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# Academic Work: What to expect and what you must do

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Ultimately, at University you are responsible as an adult for your own studies, exam preparation, and progress. Help and advice are offered in various forms, but there is no substitute for serious effort on your own behalf. The rewards for learning how to study and think and observe at the expected level are great. Consistent diligence in your studies may sometimes feel like hard work, but it is also exciting and liberating.

To make good use of the support and teaching offered by the College and the University, you must attend the classes arranged for you; the help and advice offered is likely to be of minimal use if you treat your opportunities casually. You are likely to find that the volume of material to be mastered is considerably higher than at school, with a sharper transition than you may recall between GCSEs and A-levels, and you certainly cannot rely on last-minute revision as an adequate preparation for Tripos.

You will need to work for something like 40-45 hours a week (including all lectures, classes, supervisions, and preparation) and your work must be your priority during Full Term. This is no longer than most people's working week; and the number of hours most students work suggests you should be able to fit in extra-curricular activity reasonably easily as well.

## Directors of Studies

Your Director of Studies (DoS) is the person appointed to oversee academically all students in the College reading your particular subject (or your part of it).

### **Q: What can you expect your DoS to do for you?**

- schedule a meeting just before or at the beginning of each term, to discuss courses, lectures, practicals or Faculty classes, detailed arrangements for supervisions, and generally to discuss your work and answer any questions you have;
- discuss working methods in general with you on your first arrival;
- check your examination entry (via CamSIS)
- be available throughout the term for consultation (usually as arranged by phone or e-mail);
- meet you at the end of each term, to review your supervision reports, Teaching/Learning Questionnaire (if applicable), and any other issues arising from the term's work, and to advise on vacation work;
- pass on to you your marks in university examinations, with explanations as necessary;
- in most cases, arrange a mock exam for you at the start of the second or third term;
- write references on your behalf when you need them, subject to adequate notice (approximately two weeks);

- treat what you say confidentially.

## **Q: What should you do for your DoS?**

- read your email regularly for notices and messages that apply to you, and attend beginning and end of term meetings.
- read carefully all the material distributed to you by the College and by your Faculty/ Department;
- fill in forms promptly and accurately and return them without delay to the appropriate place; they are important and that is why we have them;
- consult your DoS promptly about any difficulties you are having with your studies.

## **University Lecture(r)s**

### **Q: What can you expect of your lecture(r)s?**

- an organised presentation of the course material – in most science courses a more or less exhaustive presentation (if not always immediately digestible);
- guidance as to what further reading is necessary, or what books present similar material;
- care to ensure that the class is broadly following the lecture, and willingness to address questions raised from the floor – though you can't raise many individual points in large classes;
- readiness to answer individual questions at the end of a lecture – if you don't have to be somewhere else almost immediately;
- depending on the course and the lecturer, handouts with more or less detailed notes, and sets of questions suitable for supervision work.

### **Q: What should you do in lectures?**

- be there if your DoS recommends – they may not all be equally useful, but the ones you don't attend will be no use to you at all, and most students who in the past have claimed to learn better independently have got low marks in the Tripos;
- think carefully throughout about what is being said at the time – every hour is precious;
- write detailed notes summarising what is said, for later use with supervision work or exam revision, even if a handout appears to do this for you – there is no more effective way of fixing it in your mind.

You won't have time in most cases to rewrite more than a small proportion of your notes subsequently, or even to read through all your handouts towards the end of the year. You may like to try rewriting your notes during the vacations, when you might expect to condense them to a third of their original length by recording the main points, omitting anything of which you are already confident.

## Supervisions

You will usually see one or more supervisors on a weekly or fortnightly basis. In some subjects supervising is one-to-one, but in most subjects there will be between two and four students at each supervision (occasionally more, in which case the supervision is more like a seminar). Many supervisions will take place at Newnham, but some may take place elsewhere, by negotiation between you and the supervisor. It is likely that your DoS will supervise part of your course himself or herself.

