

# Trinity College Widening Participation Strategy 2026-2029

Trinity College's Widening Participation Strategy captures our commitment to improve educational outcomes for students underrepresented in higher education and at Trinity College. Our strategy directs our efforts to make Trinity College a more accessible destination for young people with the highest academic potential regardless of their geographical location, background or socio-economic status.

**Core Aim 1: Increase the proportion of high attaining students from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds admitted to Trinity College and Colleges across Cambridge**

**Core Aim 2: In regions we work with, increase the proportion of students who progress to competitive universities**

**Core Aim 3: Increase knowledge of what works for widening participation at the University of Cambridge.**

## Objectives which together will support us in achieving these aims

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- Increase numbers of disadvantaged students making competitive applications to Trinity's smaller and least diverse degree subjects
- Increase numbers of women from non-fee-paying UK schools making competitive applications to subjects that require maths
- Improve student, parent and teacher understanding of Cambridge's degree choices, admissions requirements and application process
- Enable more students to develop the advanced subject skills, interests and confidence in their ability needed to successfully apply to Cambridge
- Raise the perception of Cambridge and Trinity College as being worthwhile and achievable among students, parents and teachers
- Improve sense of belonging and trust in Cambridge University and Trinity College for students and parents from underrepresented backgrounds
- Increase support and partnership for programmes which successfully narrow KS4 and KS5 attainment gaps
- Increase the number of students accessing and choosing the KS5 subjects they need to progress to competitive universities
- Increase provision for teachers to support high achieving students with schoolwork and progression to competitive universities
- Improve student and parent understanding of university progression routes and student finance
- Raise student and parent perceptions of competitive universities as being worthwhile and achievable
- Grow capacity to test and evaluate our initiatives using best practice methods, especially for new and creative interventions and in collaboration with partner organisations
- Build a systematic and consistent evidence base which would extend beyond the timeframe of this strategy in order to retain knowledge
- Support partner schools and organisations to learn from our evidence-base and apply learnings that effectively address persistent gaps in opportunity
- Increase wider engagement and confidence in our initiatives by transparently communicating and celebrating our impact and delivery quality

## Our Strategic Approaches

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Our initiatives respond directly to barriers experienced on individual and area-based levels and should address all main risks associated with gaps in university progression. Risks we understand as being significant barriers to access include: School and area-based attainment gaps, limited supercurricular engagement in and out of school, limited admissions information and guidance, limited financial information and guidance, lacking a sense of belonging, and inconsistencies in outreach quality and effectiveness offered by the sector. We will use a multi-intervention approach to address these risks, using a combination of methods captured in our strategic approaches, which are collectively the best ways to achieve our aims.

### **We build meaningful relationships with students and their support networks**

- Build meaningful relationships with students and their teachers and parents through multiple points of engagement at key decision making stages.
- Provide an offer of accessible and impactful online events and in-person visits at Trinity College, targeted towards groups at key decision making stages.
- Deliver effective information and guidance directly from current students or recent graduates whose experiences connect most with target groups.

### **We respond directly to individual and area-level barriers**

- Target students who have high potential to progress to Cambridge University and who are flagged as belonging to disadvantaged or underrepresented groups
- Establish place-based relationships in order to respond to local barriers to access.
- Collaborate with educational organisations and universities to co-deliver programmes addressing complex and systemic barriers to equal opportunity.
- Continue to offer and promote opportunities for financial support for students admitted to Trinity College from lower income households.

### **We use evidence to guide our initiatives and add to knowledge of what works**

- Create new opportunities to support partners with piloting, scaling and evaluating new initiatives within specific regions of the country
- Grow collaboration and data sharing between organisations so that we can deepen understanding of what works in specific geographies and admissions contexts
- Record and report changes to initiatives in response to formative and summative feedback using a Theory of Change approach
- Maintain a strong culture of evaluation in order to support long-term consistent data collection and Type 2 Evaluation (as defined by The Office for Students)
- Report and publicly celebrate findings during key points in the admissions cycle

The Admissions and Outreach Team, led by the Director of Admissions, is responsible for monitoring, reporting and devising delivery plans. The Admissions Policy Committee and College Council share responsibility for monitoring and approving strategic changes, overall progress and spending.

