



Lucy Cavendish College Offer-Holder Mentoring and Tuition Programme, 2023

Evaluation Report

Context

Since the change to its admissions policy in 2021 to admit students of standard university age (18+) of all genders, and consequently the change to a home offer-holder field with academic conditions based primarily upon A-level attainment, Lucy Cavendish College has run an Offer-Holder Mentoring and Tuition Programme (OHMTP). The OHMTP is a programme of private tuition that aims to raise attainment levels for the most educationally and socially disadvantaged offer-holders to help them to meet the grades required by their conditional offers. A secondary, associated aim is to ensure that they are fully prepared for the academic demands of their courses when they matriculate. To avoid any possible conflicts of interest following A-level results, the Programme is run by a third-party, the educational charity Causeway Education. Causeway were selected because of their track record of working with university applicants and their high number of tutors with backgrounds in secondary and higher education and many years' experience teaching their subjects. Several Colleges provide peer-to-peer student mentoring for WP offer-holders through an existing scheme, and one College offers limited tuition by their own academics, but the OHMTP is unique: it is the only college programme to offer extensive tuition, focused directly on A-level curricula, to offer-holders at scale. To date, it has been funded exclusively through philanthropy, and in February 2023 the College was very grateful to receive a grant of £15,000 from the Isaac Newton Trust Widening Participation and Induction Fund (INT WPIF) as a contribution to our costs for the 2023 programme. The 2023 programme also saw an expansion in scale, since, for the first time the College sought to offer this provision to *all* UK maintained-sector offer-holders who were not at the most high-performing schools, based on DfE data. Ultimately, the cost of doing so proved beyond the College's means, despite the generous award from the Trust, but we were nevertheless able to enrol 68 students on the programme: our highest ever number of participants (27 in 2021 and 42 in 2022). Therefore this provision was offer to the widest possible range of offer-holders for the first time.

Quantitative Evaluation

68 students were enrolled on the 2023 programme: 24 in STEMM subjects and 44 in AHSS subjects. Seven students subsequently dropped out or declined their offer from the College, leaving 61 offer-holders by the time of A-level results. Of these, 40 either met the terms of their offer and were accepted, or missed by a sufficiently narrow margin that they could still be considered and were subsequently confirmed: this is an overall success rate of 65.6%. 21 students were rejected in August following results, a failure rate of 34.4%.

Because of the demographically mixed nature of the enrolled cohort, it is difficult to establish a valid control group against whom these results can be compared. However, data on University-wide attrition rates in 2023 shows an average success rate for STEMM offer-holders (excluding Mathematics) of 87% for UK maintained sector students who were not ARP eligible and 75.5% for those who were ARP eligible. For AHSS offer-holders, the figures are 68.7% and 51.1%. This reflects what all Colleges experience in August 2023, which was the effect of the 50% reduction in the awarding of A* grades nationwide, an effect that disproportionately affected AHSS offer-holders from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our programme at LCC had students from all subjects and all demographics, but the majority were students with widening participation flags who held offers for AHSS courses. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that 'normal' attrition for our enrolled cohort in 2023 would have been somewhere above 51.1% but below the averages for students from more privileged backgrounds and for those holding offers exclusively for STEMM courses.

Nevertheless, it is clear that an overall success rate of 65.6% is not significantly higher than such 'normal' attrition would have been, and therefore the College has concluded that the OHMTP in 2023 did not make a significant difference to students' chances of meeting the terms of their offer and being accepted to Cambridge.

The context to these findings are important, and it is likely that success rates would have been much higher had this not been the year in which A-levels returned to pre-pandemic grade proportions, but it is also true that this would have affected the normal success rates against which the programme is compared. This does nevertheless explain why the 2023 round of the OHMTP had the lowest success rate yet of any year of the programme.



Qualitative Evaluation

As part of the contract with LCC, Causeway also carried out their own evaluation of the programme using surveys and focus groups, focussing on the more holistic goals, such as academic usefulness and university readiness. They found that participants' self-assessment of their own preparedness for university increase by an average of 7.25 percentage points between the start and the end of the course. 39% of participants rated the course as being 'somewhat useful', 13% as 'useful' and 48% as being 'very useful'; none rated the programme negatively. Participant comments included:

"The A-level exam support was, in my view, crucial to me attaining my offer, and my tutor also gave me excellent advice for language study in general and language study at university."

"The feedback I received for my essay writing really helped me prepare for university, by exploring my own ideas, and using appropriate language to address my reader on the topic I was given freedom to choose."

"These sessions really helped me feel confident about the upcoming uni year, especially as someone from a state school. Thank you!"

However, other participants also reported concerns including:

"I thought the programme was very useful but I know people who found it added more stress to their lives in the time they did it."

Conclusion

In 2023, the total cost of the programme came to £30,290, of which just under half was generously funded by the INT WPIF, with the College covering the remaining amount by drawing on other donations received to support access and outreach work. This was roughly £450 per participant, in return for which the students received up to 16 hours of small group tuition. Given that the cost of private A-level tuition start at £40-60 per hour and can easily exceed £100 for the most bespoke support, the programme has been excellent value for money, but both the quantitative and qualitative feedback suggests its impact has been quite limited. The College has already committed to the 2024 round of the OHMTP, but it will now take the opportunity to review these findings in-house and to discuss them with Causeway. It will be important to consider whether the expansion of the programme that was undertaken in 2023 is actually desirable, or whether it would be better to focus on a smaller group of offer-holders from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and to provide them with support that is even more bespoke and tailored than the current programme. This would likely come at a higher cost per-capita, but would hopefully lead to better outcomes.

In this context, we do not feel it is appropriate to ask the INT for a further year of funding for the OHMTP, which we will fund from our reserves. We remain incredibly grateful to the Trust for its support for the programme and we hope that the committee will not be too disappointed with these outcomes: it is clear, after all, that many students feel they benefited significantly from participating and, anecdotally, I am aware from my own conversations with students in my role as Assistant Senior Tutor that many now feel they are implementing the lessons they learned on the OHMTP in their first year at Cambridge; we will of course also find out in due course how they fare in Tripos exams. More generally, LCC remains committed to trialling new and innovative answers to the problems posed by questions of access and widening participation, and we continue to believe that support for offer-holders must be part of our offering to students from socioeconomically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. However, in the context of the outstanding success of our other principal outreach initiative, the Academic Attainment Programme, it is appropriate to ask whether a different approach might better provide what is needed to help these talented young people close the gap on their more privileged peers at A-level.

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