in the end but includes some small expenses claims for travel and entertainment)	£4173.00	£3426.27
Overall projected cost	£29048.00	£23536.84

£5511.16 unspent and to be returned to the Trust.

Appendix B: Full schedule for the residential course

Selwyn College Bridging Course Residential 2024

1–7 September



Selwyn College Cambridge



Welcome to the inaugural Selwyn Bridging Course! We're so pleased that you're able to join us for what we're sure will be an excellent week. If you have questions or concerns at any point, any of the people listed below will be happy to help:

Course Director

Dr Tom Smith tds33@cam.ac.uk

Course Tutors

Dr Alan Howard adh29@cam.ac.uk

Rev'd Dr Arabella Milbank Robinson amm245@cam.ac.uk

Student ambassadors

Rebecca Driver rd673@cam.ac.uk

Sophie Jacques scj50@cam.ac.uk

Ellie Montague (*JCR Access Officer*) elm78@cam.ac.uk

Anaïs Pettecrew alp87@cam.ac.uk

If you have any immediate concerns about navigating the College or about safety during the residential, the Porters will be available. The Porters' Lodge is staffed and open to visit 24/7 or can be reached on 01223 335846.

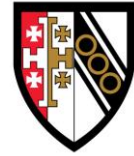
The schedule for the week is outlined across the pages below. Generally, during the afternoons in particular, if you're not participating in a scheduled event then the expectation is that you will be doing some independent study in preparation for your supervisions – perhaps in your rooms, in the Bartlam Library, or in the café-bar.

Please note that there is ***no dress code*** for any event during the week, even for the 'formal' dinner on Friday. In any situation, please wear whatever you feel comfortable in!

For each day, you'll have 15 minutes to write in a log book (use the notebook provided in your welcome pack) to help you reflect on what you're learning during the course. Please use the following two questions as a guide:

- What did I learn today?
- What question would I like to ask someone tomorrow?

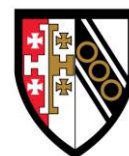
Sunday 1st September



Selwyn College Cambridge

- 14:00–16:00** Room key collection and welcome tea (*Chadwick Room*)
- 16:00–17:00** College tours led by student ambassadors (starting at the *Chadwick Room*)
- 17:00–18:30** Welcome meeting (*Chadwick Room*)
- *Dr Tom Smith* (Course Director)
 - *Dr Alan Howard* and *Rev'd Dr Arabella Milbank Robinson* (Course Tutors)
 - *Dr Stuart Eves, Dr Marta Halina, Ellie Montague, and Shireen Nawaz* ('expectations' panel)
- 18:30–19:30** Dinner (*Hall*)
- from 19:30** Log book completion and evening activities (*Chadwick Room*)

Monday 2nd September



Selwyn College Cambridge

- 8:00–9:00** Breakfast (*Hall*)
- 9:00–10:00** Tour of the Bartlam Library (meet outside the building)
- *Sonya Adams* (College Librarian)
- 10:00–13:00** Small-group tours of Cambridge led by student ambassadors (starting from *Bartlam Library*) then lunch in *Hall*
- 13:00–16:00** Getting the most out of lectures and supervisions, with a sample lecture (*Walters Room*; refreshment break 14:30–14:45)
- *Dr Marta Halina* (Study Skills Tutor)
 - *Dr Aidan Starr* (Trevelyan Research Associate in Geography)
- 17:00–17:30** Initial meeting with supervisor
- Architecture: *Dr Jiayu Pan* (*Old Library room 4*)
 - Economics: *Cat Leedham* (*Diamond*)
 - English: *Dr Ephraim Levinson* (*Old Library room 3*)
 - Geography: *Rosie Rice* (*Walters Room*)
 - HSPS: *Dr Zeina Al Azmeh* (*J12, Cripps Court*) **16:15–16:45**
 - History: *Dr Sophie FitzMaurice* (*Old Library room 2*)
 - History and Politics: *Mehmet Dogar* (*Old Library room 1*)
 - Mathematics: *Cat Leedham* (*Diamond*)
 - Medicine: *Dr Stuart Eves* (*K4, Cripps Court*)
 - Natural Sciences (Biological): *Dr Stuart Eves* (*K4, Cripps Court*)
 - Natural Sciences (Physical): *Cat Leedham* (*Diamond*)
- 18:00–19:00** Dinner (*Hall*)
- 19:00–19:30** Porters' welcome and safety briefing (*Chadwick Room*)
- *Lee Scott* (Deputy Head Porter)
- from 19:30** Log book completion and evening activities (*Chadwick Room*)

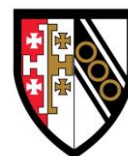
Tuesday 3rd September



Selwyn College Cambridge

- 8:00–9:00** Breakfast (*Hall*)
- 9:00–11:30** Effective communication workshop (*Walters Room*; refreshment break 10:15–10:30)
- *Dr Stuart Eves* (Admissions Tutor, Tutor, and Director of Studies in Veterinary Medicine)
- 12:00–13:00** Lunch (*Hall*)
- 13:00–14:00** IT and email in Cambridge (*Walters Room*)
- *Dave Johnstone* (IT Manager)
 - *Dr Tom Smith* (Course Director)
- 14:15–16:45** Tutorial Office appointments (*Tutorial Office, first floor, Christopher Dobson Building*) and Course Tutors appointments (*Rev'd Dr Milbank Robinson: D7, Old Court; Dr Howard: Room 2, 21 West Road*)
- 18:00–19:00** Dinner (*Hall*)
- from 19:00** Log book completion and evening activities (*Chadwick Room*)