The purpose of supervisions is solely to help you in your studies: examiners, not supervisors, test your abilities. However, supervisions will call for considerable preparation on your part – quite possibly the largest part of your time. At their best, they are the most useful part of the entire Cambridge system, and you should enjoy them as well as feeling you are making progress. If you feel either intimidated in supervisions, or consistently bored, then something is wrong. There will probably be a way of putting it right, so long as you talk to someone about it (see below). Your DoS will tell you how many supervisions you can expect from each supervisor; if you feel you need more as the term progresses, consult your DoS again.

### **Q: What can you expect your supervisor to do for you?**

- as far as is practicable, to give you a full hour of teaching;
- to encourage your involvement in the group;
- to explain how to prepare for supervisions;
- to set specific and reasonable written work to be done in advance, and to give you a clear means and deadline for its submission;
- provided you hand it in by the agreed deadline, to read / correct / annotate your written work as appropriate before the supervision;
- to address your particular needs as well as the background of the topic being addressed (but you cannot expect to be spoon-fed for examinations: there is too much material to cover);
- to offer a constructive response to your questions and problems, and to show respect for your own ideas;
- to give advice on how to tackle the relevant examination paper(s);
- to offer on request the opportunity to talk in confidence about any problems you perceive in the supervisions or with your work.

### **Q: What should you do for your supervisor?**

- complete the work set to the very best of your ability – consult other students about it by all means, but always write your own answer finally and make sure your supervisor knows if you have worked with someone else;
- hand in your work on time;
- contribute actively to the supervision, offering your ideas and opinions; a supervision is a two-way process not a lecture, and supervisors respond better to someone who demonstrates enthusiasm for the subject;

- turn up on time to every supervision;
- contact your supervisor in good time if you can't make the supervision or can't complete the work set.
- familiarise yourself with the College's, University's and Department's plagiarism policies

You cannot expect your supervisor to rearrange a supervision to suit you, except in exceptional circumstances, but may try to negotiate this – preferably when the whole group is together at an earlier supervision; your supervisor may also need to negotiate alternative times occasionally.

## **Q: Who are supervisors?**

Many different kinds of person act as supervisors: they may be Lecturers, Readers or Professors; 'Post-docs' or Research Fellows (young academics who have recently finished their PhD); or Research Students (currently working for their PhD) – often particularly helpful, being close to your own stage. They may be Fellows of Newnham, or of another College; they may have no college connection at all – or even occasionally no university connection.

They are all engaged in research in their own field however; none is able to spend more than a small part of their time supervising, and their time is usually under greater pressure than yours. Indeed a growing number of academics are reluctant to supervise at all. Securing good supervisors for their students is one of the most demanding aspects of your DoS' job; you can help by ensuring they never feel treated casually.

## **Feedback**

A great deal of feedback on your work is built into the Cambridge system: you will continually be submitting work to supervisors and getting it back with their comments, written and oral. Towards the end of each term each supervisor writes a short individual supervision report on your work: this is seen by your DoS and your Tutor, and your DoS discusses it with you. Most of these reports are submitted and held on-line in a system called CamCORS; you can read them yourself at any time after your DoS has released them at [www.camcors.cam.ac.uk](http://www.camcors.cam.ac.uk) (accessed via your 'Raven' password).

If you feel a supervisor is not giving you as clear an idea as you would like of the standard of your work, you should certainly feel free to ask for more information on this. [CamCORS](#) reports include an estimate of the standard of your term's work in relation to the usual Tripos classes (1st, 2i, 2ii, 3rd).

There is commonly an opportunity for you to provide feedback to the Department/Faculty at the end of a lecture course. Do take this when it is offered: the comments received are carefully considered by Departmental Teaching Committees, and may well affect the course the following year.

Within the College, you are invited twice a year to complete a Teaching/Learning Questionnaire (TLQ) which asks you to comment on your own work, your progress, and on each of your supervisors. One copy of this form goes to your DoS who discusses it with you at your end-of-term meeting and may if appropriate take action in respect of unsatisfactory supervisors (or pass on your appreciation to good ones). The form also goes to the Senior Tutor. Don't wait until you are asked if you feel things are not going well, or if you have suggestions for improvement; it is better to deal with such matters as they arise. Your DoS will be the normal first port of call on your own behalf, or in respect of difficulties with supervisors; any difficulty with your DoS can be taken to your Tutor or the Senior Tutor.