## Strategy Detail

Our strategy responds to Trinity's access priorities and existing context and is supportive of Cambridge's Access and Participation Plan (APP) 2025-26 to 2028-29. Our strategy underpins a portfolio of initiatives and partnerships designed to address complex barriers facing school-age students in the least resourced areas of the UK, and especially to address added barriers related to progressing to Cambridge and to Trinity.

We believe the following conditions pose a significant risk to students from disadvantaged backgrounds fulfilling their potential and progressing to Cambridge and to Trinity College. Risks are identified from analysis of offer holder surveys, participant surveys, application and admission data, partner organisation impact reporting and wider sector understanding.

### **Risk 1: School Attainment Gaps**

Gaps which are predictive of later attainment inequalities between the richest and poorest families start before school and widen throughout primary and secondary school, disproportionately impacting Black British students and students from intersecting groups of disadvantage. Area-based socio-economic factors ultimately compound risks of lower KS4 and KS5 attainment meaning that coastal towns or rural areas with physical inaccessibility to higher performing schools experience some of the lowest rates of higher education progression. Progression to Cambridge requires students to attain minimum A-Level grades between A\*AA and A\*A\*A. Students attending under resourced schools are less likely to achieve these grades and are less likely to receive consistent teaching for subjects experiencing the largest teaching shortages such as Languages, Classics, Music, Computer Science, Physics, Maths and Further Maths, narrowing opportunity.

### **Risk 2: Limited Supercurricular Learning**

Schools spending more time on exam curriculum in efforts to close attainment gaps lose out on supporting students with supercurricular learning. Supercurricular content supports well-informed subject choices and ability to articulate wider subject interests, which is essential for progression to Cambridge and to a well-chosen degree course. Supercurricular content should also build interdisciplinary links which characterise large parts of undergraduate study, and should support higher ability students to bridge the gap between school and university.

### **Risk 3: Limited admissions information and guidance**

Students attending schools with a history of low attainment and low progression to Cambridge or Oxford are most at risk of teachers and parents not considering these universities as possible destinations and not being able to access support through the process of applying. Their support networks are most likely to lack knowledge of early application to Cambridge, the early tests required and interview process. Schools are less likely to have shared knowledge about required subject combinations and degree courses on offer, leading to a greater risk for missed opportunity. The perceived inaccessibility and complexity of the Cambridge admissions process is an added barrier for students to make informed and confident decisions about their applications.

### **Risk 4: Limited financial information and guidance**

Students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly underrepresented at Cambridge and across competitive universities and are more likely to choose university places closer to home and undermatched to their ability. Students living with financial pressures are more likely to make university choices weighted on immediate living costs, loan sums and future career prospects, with less weighting placed on the university experience and opportunity for further study. Despite Trinity College and the University of Cambridge having robust financial support systems to assist students, there is a widespread belief that the historic elitism and the high living costs of the city would mean that living costs must be higher. Students and parents are likely to be concerned with costs to move students in and out of accommodation, opportunity for paid work while studying, future career prospects and value for money.

#### **Risk 5: Lacking a sense of belonging**

Students from underrepresented groups and who live in areas with low progression to university are less likely to feel that higher education, especially at Cambridge, is 'for them'. Students may find more belonging at local universities which are more likely to be undermatched to their ability. Not having met someone who has gone to Cambridge or to Trinity College before and who has had similar life experiences to them, increases this sense of distance. They might expect that they would lack community and belonging at Trinity College and that because of this, they wouldn't find university to be a welcoming or fulfilling place, academically or socially. This is particularly significant at Trinity College for women intending to study a STEM subject, Black British students, and for students from regions of the UK which are further away and with lower progression to Cambridge.

