Mind the Gap: student experiences of sexism within teaching and learning at Cambridge University
Throughout the British education system women tend to do better than men, including at GCSE level and in post 16 qualifications. Within higher education, while it once was that men generally outperformed women, the gender attainment gap has now been levelled, except at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

It was through anecdotal evidence of women and non-binary students feeling that their experiences at Cambridge had eroded their confidence in their academic ability and left them feeling isolated and frustrated that we decided to carry out this research. This report is dedicated to every student who finishes their degree feeling less intelligent and less worthy than when they did at matriculation.

Alongside explaining and analysing gendered issues students face and providing a stimulus for change, we hope this report will be of interest to staff members looking to better support and teach women students.

It is only recently in its history that Cambridge had admitted women on an equal footing to men. Despite the fact that women are now admitted throughout the University, although at a lower rate than men, the University remains a male space, this does not merely mean that it contains more men than people of any other gender but it values male-coded behaviour.

The following statement, from the University Women’s Action Group in 1988 rings eerily true of Cambridge today:

‘Promising women students are admitted, but their talents are not allowed to develop to their fullest capacity; women of high ability graduate, but they are not directed towards research; experienced and capable women are appointed as staff but their expertise and value is not recognized by permanent contracts or employment.’

Many women at Cambridge report feelings of isolation, misery, and frustration, but most of all a desire to change the University in ways that would benefit all its members. I hope that the findings and recommendations of this report go some way in helping them do so.

Amelia Horgan, CUSU Women’s Officer 2014-2015
During the last academic year (2013-2014) across undergraduate degrees, 29 percent of male students received firsts compared to 20 percent of female student. These figures are consistent with the attainment gap in previous years. In 1989, for example, 19 percent of men and 9 percent of women obtained firsts, and in 1992 20 percent of men and 11 percent of women achieved firsts. These figures are usually prefaced with the caveat that women are less likely to get thirds, although this does not seem to be the case. Between 2007 and 2010 inclusive men and women were as likely to get a ‘good degree’, meaning a first class or upper second, but men were much more likely to get a first. The recording of data and related trends since the recommendations of the Working Group on performance by gender in 2011 demonstrates this.

The gender attainment gap tends to feature prominently in the student press pretty predictably at least annually, but this year, in connection with national student campaigns to diversify curricula, many undergraduates have called for further attention paid and new approaches taken to an old problem.

We do not think that this single piece of research will answer all the questions about gender and attainment at Cambridge. Women’s underachievement is an issue with complicated and multi-faceted causes happening in very different faculty and college communities, even if they are united in a common root of an academic culture which marginalises non-men and their experiences.

In acknowledgement of our own limited capacity to find a simple solution to gender attainment issues, outlined below are the major pieces of research on gender and attainment at Cambridge in recent years. We hope that this not only reveals how little things have changed, but also confirms some of our conclusions and policy recommendations.
Working group on performance by gender, University of Cambridge, 2011

In 2011, a working group was established in response to concerns raised by student representatives and reviews by faculties and departments. Significantly, the Working Group felt that ‘the major influences on academic performance are not related to students’ previous experience in terms of teaching or social class, but the teaching and learning environment provided by Faculties, Departments, and Colleges’. The report drew particular attention to the History Faculty, which had recently been criticised for the low number of women receiving firsts, particularly in part one, along with the English faculty, and specifically the Practical Criticism and Tragedy papers where the gender gap was especially notable.

The Working Group made several recommendations, which this report intends to build on. These included training for supervisors and examiners, making expectations of students’ work clearer, monitoring gender issues and collecting relevant data, and making all aware of existing resources related to gender. One of the concerns of the Working Group was that their recommendations be ‘cost neutral’ – an approach that this report finds to be insufficient in the context of a decades-long problem that has shown no signs of improvement.

Indicators of Academic Performance Project, University of Cambridge, November 2001

This project investigated the progress of one cohort of undergraduate students between 1997 and 2000 in a range of disciplines. While some of the findings and recommendations, in particular the construction of an English faculty building, seem somewhat dated, the data and trend analysis provide an important complement to this report.

The ambitious scale of the project, covering a wide range of faculties as well as social issues related to gender, in particular class and school background, is impressive, and contains a level of detail and drive we would like to see replicated in further research by the University.

A central argument of the 2001 report is that while academic excellence is broadly defined in relation to success in Tripos examinations, ‘men and women may position these examinations rather differently within their vision of the Tripos overall’. In particular, that women ‘see the Tripos as an opportunity to increase their understanding’ whereas men are ‘alert to ‘performance’ aspects of Tripos examination from an early stage and tailor their intellectual development to public success’. While the 2001 report focuses on the impact this may have on revision (with women more likely to try and demonstrate broad understanding, and men to work towards exam strategies), this report takes the view that the desire for deeper understanding has the further effect of pushing non-male students towards an intellectual identity crisis: that students are faced with a choice of abandoning
their own ideas for learning and understanding and potentially lose out on top marks. This view is supported by Andrea Spurling’s 1990 report analysis, which stresses the desire of non-male students to bring their own experiences to their learning, which cultures and constructions of knowledge and learning at Cambridge often prevent.

It is unclear whether this desire for broader understanding comes from anxiety or, and without resorting to tired and essentialist stereotypes, a somehow less male approach to knowledge is unclear, but significantly it disadvantages women students within the Cambridge system.

The 2001 report details policy recommendations for the department and faculties that were involved in the research, after analysing the varying successes of men and women and different classes in the 1997 cohort.

‘Predicted First: Female Gender Gaps at Final Honours School Examinations at the University of Oxford’ Dphil thesis by Suzann Holsomback

Holsomback’s time as the student union’s women’s officer pushed her towards her Dphil research on ‘gender gaps’ at Oxford University. While she focuses on Oxford, her evidence and arguments also relate to Cambridge. Her work suggests that while the causes of gender gaps – it’s worth noting her use of ‘gaps’ to highlight variance across schools and faculties – are multifaceted. Holsomback debunks several existing theories about gender and success at Oxford – biology and menstruation, ability and intelligence, mental and emotional factors, admission selection, ‘self-esteem’, approach to learning, and writing style. Whether enough research has been done on approaches to learning and writing style at Cambridge to claim that these theories have been disproved is questionable, but her remaining argument, that issues of co-education, female role models, teaching, assessment criteria, and underlying all of this, academic culture, contribute to gender gaps remains a solid and interesting conclusion.