## Vacations

Vacations are a very important part of the academic year for Cambridge students. Although lectures, supervisions etc. are confined to the eight weeks of Full Term, you need to work for at least another two or three weeks in the winter and spring vacations. It is particularly critical to make a serious start in the winter vacation by revising the preceding term's work: the volume of material to be covered is far greater than at school, and it is a serious mistake to imagine you will be able to revise it in the short period immediately before the summer examinations.

## Examinations

You are expected to sit an examination each year: in the rare cases where there is no University Tripos or Preliminary Examination (e.g. the first year in English), a College Prelim is set instead. Most examinations take place during three weeks in the second half of the Easter (summer) Term – from mid- May to early June. Arts students often have a lighter timetable accommodating revision in the preceding weeks, but most scientists have their usual full timetable until a week or so before the exams.

Most examinations take the form of three-hour written papers, which will not be familiar to all of you; you may find it helpful to practise entire papers in this format as well as answering some individual questions to time. Scientists in particular will find that looking at past papers early in the year, noting the number and depth of questions asked, and their distribution between topics, enables you to use your time more effectively during the rest of the year. Arts students will want to practise writing essays by hand in the limited time allowed during an examination, which involves a rather different technique from that called for by supervision essays.

As far as possible, at least one mock paper is arranged for all first-year students (usually in January but sometimes in April) to help with preparation for the three-hour University Tripos examinations. Your DoS will discuss your performance in this with you; a low mark is not necessarily cause for serious alarm, as your skills will have developed by the time of the Tripos examinations, but may indicate that you have not learned enough of the course

content over the winter vacation – a salutary warning, as you will certainly not have enough time in the spring vacation to learn it all.

Though others will check your entry, it is up to you in the first instance to enter yourself for the right papers via CamSIS (when prompted, during the Michaelmas Term). Cambridge marks examination papers and publishes the results unusually quickly – almost all by the end of June. You will be able to see your class and some further information online, via CamSIS. It is the responsibility of your DoS will pass on marks with explanations as necessary. Around 20% of students commonly get a first, and half a 2i (fewer in early years and more in finals).

We are concerned that all our students should do well at Cambridge. We may formally review the progress of any student ranked low in their exams in order to identify any problems and help them improve. Students are required to pass their examinations at an honours standard to be allowed to continue. See [What happens if I fail?](#) for further information.

## Prizes and Scholarships

Newnham awards Prizes to all those who achieve first class results in a University examination. In Newnham the Prize awarded for a First is £100, but in addition, to those returning to Newnham in the following Michaelmas Term, a scholarship with the exceptional value of £500 is awarded. Scholars are asked to sign the Register of Scholars at Solemn Admissions at the beginning of Michaelmas Term, and are invited to attend the Freshers' Feast in the Michaelmas Term.

## Change of Tripos

Cambridge offers some degree of flexibility in that the Tripos Regulations allow for changes between many subjects at the end of your first and/or second year. However, in most cases students take the same examination papers in the new subject as people who have studied it in earlier years too. Accordingly, before permitting a change of subject, Newnham requires that the new (receiving) DoS is satisfied both that you have the necessary aptitude for the new subject (which may involve setting an ad hoc test, and/or a minimum specified class in your current subject) and that the necessary teaching resources are available. The College tries to accommodate reasonable requests from students who have worked hard. A change of subject normally requires a 2i as a condition for change.

A change of Tripos that involves a fourth year of study needs special consideration and proof that funds are available.

Your Tutor can advise about any possible change of subject, and will oversee the process (including consulting the Regulations to establish definitively what is possible); you also need to talk to both new and old DoS, and will want to consult students reading the new subject – the new DoS will be able to provide names if necessary – so as to be sure you have a realistic idea of future years in both old and new subjects before coming to a decision.

