

CAMBRIDGE & its Colleges

What is 'Cambridge'?

Cambridge can refer to both the University of Cambridge and the 31 Cambridge Colleges. The Colleges and the University work together to provide the teaching and research environment that is Cambridge.



What are the Colleges?

The Colleges are autonomous, self-governing communities where students and academics live, work, learn and socialise.

What does the University do?

The University provides the central resources for research and teaching, such as lecture theatres, faculty libraries and laboratories; sets the curriculum; conducts the examinations; and confers the degrees.



How many Colleges are there?

There are 31 Colleges. Three are for women only and two admit only postgraduates. The remainder house and teach anyone enrolled in courses of study or research at the University.



Is it possible to be a student at the University without belonging to a College?

No. A student must be admitted to a College before he or she can study at the University; they remain a member of that College for life.



Questions and answers

When were the Colleges founded?

The oldest College – Peterhouse – was established as a community of scholars in 1284; the most recently purpose-built College, Robinson College, was founded in 1979. The other 29 Colleges span the intervening centuries, and were founded by kings and queens, noblemen and women, religious orders, guilds and business people. Over the years each has acquired its own rich history of traditions and very individual atmosphere.

Why is the College system important?

The collegiate structure gives a strong sense of community. The Colleges were a medieval innovation that allowed the University to grow as a national, then European, then international force, and yet remain a supportive environment for scholars and students. Within each College, academics and students of all disciplines are brought together, encouraging a cross-fertilisation and free exchange of ideas.

Is a College like a hall of residence?

No. A Cambridge College plays a far more significant part in an undergraduate's and graduate's life than a hall of residence. As well as food and accommodation, students also receive supervisions – individual and small group teaching sessions – in their College, which complement the lectures and practical classes organised by the University. The College also provides a welcoming community for its students. Each College has a Junior Combination Room (JCR) for undergraduates and a Middle Combination Room (MCR) for graduate students. JCR and MCR officers represent student views on College committees.

What do the Colleges offer their students apart from specialist teaching?

In the past, College life revolved around the three great communal areas – the chapel, the library and the dining hall. Today, each College has living accommodation, a library, a bar and sports facilities, and some have a theatre. All Colleges have their own clubs and societies, offering non-academic activities for students to take part in.

How do the Colleges operate?

Each College is an autonomous institution with its own property and income, and has its own governing body that runs it and decides on policy. The Colleges appoint their own staff and are responsible for selecting undergraduate students, in accordance with University regulations. As each

individual College operates autonomously and chooses its own members, this very much defines its character.

Who exactly governs the Colleges?

The governing body of a College consists of a Master or Mistress (or Provost, President, Principal or Warden) and some or all of its Fellows. A Fellow is an elected senior member of a College whose primary duty is teaching, research or administration.

Who are the other members of a College?

The College system works through Tutors (led by Senior Tutors), who are responsible for the pastoral care of students; Bursars, responsible for finances and buildings; and Directors of Studies, who have specific responsibilities in relation to courses of study and the academic progress of students. Other College officers include Deans or Chaplains, whose concern is the spiritual welfare and academic progress of students, and Supervisors, who carry out the small group teaching.

How do these autonomous institutions work effectively with the University?

Involvement with the governance of the University is ensured through College representatives on the Council (the University's principal executive and policy-making committee), the Finance Committee, the Planning and Resources Committee, and numerous other University and intercollegiate committees. In addition, most but not all of the academic staff of the University are either Fellows or members of the Colleges, and most Fellows of Colleges also hold University teaching appointments.

What are the benefits of the College system for students?

Teaching: The supervision system is regarded as one of the best teaching models in the world and is considered to be one of the main reasons for the University's success in external reviews of learning and teaching. Colleges also offer Junior Research Fellowships to support early career academics.

Accommodation: Almost all undergraduates and many graduate students live in College accommodation for the duration of their time at Cambridge.

Welfare: A variety of support systems ensure that students are treated as individuals, allowing overseas students in particular to be fully integrated.

Financial support: Many Colleges offer awards for their own members, in addition to funds available from the University.