#### **Risk 6: Low quality and effectiveness of outreach programmes**

Inequalities can be exacerbated when widening participation initiatives raise aspirations but do not develop tangible skills which would support successful transition to higher education, or when initiatives target groups already receiving support. These risks are caused by deficient knowledge of what works, stemming somewhat from gaps in robust evidence and missed opportunities for data sharing and collaboration across institutions and between Cambridge Colleges. These risks can also be caused by reliance on status quo initiatives and short-term planning and reporting cycles which favour shorter term interventions. High staff turnover within Cambridge Colleges and lack of joined up initiatives means there is also a high risk of inconsistency and repeating mistakes.

### **Strategic Approaches and Targets**

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Our initiatives support students whose educational achievement or progression to university could be supported with intervention from Trinity College or with a multi-organisational approach. Over the next three years we will ensure our initiatives reach a greater number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and that we expand and strengthen relationships with areas whose young people are least likely to progress to competitive universities. Our targets below are a collection of ways our strategic approaches will be tracked and assessed for

how well they support us to achieve our aims and objectives. Each target will be summarised through annual progress reports.

### **Build meaningful relationships with students and their support networks**

Schedule all interventions to support a key decision-making stage for students, including choices of KS4 and KS5 subjects, supercurriculars, outreach opportunities, degree subjects, university and College	Increase numbers of target students part of programmes with multiple points of engagement with Trinity College, spanning from a single term to multiple years, and including both online and in-person engagement	Maintain a core delivery offer of at least four annual in-person subject residential focused on supporting students with applications to subjects experiencing the largest admission gaps	Grow engagement from target groups with social media posts (which highlight outreach programmes, platform student experiences, challenge myths about Cambridge and share reliable information and guidance)
Maintain at least 40 target students who participate in language-based KS5 events who are taking a language A-Level or equivalent	Increase the number of female students from non-fee-paying schools participating in KS5 maths events who are taking A-Level Further Maths, so that we are working with over 60 students	Adapt Student Ambassador training and involvement in response to post-event feedback	Employ Student Ambassadors representing all of our largest and target subject areas
Academics from each subject area engage with prospective students by delivering interactive subject sessions	Develop strategic communications plans by assessing the impact of different media platforms for supporting decision making for prospective students	Fund transport costs for prospective students, schools and current ambassadors to take part in all our selective widening participation events at Trinity College	

### **Respond directly to individual and area-level barriers**

We take a partnership approach to responding to area-level barriers. Community embedded partner organisations have unmatched local knowledge and are best positioned to identify the knowledge gaps of their young people. Similarly, teachers are best able to identify students who

would benefit most from interventions, based on family engagement and risk of underachievement, as well as socio-economic measures such as Pupil Premium funding. Multi-organisational partnerships have the potential to extend impact to schools and students who would not otherwise believe outreach from Trinity College is ‘for them’, and has potential for wider community change and impact on attainment.

In order to alleviate financial barriers to participating in access initiatives, we offer financial support for students and schools at all stages of engagement with Trinity College, including to support with costs of traveling to Trinity College and ensuring all of our programmes remain free of cost. We share information about financial support available at Cambridge and Trinity College for undergraduate students on all platforms and within relevant access initiatives so that prospective students and families understand that finance should not be a barrier to study at Trinity College.

Increase support for initiatives which enable more girls from non-fee-paying schools to progress from KS4 Maths to KS5 Further Maths	Sustain engagement with at least 35 priority schools who visit Trinity College or receive a visit to their school	Increase partnership and delivery support for attainment raising programmes	In collaboration with local organisations, identify and respond directly to priority needs of students, schools and parents
Increase the number of students from priority areas applying to our KS5 programmes, and the percentage of these students selected to participate	Increase partnerships involving our co-delivery with external organisations or universities which directly address gaps in university progression for high attaining and disadvantaged students	Ensure our widening participation events at Trinity College are entirely free including travel reimbursement for schools and students and costs covered for accommodation and meals	Increase support for longer term multi-organisational partnerships which address systemic barriers to equal opportunity, including attainment raising, teacher or family engagement initiatives
Increase the percentage of academically able students flagged by major indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage (FSM or IMD) participating in our KS5 events	Increase awareness financial support from Trinity College and the University of Cambridge among applicants and offer holders	Develop area-based partnerships as anchor points for school engagement	Continue an offer of needs-based financial assistance for undergraduate students, determined by assessing the impact for different student groups

## **Use evidence to guide our initiatives and add to knowledge of what works**

Our approaches to evaluation take account of gaps in the sector's knowledge of what works and our own needs to strengthen evaluation practice. These approaches should together contribute to knowledge of what works for widening participation at Cambridge.