## Problems with supervisions

In most cases supervisions run smoothly enough and provide a stimulating environment for learning. They are individual and inter-personal rather than off-the-shelf occasions, however, and things can go wrong, not necessarily always the fault of either the supervisor or the student. There may be problems with supervision group dynamics, a supervisor's expectations of you, or your own expectations of what you should be able to do; it may also be that you are putting altogether too much or too little time into preparation.

It may help to note a few particular problems that may arise, with suggestions for resolving them; you can always ask your supervisor for a private word at the end of a supervision or at some other time.

- **Problem:** Someone else – or even the supervisor – never allows you to get a word in edgeways.
  - **Response:** Mention the problem to your supervisor; perhaps ask the other student(s) to be less pushy; if the problem persists, ask if the groups could be rearranged.
- **Problem:** You find it difficult to contribute to the discussion anyway.
  - **Response:** There can be a number of reasons for this not unusual but demoralising problem. You may not feel what you have to say is worth listening to; you may be finding the subject confusing; or you may feel you can't say what you want so well orally as in writing. Whatever the reason, talk to your supervisor early: it gets harder to intervene the longer you stay silent. The supervisor may be able to draw you in gradually; specific preparation (e.g. making a list of questions to ask) may also help. A supervision is a unique occasion for the interchange of ideas and you stand to lose a great deal if you let it drift passively by. You will need similar oral skills in almost any profession subsequently, and they can be learned – so practise them now.
- **Problem:** You have no idea how well or how badly you are doing in the subject.
  - **Response:** Ask your supervisor for a clearer indication of the standard of your work at present (in relation to individual pieces of work if you like), and how they anticipate it developing over the year. See also the section on Feedback.
- **Problem:** You do not feel you are learning much from your supervisions.
  - **Solution:** Ask your supervisor if the time can be spent differently, or simply raise more questions yourself – the content of the hour is up to you as well as the supervisor. If this does not work, talk to your DoS.
- **Problem:** You come away from supervisions feeling negative about your work and your ability in the subject.
  - **Solution:** You may of course simply be underestimating your ability to do well in the long run (see above); your supervisor or DoS should be able to offer some perspective on this. You may not have done all the work you

should for the supervision or earlier (see below); your supervisor will be right to point it out if so, and you should adjust your work patterns quickly.

- **Problem:** You don't know if you are doing the right amount of work.
  - **Solution:** As a rough guide, less than 40 hours a week (including all lectures, practicals, classes, supervisions etc.) is unlikely to be enough; more than 50 suggests you are not using the time effectively. Talk to other students whose work you respect, or ask your supervisor or DoS. Don't deceive yourself however: most people cannot make a reliable estimate of the total number of hours they work, and you should probably keep a simple diary for a week or two to check.

If you are concerned about continuing problems with supervisions or with a supervisor, you should:

- talk to your DoS, particularly if for any reason you can't talk to the supervisor;
- talk to your Tutor, or the Senior Tutor, particularly if for any reason you can't talk to your DoS.

Remember, your DoS will treat these discussions as confidential. Above all, don't delay and allow a problem to get worse.

## Problems with your DoS

In the unlikely event of your feeling any difficulty in relation to your DoS, you can consult your Tutor. One of the reasons you have two Fellows to consult is to ease any difficulties in relation to either one of them. The Senior Tutor will also be happy to talk to any student about problems of this kind.

## Other sources of advice

Other students doing your subject, particularly those in the year above, can be very helpful. In most subjects, it is helpful to discuss your work with other students, or in science subjects to tackle problems together (as long as you let your supervisor know you have done this): anything learned or consolidated before a supervision releases time that can be used for something else.

The JCR has an Academic Affairs Officer whose role is to keep an eye from the undergraduate point of view on the College's academic policies and practices, and to advise and/or represent individual students who may be having difficulties.

Many Departments / Faculties now publish information about courses, assessed coursework, dissertations, timetables, study methods and examination class criteria either in booklets or on their websites. You may also find one member of staff, designated as Course Co-ordinator, or Year Group Co-ordinator, with overall responsibility for the smooth running of the course, who will be happy to respond to questions from you, e.g. by e-mail.