Holsomback suggests that co-education may damage women student’s chances of getting top marks, citing that before Oxford colleges went mixed there was an 0.8 percent difference between men and women getting firsts, which widened to 7.2 percent after every college went mixed. Holsomback writes that a similar trend is noticeable at Cambridge, but something that the examination gains of today’s all-female colleges call into question.

Teaching and the failure of teachers to deal with gendered issues or sexist students in classes is another cause is also listed as a potential cause of gender gaps by Holsomback, as are issues with the clarity of examination criteria. These are concerns and trends that are confirmed in our research.
'The students and academic faculty' Holsomback concludes ‘embody the habitus reflective of a value system that perceives ‘masculine’ traits, work and success as normal or as the pinnacle of achievement’. 11 Gender gaps, she argues are ‘due to the university perpetuating the cultural value system that values certain [i.e. ‘masculine’] types of capital over others’. An institutional culture, specifically one built on the exclusion of women, shapes attainment, a central claim of Holsomback’s work, is a strong argument, and one that this report will also put forward.


Spurling’s report, now twenty-five years old, might initially seem out-dated, but things really do change slowly in Cambridge, and much of Spurling’s analysis, if not the statistics she uses, seem relevant today.

In 1988 King’s College decided to commission a practically-oriented research document into factors inhibiting the academic careers of women at Cambridge, following two decades of co-education at the College.12 While Spurling’s focus on female academics, her analysis of College culture and life (based on an 18 month long project) helps flesh out arguments about the University and masculinity made elsewhere. Spurling also insists that the issues go beyond gender alone: “even on a slight acquaintance with Cambridge University … I felt that the question ‘Why don’t women get further here?’ was only one in a series in the larger set, ‘Why are most people here, male, white, middle-class, and from the Home Counties?’”.13

She analyses the forces creating and maintaining the college as a male space, primarily through interviews. Her main argument is that women are prevented from success at Cambridge because of ‘the masculinity of the academic and social cultures at Cambridge, and the expectation that women will conform to traditional stereotypes’ as well as ‘structural barriers’ making academic careers incompatible with traditional family responsibilities and gender roles.14

Spurling’s recommendations were intended for King’s College specifically but it’s clear that she felt the University might similarly benefit from ‘[t]he wider use of encouragement and ‘non-combative’ modes of teaching and learning’, changing of employment practices to make them more family friendly’ and ‘the rejection of a culture in which the academic and personal areas of life are officially regarded as separate, in favour of one which acknowledges a greater integration of the personal and the professional’.15
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This is the first ever large-scale research on students’ perspectives of the impact of gender on teaching, learning and student wellbeing at the University of Cambridge. The data is far from perfect; indeed, one of our suggestions is further research into specific areas, but we hope it sheds light on student opinions and experiences of institutional sexism.

The survey was shared amongst Cambridge students, and while the sample is likely to be skewed towards students who feel their gender has impacted their experience here or who are already involved in the Women’s Campaign’s work on gender and attainment, the large number of respondents should go some way towards mitigating this issue. We asked students questions on their general experiences of studying and living, followed by questions on their experiences of different elements of teaching and assessment.

It is likely that there will be an element of self-selection in students who filled out the survey with those who’ve had negative or indeed positive experiences more likely to fill it out than those who’ve had neutral experiences. Wherever possible we’ve cross-referenced our findings with results from other research which attracted a broader based of students.

We had 1405 survey respondents, of which 397 were men, 961 were women, and 25 who answered that their gender was best defined as ‘other’. Alongside these options, responded were also able to select ‘prefer not to say’, meaning that those who responded ‘other’ are likely to define outside of the gender binary and as such, face legal, institutional and cultural discrimination.

The balance of arts and humanities students to science students was 787 to 530. The overrepresentation of arts subject proves a problem for the nuance of our data but we’ve also enjoyed the opportunity to debunk the myth that sexism is a problem only in STEM. The relative proportions of graduate and undergraduate respondents, 275 compared to 1,130 undergraduate respondents, means that our analysis focuses primarily on undergraduates but we believe our policy suggestions may have significant and positive ramifications for graduate students too.

We have presented a large amount of the data in the aim of inspiring discussion and institutional change around the gender attainment gap. There are of course, some areas which may appear to be gendered in our data that other research may put into question, or some sections which have different results by gender but may not in fact be caused by gender.

It is worth stating that because the sample sizes for students who face multiple oppressions or fall into two sets of Equality Act ‘protected characteristics’ is so small – in itself an indictment of access at the University – the data for these students may well be imperfect.
EXPERIENCES OF CAMBRIDGE:

Women are twice as likely to feel they struggle with learning new ideas or concepts than men. 16 percent of women compared to 8 percent of men and 22 percent of ‘other’.

1 in 3 women do not feel that Cambridge provides a learning environment that allows them to work to the best of their ability.

BME women were less likely to feel able to work to the best of their ability here than white women (36 percent to 44 percent), and LGBT+ women were 12 percent less likely to agree than non-LGBT+ women.

Only 30 percent of disabled women felt Cambridge allowed them to work to the best of their ability compared to 46 percent of non-disabled women.

Nearly half of women, and 90 percent of ‘other’ students feel their mental health negatively impacts the amount of work they are able to do, compared to 33 percent of men.

“A lecturer for [biology module] would show photos of famous scientists on the PowerPoint, as we learned about their discoveries. The only time a female scientist was shown, he made a comment on how ‘pretty’ she looked” (Female Undergrad)

33 percent of men, 49 percent of women and 90 percent of ‘other’ felt that their mental health negatively impacts their work.

Around 1 in 5 women felt their gender negatively impacted their learning experience compared to 1 in 25 men and around 1 in 2 ‘other’ students.

