

## Cambridge considers expanding colleges to give more places to disadvantaged students

29 undergraduate colleges asked to make space to help university boost diversity

By Camilla Turner, EDUCATION EDITOR 22 February 2020 • 9:30pm

Premium



Cambridge University is considering expanding all its undergraduate colleges to make more places for disadvantaged students, The Sunday Telegraph has learned.

It comes as the university is under pressure to boost the number of students it admits from deprived families.

The vice-Chancellor's staff are in "detailed discussions" with 29 colleges about increasing their intake, as it embarks on one of the biggest expansion projects in its 800 year history.

Details will be outlined in the university's ten year strategic plan, which is due to be published later this year.

Cambridge is also carrying out a review of the criteria it uses to judge whether or not prospective students are deemed to be from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It hopes to boost the number of underprivileged students by setting up a “Transitional Year” programme for bright but poor pupils who are offered a place to study at Cambridge but fail to achieve good enough grades in their A-levels to meet their offer.

The university aims to have this set up by 2022, but extra places will be required at colleges to accommodate students on the programme.

Cambridge admissions tutors already take into account a student’s socio-economic background when making offers.

Students are assigned a “contextual flag” based on a number of factors, including if they come from a low-income household, if they have spent time in care, or if they have attended a low-performing school. This information will also be used as eligibility criteria for the new Transition Year programme.

So far only one college has confirmed it will expand the number of undergraduate places it can offer. Lucy Cavendish College, currently a women only college but will accept men from 2021, intends to more than double its intake to 130.

The UK’s top universities have been told by the higher education watchdog to set radical targets on how they plan to increase their intake of students from underprivileged families.

Oxford has pledged to cut the ratio of students from the wealthiest areas of the country to those from the most deprived from around 15 to one to eight to one in the next five years. The university says it has no plans to increase the number of undergraduate places it offers.

Meanwhile, Cambridge has committed to cutting the ratio from around 14 to one to around 6.7 to one over the same period.

But private school chiefs have previously warned against “robbing” pupils of places based on social class.

The Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference (HMC) - which represents the most prestigious public schools including Eton College, Harrow School and Winchester College - has urged universities not to reject candidates based on their family’s wealth.

The organisation has been lobbying Oxford and Cambridge to open up more places to ensure that their diversity drives do not mean that bright middle class students miss out.

Chris Ramsey, headmaster at the £40,000-a-year Whitgift School, told The Sunday Telegraph: “We have often said to Oxford and Cambridge that if they quite rightly want to widen access, then it would be fairer to increase the number of undergraduates.”

Charles Fillingham, headmaster at Francis Holland school in Regent’s Park, London added that if Oxbridge increase the number of student numbers this would solve the “zero sum game”.

He said: “We are interested in meritocratic admissions, there are a lot of deserving candidates from a range of schools.”

A Cambridge University spokesman said the university is “involved in detailed discussions about the possibility of expanding capacity at the 29 Colleges that admit undergraduates”.