Panel Guidance for University of Cambridge Athena SWAN and Race Equality Charter submissions

The organisational and staffing structure of the University of Cambridge is different from most other universities. This guidance provides additional information about those features that may be distinctive to Cambridge to assist panel members in assessing Cambridge submissions.

1. Collegiate system
Cambridge is a collegiate university, consisting of the University itself and 31 Colleges. All students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, and most academic staff (but not researchers) are members of a College. The Colleges are independent legal entities, governed by their own statutes and regulations, and are related to the University in a federal system. They:
- select and admit undergraduate students, and provide them with supervisions (weekly small group teaching);
- provide accommodation, meals, common rooms, libraries, sports and social facilities, academic support and pastoral care for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. This means that students’ experience is largely influenced by the College environment.

The University and its Departments do not have direct control over the extent and standards of support provided by Colleges.

The University comprises academic Departments and research centres (organised within faculties and schools respectively), administrative Departments, libraries and museums. The University:
- determines curricula, organises lectures, seminars and laboratory work, sets and marks examinations, and awards degrees;
- admits and supervises graduate students (who are then placed in Colleges), and examines theses;
- provides a wide range of resources for teaching and learning such as libraries, laboratories, museums and computing facilities; and
- provides centrally managed student services such as counselling and careers.

The University is the primary locus for Cambridge’s extensive research activity and employs the majority of researchers, and hosts seminars and workshops. Academic-related and assistant staff (professional services) are employed by the University: very few have any College affiliation.

2. Undergraduate admissions
Colleges select and admit undergraduates. Candidates apply to a preferred College via UCAS and are assessed by that College against a range of criteria including contextualised GSCE results, often a written assessment, and usually two interviews. Around 75% of applicants are interviewed. The College then makes a decision whether to make an offer (the number of places which each College can offer is determined centrally by the University). Although Department members may be involved in interviewing, the University has no authority to instruct the Colleges and individual Departments do not choose which students get offers and subsequently who arrives for registration at the start of the undergraduate course. The number of students admitted by each College for a particular course is small.

Additionally, the Cambridge Natural Sciences course adds a further layer of complexity where STEMM students are not admitted to study individual subjects, e.g. Physics or Biochemistry, but are expected to study three experimental sciences (from a choice of 8 subjects) and mathematics in the first year. Students then specialise more as the course progresses in years 2 and 3. Only after the first year can the 16 Natural Sciences Departments have an impact on student subject choices. Retention by subject is therefore a useful metric, but one which needs to be used with care, since in some cases the subject specific cohorts are only a tiny fraction of the total numbers of students in the first year.
3. University and College appointments
Many academics and some research staff will not only have Departmental and university responsibilities but will also have an additional employment contract as a Fellow of one of the Colleges. As part of their College duties, Fellows will be expected to undertake supervisions/tutorials for which they are remunerated by the College (distinct from their University salary). They may also have additional responsibility as Director of Studies, the primary point of contact between the College and the individual Departments. Working closely with the College’s Senior Tutor (who is ultimately responsible for the effective College teaching of undergraduates) each Director of Studies carries the responsibility for ensuring that students in that subject receive good supervisions.

This results in an additional layer of complexity, particularly when considering workload allocation models, in attempting to take into account both Departmental and College responsibilities. Different Departments may well take different approaches to assessing workload. Some Colleges may also seek to supplement teaching in particular subjects by appointing College Teaching Officers. The degree to which these staff are integrated into Departmental life varies, but it is the College and not the Department which is responsible for their career development, appraisal and training.

4. Governance arrangements
The governance arrangements of the University allows a high degree of self-governance. The main impact is that policy whilst determined and directed from the Centre is then implemented at the local level by semi-autonomous faculty, departments and institutions. Specific considerations for our approach are:

- Whilst the Athena SWAN, Race Equality Charter and HR People Strategy provides a central framework of policies, guidance and strategic steer, the devolved autonomous nature of the constituent departments and institutions within the University means the majority of E+D initiatives are implemented at a local level.

- The University takes a consensus approach to implementing changes which impact directly on academic freedom and employment practice. The implication it that the University may take an iterative approach.

The University’s governance stems from a Royal Charter and is now governed through central bodies, principally the Regent House, the Council and the General Board of the Faculties. These bodies now operate to allow the university to operate as a direct democracy and they include representatives from across the University. The University Council has overall responsibility for University governance and administration, for defining its mission and for resources and planning. The Council comprises the Chancellor, the Vice-Chancellor (as chair), 17 elected staff/student members, the Cambridge University Student Union (CUSU) president and the Graduate Union (GU) president, and four external members. The General Board also has general responsibility for the academic activities of Departments and Schools, as well as for the University’s Museums and Libraries. The GB comprises the Vice-Chancellor (chair), the Heads of School plus Deputy Heads of SHSS and SAH, four members appointed by Council and two student members (the CUSU Education Officer and the GU President). An Advisory Committee on Committee Membership and External Nominations and the Committee on the Membership of Committees, oversee committees of the Council and General Board. These Committees review and approve new appointments. The Regent House is the governing body and principal electoral constituency of the University. It has more than 3,800 members, including University Officers, and Heads and Fellows of Colleges. It makes and amends the regulations that govern the University. The Council is the principal executive and policymaking body of the University, reporting to the Regent House. The Council has many standing committees including the Finance Committee and the Planning and Resources Committee. The governance arrangements require the Council to present a Grace or motion for decision to the Regent House. If no objection or amendment is made by at least 25 members of Regent House within ten days, the Grace is deemed to have been approved. If a vote is called, voting is by postal ballot.