Women are around twice as likely to self-define as disabled compared to men (8 percent to 4 percent). Significantly, 36 percent of respondents who answered ‘other’ defined as disabled.

Women and ‘other’ respondents were less likely to feel their work was going to plan than men: 77 percent of men, 69 percent of women and 47 percent of ‘other’.

“As a new student on a one year course I felt completely overwhelmed by the ‘idea’ of Cambridge as an institution and it wore down my confidence”. (Female Postgrad)
KEY TRENDS

While a gender attainment gap is currently a phenomenon specific to Oxbridge, the devaluation and marginalisation of women’s contribution to academia is not limited to those two universities. Women, in particular women who face multiple oppressions, while overrepresented at undergraduate level, form a tiny and disproportionate number of professional and other senior appointments.

The causes of the gender attainment gap, while emerging from and reinforced by teaching and institutional behaviour at Cambridge, are diverse and far-reaching. As such, a simple and decisive conclusion would belie a more complex interplay of structural and individual factors located both within and outside of the University. Instead, we intend to offer an overview of the key data trends alongside analysis of specific questions and sections.

One thing that has been confirmed by this data that women and non-binary students at Cambridge feel they are treated differently and often negatively because of their gender. Women in particular report much lower levels of confidence and higher levels of work-related anxiety. Whether or not this has an impact on degree performance, and of course, it is highly likely that it does, these are issues that deserve to be further investigated and improved.

‘Cambridge style’ and Cambridge confidence:

Survey respondents, across all genders, suggested that there was style of teaching unique to Cambridge, and often to Oxford too. In some cases this was just a difference in the practical aspects of teaching and resource allocation, in particular that Cambridge offers students a greater amount of individual attention than most other universities. Women, and ‘other’ respondents, however, while valuing the relatively high amounts of contact time and one-on-one support, described an approach to knowledge, knowledge acquisition and teaching that had proved detrimental to their self-confidence.

Andrea Spurling’s research at King’s uses the idea of the ‘Cambridge Style’ to analyse this. She found that “both senior and junior members in interview used the phrase ‘The Cambridge Style’ spontaneously when asked to identify any specific features of the working environment or culture that might cause difficulties for women”.

While the students we surveyed did not articulate this idea in their responses, their comments on antagonistic, cross-examination style supervisions and classes, echoed those of Spurling’s interviewees, who described supervisions as something which varied from a minimal “‘classic Socratic dialogue’ … to accounts of something sounding more like the Spanish Inquisition”.

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When it came to producing work within the arts and humanities, many women respondents talked about a style of essay writing – fast-paced, aggressive, and argumentative for argument’s sake – that they felt was valorised over more considered and expansive pieces, and that women in general found more difficult, or were less inclined, to write. It’s easy to slip into a lazy line of thinking that suggests women are less confident than men, and therefore they write less confident essays for supervisions and exams. More discursive essays are not simply down to a lack of confidence but instead might emerge in part from a vision of how knowledge and academia should function and a desire to eschew academic showboating.

Knowledge in many sections of the arts and humanities at Cambridge is presented as a dispassionate, detached, and even ‘objective’ rummage through texts and facts leading to a strong, linear, and bold argument. Personal input is discouraged, a frustration for students want to write about how their own lives and experiences have shaped their ideas or responses to a text. A dispassionate approach to knowledge, especially in the context of a male-dominated University, can exclude women whose perspective, especially when talking about their experiences, are rarely considered ‘objective’ to the same extent as men’s. To reduce the gender attainment gap the entirety of Cambridge’s approach to knowledge needs to reconsidered, or at least widened.

Qualities which are coded, but are not essentially or inherently, masculine, are broadly praised within academia and learning. Not only does this make writing ‘good’ essays harder for women students, it can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration. As Spurling writes “women who recognize that the source of the problem is in the environment rather than in themselves, but who feel they can do nothing about it, find their own frustration and anger increasingly difficult to endure. Their self-confidence dwindles in a downward spiral as they see that of their male contemporaries apparently increasing. The realization that men’s confidence is boosted by a masculine environment, and is not necessarily the result of greater intellectual ability, often only serves to increase resentment and frustration”.

Supporting the idea of an environment detrimental to women students, in the CUSU Big Cambridge Survey in 2014, 32 percent of women and students who responded ‘other’ felt that Cambridge had had a negative impact on their confidence, compared to 37 percent of male students.

Female spaces in the male university:

“A male university although of a mixed type” was how a government report of 1921 memorably described the University and a statement that, at least in some sections of the University, might be hard to disprove today.
The most obvious issue is that the University is dominated by a certain group of people – namely white men from a very narrow class, and often regional, background. Less than 1 in 5 professors in the UK are women, and there are only 1,195 BME professors of the 17,435 national total. Even at the level of undergraduates – where normally women outnumber men – in many Cambridge colleges as well as courses, men outnumber women.

The admission of women does not make the University a gender-neutral space, or stop it from being in parts a male space. In the history of women at the University it was not just in women’s access to education that progress was terrifyingly slow; women were routinely excluded from spaces within the University, and much of the debates around women’s admission to Cambridge stems from anxiety around the perceived impact their presence would have on the male space. Women’s access to the University Library was restricted to certain hours, as was their ability to move in more informal spaces.

When women start to be admitted to previously all-male colleges from the early 1970s, students in those colleges organised campaigns to push for mixed education, as well perhaps less supportively, last hurrahs for their all male communities. In King’s students agitated from 1968 to encourage the college to ‘go co-ed’, with officials finally relenting in 1973. Meanwhile, in Queens’, on the eve of admission of non-men, the JCR organised a ‘stag-night’ with strippers. Similarly, one college bursar likened the admission of women to the “letting of cats into a dogs home”. Cambridge University has historically been a male space and the slow admission of women does not automatically render it a gender-neutral space, let alone a welcoming environment for women students and staff.