- **Theory of Change Approach:** Our initiatives are largely area-based and contextual and will draw on the aims of partner organisations, each having distinct approaches and desired outcomes. Each of our initiatives must also be connected to our strategy and evaluated based on how well they align with and can be evidenced to support our intervention strategies, objectives and core aims (type 1 evaluation as defined by The Office for Students). We will use Theories of Change to capture the delivery, intended outcomes and strategic links of core interventions so they can be continually refined while remaining cohesive.
- **Long-term Evaluation Framework:** A consistent approach to data collection and comparison of interventions supported by a strong culture of evaluation. Evaluation of programmes should include empirical data where possible (type 2 evaluation as defined by The Office for Students) which can be built on across multiple years using an evaluation framework.
- **Cross-Organisational Collaboration and Sharing:** Given that our initiatives are designed to respond to specific target groups, geographies and admissions context, we must acknowledge limitations in ability to generate sector-wide knowledge. To strengthen our ability to further knowledge and understanding of what works, we will need to grow collaboration and data sharing between organisations to deepen understanding of specific contexts and why some initiatives have more success than others.
- **Impactful Communication of Findings:** Effective use of channels for reporting impact between partner organisations, internally across Cambridge through communities of practice, and through informal website publication. Where appropriate, impact should be communicated at conferences and news articles.

## **Target Groups**

Target groups are those least likely to progress to a university place matched to their ability and who are as a result most underrepresented at Trinity College and throughout competitive universities. Cambridge's APP defines groups most at risk of being undermatched and underrepresented as those who experience socio-economic disadvantage, indicated by receipt of Free School Meals (FSM flagged) and belonging to quintiles 1 or 2 of area-based measure Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD flagged). Admittance to Trinity College over the last five years show significant gaps in representation of these groups and of students from state schools and of women. Over the five-year period between 2021 and 2025, an average of 7.4% FSM and 17.6% IMD flagged students were admitted to Trinity, while 58.7% were from state schools, and 32.4% were women. Our strategy sets out to support the university in admitting

9.4% FSM and 25.1% IMD flagged students by 2029 while also addressing priorities to improve access for other disadvantaged and underrepresented groups at Trinity.

Disadvantage is compounded by belonging to multiple intersecting underrepresented groups characterised by gender, ethnicity, care-experienced and estrangement, and by attending a school whose students are historically least likely to progress to Cambridge. Target schools are those whose student have higher than average flags of disadvantage such as FSM, have been least likely to be admitted to the University of Cambridge as shown on the Cambridge Admissions Office School Targeting Dataset, and who belong in regions with lowest progression to Cambridge. Groups prioritised and selected for within outreach initiatives include:

- Eligible for FSM
- Residing in IMD quintiles 1–2
- Attending a target school such as one with low progression rates to Cambridge compared with their attainment
- Being part of a group of significant priority: Refugee status, care-experience and being a young carer
- Black British students
- Other underrepresented ethnicities and intersecting with socio-economic disadvantage

Black British, British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani ethnicities, among other ethnicities underrepresented across higher education are significantly underrepresented across Cambridge, with Black British students being particularly underrepresented at Trinity College.

#### **Students underrepresented in subject areas where gaps are widest**

- Female UK state school students applying to STEM subjects where their school support is limited, especially for women making applications to subjects which require Maths and Further Maths.
- UK state school students applying to subjects where state-school support is limited and where they are most underrepresented, including for languages-related courses, Computer Science and Economics

Trinity College sees significantly fewer successful applications from female UK state school students in STEM subjects, and significantly fewer students from state schools admitted to some of our smaller humanities subjects, to our languages-related courses, to Natural Sciences and to Computer Science. Each year we will track state school and flagged student admittance to determine priority subject areas, summarised in our progress reporting.