Wednesday 4th September



Selwyn College Cambridge

8:00–9:00 Breakfast (*Hall*)

9:00–11:30 **Arts/Humanities/Social Sciences:** What to do with a reading list (*Walters Room*; refreshment break 10:15–10:30) followed by tour of the University Library

- *Dr Marta Halina* (Study Skills Tutor)
- *Dr Tom Smith* (Course Director)

Economics/Mathematics/Physical Sciences: Mathematics and problem sheets masterclass (*Old Library room 4*; refreshment break 10:15–10:30)

- *Matthew Smith* (Teaching Bye-Fellow in Mathematics for the Natural Sciences)

Biological Sciences: Maths for biological sciences (*Old Library room 2*; refreshment break 10:15–10:30 in *Old Library room 4*)

- *Dr Stuart Eves* (Admissions Tutor, Tutor, and Director of Studies in Veterinary Medicine)

12:00–13:00 Lunch (*Hall*)

13:00–14:00 Welfare and resilience (*Walters Room*)

- *Dr Lotte Reinbold* (Tutor and Director of Studies in English)
- *Rev'd Dr Arabella Milbank Robinson* (Course Tutor)
- *Lucy Turnell* (College Nurse)

17:00–18:00 Supervision 1

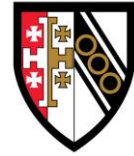
- Architecture: *Dr Jiayu Pan* (*Old Library room 4*)
- Economics: *Cat Leedham* (*Diamond*)
- English: *Dr Ephraim Levinson* (*Old Library room 3*)
- Geography: *Rosie Rice* (*Walters Room*)
- HSPS: *Dr Zeina Al Azmeh* (*J12, Cripps Court*)
- History: *Dr Sophie FitzMaurice* (*Old Library room 2*)
- History and Politics: *Mehmet Dogar* (*Old Library room 1*)
- Mathematics: *Cat Leedham* (*Diamond*)
- Medicine: *Dr Stuart Eves* (*K4, Cripps Court*)
- Natural Sciences (Biological): *Dr Stuart Eves* (*K4, Cripps Court*)
- Natural Sciences (Physical): *Cat Leedham* (*Diamond*)

18:00-19:00 Dinner (*Hall*)

19:00-20:00 ‘A day in the life’ – student ambassador session (*Walters Room*)

from 20:00 Log book completion and evening activities (*Walters Room*)

Thursday 5th September



Selwyn College Cambridge

8:00–9:00 Breakfast (*Hall*)

9:00–11:30 Writing masterclass (*Walters Room*; refreshment break 10:15–10:30)

- *Dr Marta Halina* (Study Skills Tutor)

12:00–13:00 Lunch (*Hall*)

17:30–18:30 Drinks in the *Master's Lodge*

18:30–19:30 Dinner (*Hall*)

from 19:30 Log book completion and evening activities (*Walters Room*)

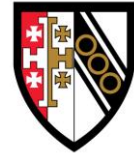
Friday 6th September



Selwyn College Cambridge

- 8:00–9:00** Breakfast (*Hall*)
- 9:00–11:30** Getting organised (*Chadwick Room*; refreshment break 10:15–10:30)
- *Dr Marta Halina* (Study Skills Tutor)
- 12:00–13:00** Lunch (*Hall*)
- 13:00–13:45** How stuff works (*Chadwick Room*)
- *Jennifer Phillips* (Bursar)
 - *Matt Rowe* (Operations Manager)
- 15:30–16:30** How to make the most out of Cambridge (*Chadwick Room*)
- *James He* (Selwyn graduate and data scientist)
 - *Thisath Ranawaka* (Publications and Marketing Officer)
- 17:00–18:00** Supervision 2
- Architecture: *Dr Jiayu Pan* (*Old Library room 4*)
 - Economics: *Dr Myungun Kim* (*J1–3, Cripps Court*)
 - English: *Dr Ephraim Levinson* (*Old Library room 3*)
 - Geography: *Rosie Rice* (*Walters Room*)
 - HSPS: *Dr Zeina Al Azmeh* (*J12, Cripps Court*)
 - History: *Dr Sophie FitzMaurice* (*Old Library room 2*)
 - History and Politics: *Mehmet Dogar* (*Old Library room 1*)
 - Mathematics: *Julian Wykowski* (*Chadwick Room*)
 - Medicine: *Dr Stuart Eves* (*K4, Cripps Court*)
 - Natural Sciences (Biological): *Dr Stuart Eves* (*K4, Cripps Court*)
 - Natural Sciences (Physical): *Cat Leedham* (*Bartlam Library study room 1*)
- 18:30–19:30** Pre-dinner drinks (*Harrison Room*)
- from 19:30** Formal Hall (*Harrison Room*)

Saturday 7th September



Selwyn College Cambridge

- | | |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8:00–9:00 | Breakfast (<i>Hall</i>) |
| 9:00–9:30 | Check out of rooms – hand keys back to <i>Porter's Lodge</i> |
| 9:30–10:30 | Log book completion and feedback session (<i>Walters Room</i>) |
| 10:30 | Official end of course |