There are some areas of the University that are perceived to be more ‘male’ than others. Most obviously, STEM subjects, which have a history of a low proportion of female students, as well as some specific papers in other Tripos – for example the History of Political Thought papers in the History and Politics faculties, which are considered to be something of a ‘boys’ paper’. Elements of assessment, alongside areas of learning and knowledge, may well be also gendered male. Examinations, with their gruelling schedule and expectations (whether created by students or by the wider University) of excessive, even super-human, hours of work, could be such an area. This is supported by our findings that women’s wellbeing and confidence seem to suffer disproportionately within these areas.

There are, however sections of the University that are gendered female, or where men are less dominant. The most obvious example is that of women’s colleges, which from the feedback within our survey, play a vital role in supporting women students both pastorally and intellectually, often in the face of sneering criticism from male students. Similarly, courses or parts of courses that are dominated by women; one example being papers on gender which were continually and positively brought up by our respondents, women.
report feeling supported, respected and valued in these less antagonistic and more collaborative environments.

**WORKLOADS**

The intensity of a Cambridge degree is considered one of its strengths from the perspective of its applicants and perhaps in some of their minds, their imagined future employers. Once students arrive here however, many find that the workload is not only unmanageable but leads to a situation where they feel intellectually under-challenged.

Student wellbeing concerning pressure and workload is an issue often raised by elected student representatives and by the student body more generally. The case for reassessing the levels of pressure and work for undergraduate students was confirmed by this year in the National Student Survey which found that only 55 percent of final year students agreed that the workload on their course is manageable. Similarly, only 38 percent of NSS respondents felt that their course does not apply “unnecessary pressure”. These results were reflected in our survey findings.

Aside from the impact on student health, many students felt that the enormity of workloads has a detrimental effect on their academic progress. One female undergraduate student wished her degree gave her “more time to do the work so that it becomes more about producing good quality work than about desperately trying to churn out another essay”, these comments were echoed by undergraduate students of all genders.

“[I]n my 7th week, I sat down and told myself ‘to write like a boy’. The essay I wrote was not in my usual style – very confident, with less subtleties and details, less “balanced” ... I felt arrogant even. ... My supervisor told me it was one of my best essays. I did the same next week, with the same result” (Female Undergrad)

Approaches to work, stress around completing assignments, and concerns about deadlines varied significantly across genders.

75 percent of women did not feel able to complete their work to the standard they would like, compared to 61 percent of men, and 89 percent of ‘other’ students.

Men and women were more or less the same likely to disagree that they were able to complete their work on time (39 percent of men compared to 40 percent of women).
Men were most likely to agree that deadlines were consistent and fair – 65 percent of men compared to 53 percent of women and 28 percent of ‘other’ respondents.

**ASKING FOR HELP AND SUPPORT**

Many students will access support during their time at Cambridge, from an informal chat with a college nurse to long-term support for disability or mental health problems. Women and ‘other’ students are more likely to need on support providers so any deficiencies or issues with help within in the collegiate University will have a gendered impact, as evidenced by a 2014 CUSU survey which found that 56 percent of women and ‘other’ respondents agreed that stress and anxiety were problematic in their student life, compared to 37 percent of male respondents.

Women are slightly better at knowing where to access help; 77 percent of men felt they knew where to get help compared to 81 percent of women and 67 percent of ‘other’ students. Women were more likely to agree they got the help they wanted, but more likely to feel like they were a drain on resources when they asked for help than men did, reflective of women’s socialisation to focus on caring for others rather than themselves.

60 percent of women felt they received help when they asked for it, compared to 53 percent of men and 44 percent of ‘other’ students and 25 percent of men, 38 percent of women and 61 percent of ‘other’ students felt like a drain on resources when they asked for help.

Significantly, around 15 percent of women felt their gender had impacted the help they received.

For support external to colleges, male and female students were similarly likely to have had positive or negative experiences. For this section students who answered ‘other’ are not included due to the small number of respondents and subsequent risks to confidentiality.

7 percent of men and 6 percent of women had a negative experience with the Disability Resource centre.

3 percent of men and 6 percent of women had a negative experience with the Student Advice Service.

17 percent of women and 19 percent of men had a negative experience with the counselling service.
Perhaps supporting the idea of women’s difficulty in spaces gendered as male, when it came to experiences with in-college support, men were slightly more likely to have positive experiences than women.

64 percent of men rate their tutor positively compared to 59 percent of women.

46 percent of men rated support from their senior tutor positively compared to 38 percent of women.

61 percent of men rated support from their college nurse positively compared to 56 percent of women.

Ratings for DoS were more or less equal across men and women.

For support from college counsellors 35 percent of men and 32 percent of women rated their support positively.

**SUPERVISIONS**

Supervisions form a central part of learning within the Cambridge undergraduate degree as well as a decent part of the mythology of the University. Supervisions have previously been considered to be a factor in the gender attainment gap and with good reason; supervisors lacking training, and over-confident male students more than willing to speak over the rest of their supervision combine to make supervisions an often negative learning experience for women and ‘other’ students.

‘I have had many positive experiences where gender has played little part and I felt confident in discussions. However, I have had a couple where I felt that I was treated differently to male students – my teacher asked me to answer fewer or less difficult questions, engaged with my answers less, or was patronising. One supervisor in particular will speak disparagingly about our female lecturers. Often my supervisors (who are mostly male) will engage in ‘banter’ with male students but maintain their distance with me and other female students. This makes me feel less confident in supervisions and I won’t answer questions unless I am sure I am right for fear of being humiliated.’ (Female Undergrad)

Women and ‘other’ students generally had worse experiences than men in supervisions. Some respondents felt that an aggressive style by supervisors and a lack of positive feedback, damaged their confidence and indeed, enjoyment of their degree.
Several male students felt that their supervisors either didn’t prevent male students dominating supervisions or had lower expectations for women students. In their comments male respondents often didn’t see sexism in supervisions as an issue for people of any gender.

Men were very supportive of the idea of supervisions and the vast majority of men had had broadly positive experiences in their supervisions.

Many women and ‘other’ respondents found supervisions a positive experience and a useful way of learning, but women were more likely to rate supervisions either mixed or negatively.

Inappropriate behaviour by supervisors was regularly mentioned in comments from women, including sexual comments.

Women students who attended all-female colleges or had had men-free supervisions commented on this as positive aspect, and in some cases, almost feeling like something of a lucky escape. These experiences were echoed by non-binary students. Men were significantly more likely to agree that their supervisor was able to manage group dynamics than either women or non-binary students. 73 percent of men compared to 64 percent of women and 56 percent of ‘other’ students.

82 percent of men, 77 percent of women and 50 percent of ‘other’ respondents felt that their supervisor made them feel comfortable.

It was not felt by all students that supervisors set clear expectations about the amount and quality of work that they were supposed to produce. Men were more likely to agree that clear expectations were set, reinforcing the idea that men feel generally more comfortable and at home in learning spaces at Cambridge: 70 percent of men, 66 percent of women and 50 of ‘other’ students agreed that expectations were clear.

The majority of students agreed that their supervisor behaved ‘appropriately towards’ them, but that there is any divergence from all students feeling this is a cause for concern. 94 percent of men, 91 percent of women and 56 percent of ‘other’ students agreed that their supervisor behaved appropriately towards them.

‘Of the three guys and two girls in the group I talk the most, ask the most questions and am most confident in disagreeing with the supervisor. ... Some possible reasons: I went to a public school; I’m aware of how much I’m paying per supervision; I really enjoy arguing about my subject’ (Male Undergrad)
27 percent of women felt that their supervision partners spoke over them compared to 14 percent of men and 22 percent of ‘other’ students. Similarly, 20 percent of women and 61 percent of ‘other’ students felt their gender influenced the way their supervision partners treated them.

Women were significantly less likely to feel able to make points or contribute to discussion than men and ‘other’ students. 93 percent of men compared to 80 percent of women and 83 percent of ‘other’ students agreed that they were comfortable making points or contributing to discussion. Similarly, 94 percent of men felt able to ask questions, compared to 79 percent of women and 88 percent of ‘other’.

Feedback, identified in respondents’ comments as crucial to students self-esteem also proved a gendered issue with 3 in 4 men feeling able to ask for feedback compared to less than 2 in 3 of women and 2 in 5 ‘other’.

While many students found great enjoyment and academic enrichment from their supervisions, that negative experiences are not uncommon, and that there is significant variety in the quality of teaching, confirms the need for greater training and support for supervisors. As one male postgraduate student who supervises comments “There needs to be more training for supervisors. All we’re told is basically ‘Don’t hit on your students’ and that’s it.”

**CLASSES**

The gendered problems found in supervisions were also common, and often magnified in classes.

Feelings of comfort and support remained gendered, and were generally lower than supervisions: 74 percent of men, 71 percent of women and 50 percent of ‘other’ students felt their class teacher made them feel comfortable.
The meeting of and access or disability-related needs emerged as very serious issue: only 27 percent of men, 31 percent of women and 22 percent of ‘other’ students felt any access needs they had were met by their teachers in classes.

Only 68 percent of women felt teachers were able to manage class gender dynamics, and 1 in 4 women felt their classmates spoke over them. 1 in 5 women felt unable to make points in classes. Similarly, women were less likely to feel listened to by their peers and teachers: 65 percent of women felt their ideas were listened to compared to 76 percent of men and 67 percent of ‘other’.

Once again, lack of feedback was an issue and one which impacted women and ‘other’ students more than their male counterparts. 58 percent of men felt able to ask for support compared to 47 percent of women and 22 percent of non-binary people. Just under half of women felt able to ask for feedback.

**LECTURES**

Men are more likely to find the lecture environment welcoming; 65 percent of men do compared to 55 percent of women and 46 percent of ‘other’ students.

When discussion took place in lectures 1 in 3 women felt that other students dominated discussion compared to 18 per cent of men and 23 per cent of non-binary students.

1 in 5 women felt that lecturers were not considerate to access needs.

“In a [science] lecture I asked the lecturer a supposedly “stupid question” to him and he did not answer the question because he said I should know the answer. I nearly cried it was so embarrassing” (Female Undergrad)
TEACHING METHODS

1 in 5 women felt teaching methods used at Cambridge were not suited to their needs, compared to 1 in 6 men and 1 in 2 non-binary students.

“[I] was told to ‘write more like a man’ during the year. … I performed well but having been told that, I think it natural to wonder if I would have performed better if writing in a more argumentative style.” (Female Undergrad)

Nearly a third of women felt that teaching methods and styles made them feel unsupported and under-valued.

EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENTS

During Easter term when undergraduates have the majority of their degree assessments, students feel, as one male undergraduate commented that there is a ‘[r]eally terrible collective atmosphere in the town”. Anxiety levels, boosted by a competitive environment and a results-driven focus reinforced by the pressure of higher tuition fees, are a serious issue for students of all genders. Women, however, were more likely to feel anxious about their exams.

Students often feel that the ways in which exams are marked are shrouded in academic mystery, and struggle with knowing the criteria for excellence, or even just a good mark, in their degree area. These concerns were present in students of all genders, but women and ‘other’ students were more likely to feel they had little understanding of how exams work. Just under half of men felt marking processes were clear compared to around a third of women and non-binary students.

“They don’t reflect how hard you’ve worked – they reflect a very certain kind of “thing” Cambridge is looking for: the ability to take risks and jump very quickly to a conclusion. It doesn’t encourage reflection, just bolshiness”. (Female Undergrad)
70 percent of women, 40 percent of men and 70 percent of ‘other’ did not feel confident about examinations.

70 per cent of men and non-binary students felt exam questions reflected the work they had done that year compared to 55 per cent of women.

1 in 5 women felt their gender had an impact on their exam results as did 1 in 3 ‘other’ students, compared to 1 in 20 men.

**COURSEWORK AND DISSERTATIONS**

Rates of anxiety were lower for all genders than for examinatons but a difference of around ten percent between men and women persisted.

> “Very negative feedback on essays damaged the confidence of many women I knew; I feel fortunate not to have experienced this more, but when I did experience it, I found it devastated my confidence. Being made to feel inadequate, stupid and uninteresting does not help you learn!” (Female Undergrad)

Around half of women surveyed compared to a third of men and two fifths of non-binary students did not feel confident about coursework.

Perceived understanding of marking processes were lower than for examinations, and again a difference of around ten percent persisted between men and women, with more men and non-binary students feeling they understood marking schemes than women did.

1 in 10 women felt their gender influenced their performance, compared to 1 in 20 men and 1 in 2 non-binary students.

**INTERVIEWS AND VIVAS**

Vivas and similar interviews are rarely offered in undergraduate courses but form a standard part of graduate assessment methods. Within the Classics faulty, undergraduate vivas are routinely used. The reduced sample size in this section should be taken into account when analysing the figures below, but vivas do seem to present a successful alternative or supplementary assessment method that students broadly feel positive about.

> "I wish we had these [vivas] – I would feel more confident in this than in an exam or when doing coursework." (Female Undergrad)
Levels of anxiety were lower than for examinations across all genders, with just 51 percent of men and 40 percent of women feeling anxious.

A third of men and a quarter of women felt they had adequate support during the process.

There was a lower understanding levels of marking processes than either exams or coursework but with no significant gender difference; just 21 percent of men and 19 percent of women felt the marking processes were clear.

EXAM ADJUSTMENTS

Women and ‘other’ students were twice as likely to have requested exam adjustments than men.

Women were likely to have had better support in the process of applying for adjustments, with 52 percent of women agreeing that their college had been supportive compared to 39 percent of men. Women were more likely to feel comfortable requesting adjustments than men, with 32 percent of men and 39 percent of women agreeing that they felt comfortable. It’s worth noting that both of these figures remain unnecessarily low.

26 percent of men and 40 percent of women felt their exam adjustments made a difference to their performance.

Many students, especially disabled students, rely on exam adjustments to allow them to participate in assessment at Cambridge. While this report will suggest consideration of a wider range of assessment methods, the need for supportive and streamlined applications procedures for exam adjustments remains.

REVISION

In a reversal of the general trend, more men than women knew where to access support, with 56 percent of men, 44 percent of women and 50 percent of non-binary students agreeing that they knew where to find support. This suggests that exams and revision may feel like more of a male-coded space and a site of idealised Cambridge tradition, further demotivating and reducing the confidence of non-male students.

Men were more than twice as likely as women to feel confident during revision. Only 14 percent of women felt confident while revising, compared to 20 percent of non-binary students and 37 percent of men.
GRADES AND RESULTS

A third of women did not feel their grades reflected the level they had been working at throughout the year, compared to a quarter of men.

Women and non-binary students were worse at predicting their grades than men (both in terms of better and worse results), and were more likely to be worried about finding out their results. 90 percent of women and ‘other’ respondents felt worried about finding out results compared to 74 percent of men. This confirms the need for consistent feedback throughout the year, as well highlighting a lack of confidence on the part of women and ‘other’ respondents.

“They [exams] don’t reflect how hard you’ve worked – they reflect a very certain kind of “thing” Cambridge is looking for: the ability to take risks and jump very quickly to a conclusion. It doesn’t encourage reflection, just bolshiness”. (Female undergrad)

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of this report intend to build upon and extend those made to the University in 2011 and in 2001. Underlying these suggestions is that the belief that the solution to women and non-binary students who appear lacking in confidence is not to urge their participation in confidence-building workshops, but instead to tackle the root institutional causes of such problems. Similarly, women’s success will not just come from the removal of obstacles; because in the fist instance we do not even fully know all the obstacles yet, and secondly the removal of barriers alone will not let people who’ve not been taught they deserve to excel in Cambridge context do so. It is also important to considered gendered violence and the impact it has on students’ attainment while at University. Adequate student welfare provision and strong policies will help the significant number of women students who’ve experienced violence during their degree and may mitigate the impact of violence on their studies.

Our recommendations are:

• Further research
• Data monitoring
• A review of teaching and assessment methods and styles
• Enhanced staff training
• Better student support
• Continuing work on ending sexual violence and supporting survivors
DATA MONITORING

At every level (college, department, faculty, school, collegiate University) data monitoring must either be established, or where it already exists, continued. Colleges and faculties that lack the expertise or funds to collect and analyse data must be financially supported in doing so. The collection of data relating to gender, along with other equality and diversity related areas appears to be a strength of the University – this must continue and be equally applied to all areas of the collegiate University.

Wherever gender data is monitored other diversity areas should be monitored concurrently and reported on together rather than in isolation, in order to recognise the importance of intersecting identities and oppressions that students may face. The experiences of a wealthy woman undergraduate compared to a woman student from a working class background, or the differing experiences of white and BME women, or disabled and non-disabled women, should be monitored and analysed.

The principle of studying all possible factors influencing a student’s attainment should be similarly continued into any reports produced from the data collected.

Alongside the monitoring of other diversity criteria, data collection should allow for the recording of non-binary or ‘other’ gender identities instead of using only ‘male’ and ‘female’ tick boxes.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The collection of year-on-year data should be supplemented with analysis of longer-term data trends, and to particular specific areas within and between Tripos subjects. For example, in the English Tripos certain papers exhibit larger gender gaps than others, and investigation into different teaching and assessment methods in and across faculties, with the aim of establishing good practice, should be encouraged.

Research from Higher Education institutions across the UK suggests a sector wide attainment gap between BME and white students. White students are much more likely to be awarded a ‘good’ degree, with 67 percent of white students gaining a first or upper second class degree compared to 50 percent of BME students and 38 percent of Black students. After controlling for the majority of contributory factors (for example, prior attainment, age, gender, disability, type of HE institution), being from a minority ethnic group was found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment. Attempts were made to analyse the data we collected to see if there were any statistically significant variations. The very small number of BME respondents, in part a result of the very low number of BME students at the University, made obtaining statistical
significance very difficult. Further research into the race attainment gap and how this feeds into access, institutional, and structural issues, along with teaching and learning should be a priority for the University. Consultation with student representatives, especially the CUSU BME Campaign should form an important part of this research.

Faculties should be encouraged (where necessary with financial assistance) to support innovation in relation to teaching and gender. One recent example is the use of ‘scaffolding’ questions in Physics examinations. Research into the efficacy of such projects, as well as longer-term trends garnerered through data collection, should be encouraged and produced by the collegiate University.

Any potential differences in the gender attainment gap between colleges may provide a fruitful area of research.

What is clearly necessary is a spirit of creativity in responses to the gender attainment gap. Reforms and changes to teaching and assessment methods should be explored, deployed and analysed; evidentially, the current Tripos is letting down many students, not just women, and to move beyond this the University must stop seeing elements of the degree as sacred and immovable.

**TRAINING**

Training for teaching and pastoral staff is essential to support women and other minority students during their time here. Aside from training on diversity matters, teaching staff should feel empowered to better manage gender dynamics within group sessions and how to motivate students, including the use of positive feedback.

The Graduate Representatives on the Women’s Campaign Committee, both current PhD students, are currently working with other graduate students to create a training programme for students who supervise. The training will focus on gender related issues. The University should look into the suitability of this training for old and new supervisors, as well as considering other areas of training that may be beneficial for both supervisors and supervisees.

The very high number of ‘other’ respondents who had experience of poor support and inappropriate behaviour confirms the need for training on issues effecting non-binary and trans students. The CUSU LGBT+ trans campaign, ‘Make No Assumptions’ has produced a wealth of resources available on their website. We would strongly encourage consultation with the campaign to provide training and assistance.
The biggest concern for respondents was the style of teaching rather than the different methods of teaching. There were, however, calls for a wider variety of teaching methods, such as better use of classes, use of a larger range of media, more group work, by many students.

When students arrive for the start of their undergraduate degrees some faculties host skills based training events to support students who did not receive training on research skills or essay writing within their schooling. Whether these endeavours could be expanded and normalised, in order to demystify the learning process, something that our research suggests is gendered, and address the discrepancies between state and private school students should be seriously considered by the University. This may include a focus on the criterion for exam and assessment excellence within degrees – an area that many women feel they struggle to understand later on in their study. Of course, to pin the blame on a deficiency in women’s understanding rather than on structural issues with teaching and courses would be misguided. That said, enhancing academic skills based training from the start of undergraduate degrees might go somehow towards addressing gendered divides in confidence.

“I honestly think that if we were all reassured more/give more honest feedback regarding how a piece of work would be marked in an exam we would have the confidence to go beyond that basis and explore further” (Female Undergrad)

A combative teaching style, especially within supervisions was something mentioned by many students. Related to the idea of the ‘Cambridge style’ many felt that supervisors cross-examined them rather than discussing the ideas the course or their work had produced. Others had an approach of tearing down suggestions made, including in some cases ignoring or laughing at students’ ideas. Many women students described how this approach had disastrous effect on their confidence and self-esteem, especially within group supervisions. While questioning of a student’s idea and approaches is a necessary part of the learning process, what is unnecessary is cross-questioning to the extent of deleterious effect on the confidence and wellbeing of students.

Concerns about feedback had two main strands; firstly that the quantity of feedback was often insufficient and the level of detail given varied hugely between supervisors, and secondly that feedback was often given in the combative style outline above.
We would recommend stressing the need for positive alongside critical feedback, and ensuring that guidelines for best practice for feedback was stressed in supervisor training.

The accessibility of learning materials for students, in particular disabled students, was raised throughout respondents’ comments. We suggest that lecture notes and wherever possible recorded lectures are available on Camtools or Moodle, to ensure that students who are unable to attend lectures for disability reasons are able to access material remotely when it suits them. The ways in which the University supports student with access and disability needs with regards to teaching and assessment needs to be reviewed. This is not an area that will necessarily have an immediate effect on gender attainment gaps but as more women and ‘other’ respondents reported defining as disabled or using exam adjustments there may be well be a gendered impact.

Students are often unaware of existing mechanisms to improve their learning, for example the ability to request different supervisors or supervision partners. We would suggest that these processes are made known to students and that the processes are as simple and supportive as possible.

**COURSE CONTENT**

In the arts and humanities in particular, women’s confidence is further undermined by reading lists and course content that ignore their experiences, confirming Cambridge and perhaps the entirety of academia, as a male domain. A wider choice of subject areas in the arts and humanities, and a focus on women’s achievement across all degree subjects would go some way to improve the current situation.

“Most of the texts we read were by men. (mostly white men incidentally). It’s kind of crushing. It’s especially crushing when they choose highly misogynistic texts and the teacher dismisses it. ... Misogyny in texts is just dismissed too easily and to be honest it sucks to read men writing about men all the time, it’s really alienating.” (“Other’ Undergrad)

The network of school, faculty and course reps could play a vital role in ensuring that student preferences for a more diverse curriculum are met. Within the plans to revisit academic governance within the University there may well be an opportunity to enhance student representation, and perhaps specifically on gender issues, an opportunity this report would greatly recommend using.
Recently there has been a great deal of public controversy over the use of ‘trigger warnings’ within an academic context. ‘Trigger warnings’ are designed to alert a reader when a text contains material they may find upsetting, or in the case of those who have direct experience of the issue, for example, sexual violence, triggering in relation to PTSD.

It should be noted that the Women’s Campaign prefers the use of the word ‘content warning’ – a more neutral term that many who have experiences of PTSD and related symptoms prefer.

In their simplest form a note on the content of a lecture or text works in a similar way to warnings on news broadcasts about images that certain viewers may find distressing. When used to provide a reference point for students about the type of material they will be using – for example whether a lecture will contain detailed descriptions of sexual violence or just talk about in an abstract or theoretical way, allows students to access material in a way that is beneficial to them, their peers and their teachers.

Content notes are not as they have been presented in the press an affront to academic freedom, but instead provide a way of allowing students to access material in ways that support their personal development. With more accessible lectures and other teaching resources, allowing students to access material in non-traditional ways, content notes could mean that students are better able to participate in learning on a text or module. They would not mean that certain areas are out of bounds for discussion, simply that students would be aware of aspects of the course that could be more difficult for them to study in advance, and given time to academically and emotionally prepare. We would recommend that in consultation with relevant student representatives from across the University, the feasibility of adding, where appropriate, notes on content discussing issues like (sexual) violence or suicide is discussed and researched.

ASSESSMENT METHODS

We understand that the University is currently conducting an Examination Review, something that we greatly support, and urge that gender issues are taken into consideration within this process.

The use of more inventive assessment methods, and in particular a wider range of assessment methods may have gender specific impact although the data on this unclear and at time contradictory. The successful use of undergraduate vivas in the Classics Faculty and the lower rates of anxiety for this assessment method confirm the need for both further research and further experimentation in this area.
The prevalence of gendered violence, in particular sexual violence and partner abuse within campuses across the UK has been a serious concern for both students and universities. Survivors of sexual violence, who are disproportionately women and non-binary students, are more likely to face poor mental health which is likely to impact on academic achievement. Moreover, when student survivors who report their experiences are treated with a lack of respect, sympathy or dignity, or action is only taken very slowly, their relationship with the institution is likely to deteriorate further, reinforcing the impact of the trends outlined above.

Last year’s Cambridge Speaks Out survey, organised by the CUSU Women’s Campaign and Varsity student newspaper, highlighted just how common sexual violence is within the University: 77 percent of respondents had experienced sexual harassment, and 29 percent had experienced sexual assault. Significantly, across all incidents, 85 percent of respondents reported a negative impact on their mental health.26

Similarly, in the NUS Hidden Marks from 2012 68 percent of respondents had experienced sexual harassment, 1 in 7 survey respondents has experienced a serious physical or sexual assault during their time as a student and over a third of students felt unsafe when visiting their University or college buildings at night.27

“"There should be more academic support for students who have experienced sexual assault. It can have a strong impact on academic work, and as the statistics show a significant proportion of female students will experience this at some point during their university education." (Female Undergrad)

Women aged under 30 are the age group most at risk from domestic violence, but there is limited specialist support for younger women.28 The collegiate University is lacking a strategy on tackling partner abuse and supporting student survivors.

While it is not the case that gendered violence is necessarily more common at Cambridge, the current support and reporting mechanisms, and the structures of our communities contribute to a culture which marginalises and silences survivors, likely with a subsequent impact on their academic success. The small size of college communities inhibits reporting because of the difficulty of preserving anonymity and because the people involved in reporting structures may already have an established relationship with the person reporting and the person accused. That most students live in college accommodation where they face the risk of running into their attacker or abuser presents another area where support is
lacking and confirms the need for supportive and empowering policies in every college and faculty.

We do not know how much of an impact these crucially important changes will have on results, but we do know that sexual violence can have a devastating impact on the well-being and mental health of a survivor – something the University should consider when in future research about gender, wellbeing and attainment.

The Women’s Campaign recommendations for a University wide sexual harassment policy were laid out in an open letter earlier this year:

*We’re calling on the University to develop a central policy on sexual harassment that all colleges will be obliged to sign up to. This policy must explain the support that students who face sexual harassment and violence will receive and the processes that will be involved in reporting a case of harassment. It must be clearly written and easily available for students to access. It must be reviewed regularly, and renewed when necessary in line with equality legislation and with the feedback and demands of students. Most importantly, it must protect us and place our wellbeing at the forefront.*

The small, insular atmosphere of Cambridge colleges - where everyone knows everything about everyone else - and the individualised nature of college support systems are clear barriers to students reporting incidents of harassment and assault. Students should not have to refrain from seeking support because it would cause a college scandal or bring them in contact with senior staff they have problems with (and that’s not even to mention cases where it is a member of college staff who has perpetrated harassment or assault of students). The centralised sexual harassment policy that we are demanding must therefore present different channels for students to seek support outside of their colleges if they want or need to. And it’s not only in our colleges that we face harassment and violence; in our academic departments and in anywhere the University owns and controls we must also feel safe. Faculties must subscribe to the central sexual harassment policy, as must University or college-owned student spaces.

We also urge the University to continue its support for student-led sexual consent workshops in all college and for all incoming students.

We would strongly encourage training for academic and non-academic staff who students may disclose their experiences to, including awareness of gender based violence, first response training, and workshops on signposting to available support.

CUSU is signed up to the Good Night Out campaign – a project which offers training to night-time venues on combatting and dealing with sexual harassment and harassment of LGBT+ people. We aim to be launching this training properly in the next academic year and would encourage all relevant venues in the collegiate University to sign up to the scheme.
MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Mental health is a serious concern for students at Cambridge. In CUSU annual Big Cambridge Survey of 2014, 24 percent of respondents felt that Cambridge was not a healthy and positive place to live, and 31 percent agreed that Cambridge had had a negative impact on their mental health. Mental health is also a gendered concern; in the same survey 51 percent of women and those who responded ‘other’ felt that Cambridge had had a negative effect on their mental health compared to 34 percent of male respondents.  

The potential negative impact of the workload on student wellbeing (both physical and mental) is something that needs to be taken seriously at every possible level. 56 percent of women and ‘other’ respondents agreed that stress and anxiety were problematic in their student life (compared to 37 percent of male respondents). Ensuring that support services available are supportive and have minimal waiting lists is crucial to supporting women and non-binary students, and may help towards narrowing attainment gaps. We would also advise that training on gender-related issues, in particular sexual violence, eating disorders, and partner abuse are offered to all support service providers.
Title taken from a comment made by a fellow reported in *Is King’s Still a Male College Admitting Women?*, Cambridge, 1993.
3 Ibid, p. 4.
5 ‘Cambridge University Indicators of Academic Performance Project’, November 2001 Ch. 9 p. 4.
6 this section contains interesting analysis of the seemingly unlikely relative lack of success on the part of privately educated women undergraduates with the faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages.
7 Ibid, Ch. 9 p. 4.
11 Ibid, p. 68.
12 Ibid, p. 5.
14 Ibid p. 96.
16 Ibid, p. 20.
17 Ibid p.20.
19 CUSU Big Cambridge Survey 2014.
20 UCU ‘The position of women and BME staff in professorial roles in UK HEIs’, January 2013.
22 National Student Survey results, 2014.
30 Figures from CUSU’s ‘Big Cambridge Survey’ (2014).