UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Department of Computer Science & Technology

Outreach Committee Meeting
15:00, Wednesday, 12 November 2025
William Gates Building, Room GS15

Minutes

In attendance:
Jeremy Yallop (Chair)
Aga Niewiadomska, Outreach Administrator (Secretary)
Celia Burns, Faculty Administrator (Notetaker)
Laurie Gale
Rachel Gardner, Communications Manager
Becky Straw, Undergraduate Teaching Manager
Jamie Vicary

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Lise Gough and Sue Sentence.

2. Conflicts of interest

Committee members were asked to declare any conflicts of interest as they arise.

3. Updates on current outreach projects

Aga reported that a lot had happened since the last meeting in June, and provided updates on several initiatives:

a. Women in CS

A programme evaluation report was circulated with the agenda. Aga noted that this year's programme was very successful. It was held at Robinson College, which proved convenient as it is within walking distance of the Department. Some sessions were revised from last year; for example, the programming workshop, previously an introduction to Prolog, was replaced with repurposed first-year machine learning ticks. This session was well received, and participants appreciated learning that these exercises form part of the first-year curriculum. During planning, Aga consulted Simone Teufel, who expressed interest in contributing next year.

Looking ahead, Aga is currently promoting the seminar series, which will take place on an earlier schedule next year (January - February 2026) to avoid overlapping with the Cambridge Festival. All speakers are now confirmed.

For the residential component, Aga has engaged with Trinity Hall, who are keen to host the programme. Robinson College was approached initially, but there were some scheduling conflicts, and Trinity Hall's interest aligns well with the Department's objectives.

Aga highlighted the evaluation report, which included her reflections on changes made and participant feedback. One of the key differences between the feedback for the 2024 and 2025 programme is seen in the sense of belonging in Computer Science. In 2024, this increased steadily over the course of the programme, whereas in 2025, this started high and remained

this way throughout the programme. Aga alluded to fact that this could have been caused by the seminar series which occurred before the programme began this year. This is backed up by data collected from a survey sent out at the end of the seminar series, discussion of which was omitted from the report. There were approximately 60 respondents to this survey, and their feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with 95% indicating that their sense of belonging in Computer Science had been influenced by the seminar series.

Regarding publicity for next year's programme, three of the five seminar recordings have been uploaded to the Department's YouTube channel and webpage, with the remaining two pending permissions.

Aga noted that Further Mathematics will be a prerequisite for future programmes.

Finally, Aga shared that during her presentation to first-year students on registration day, she was very pleased to meet a student who had previously attended the programme. Trinity Hall also noted that seven applications out of 15 participants represent a strong conversion rate, reinforcing their enthusiasm for collaboration.

b. DeepMind internships

Aga reported that the interns performed exceptionally well and expressed high levels of satisfaction with the programme. This year, the Department partnered with Hughes Hall, which proved highly successful. Unlike previous arrangements with Churchill (which focused solely on accommodation), Hughes Hall actively engaged with the students, hosting research events and investing in their experience. Aga hopes to continue this partnership next year.

Feedback on the final day was particularly encouraging: six out of ten interns indicated plans to apply for a Master's degree at Cambridge. Aga also noted that funding has been secured to produce an intern experience video. Initial recordings have been very positive, and additional students will participate in video recordings next week. Aga anticipates this will be a valuable resource for future recruitment.

Rachel highlighted the exceptional calibre of the interns, mentioning that one has already secured £500,000 in start-up funding. Aga added that one participant from the 2024 programme has commenced an MPhil at Cambridge this year, while another has started a PhD elsewhere. In response to Jamie's question about featuring such success stories on the Department's webpage, Rachel agreed this would be an excellent idea.

Aga does not yet have comprehensive data on the remaining students but plans to gather more information from this year's cohort. She noted that many interns reported a significant shift in their perception of Cambridge and expressed a strong interest in continued engagement with the Department.

Aga also mentioned ongoing discussions with the Royal Academy of Engineering regarding funding. While the original application proposed five interns, there is a possibility of being allocated the full ten, though confirmation is still pending and expected by the end of this month.

Advertising will need to begin in early January.

c. Sutton Trust summer school

A feedback summary was circulated with the agenda. Aga reported that the timetable for this year's summer school was largely unchanged from previous years, apart from two updates: the icebreaker activity was replaced with programming robot cars, and the astronomy workshop was replaced with an AI workshop. Overall, the programme was similar to last year, and many students reported enjoying their experience. The most popular activity was the visit to the Centre for Computing History.

Aga noted that most suggestions for improvement related to factors outside the Department's control (such as the walk from the College and College catering). She mentioned that the AI workshop did not go entirely as planned, but overall feedback indicated that the schedule works well and does not require major changes.

Aga highlighted that, despite initial restrictions from the central university limiting the cohort to 20 students, she and Tim Jones (previous Committee Chair) successfully negotiated an increase to 30 students. This resulted in a highly engaged group and a positive experience. She acknowledged that securing places remains an ongoing challenge each year. No update on participant numbers for 2026 has yet been received from the Sutton Trust team.

The committee discussed participant suitability. Jamie asked whether these programmes are advertised as suitable for all students, noting that one survey response indicated the student was "definitely not" considering university. Aga explained that the ideal audience is students who are interested but unsure about applying to university. She added that, for programmes such as Women in CS, the intention is to attract students considering computer science or mathematics, though in practice most attendees already study computer science at A level.

d. Physics at Work

Aga reported that the Department participated in the Physics at Work event this year, following a break last year. The event took place in the Ray Dolby Centre and was aimed at students aged 14–16. It ran over three days, with six different stands and 12 sessions per day, each lasting half an hour and attracting groups of 30–40 students.

On the first day, Aga and Rachel delivered a session introducing machine learning, similar to the format used two years ago. On subsequent days, research groups contributed, including a robot demonstration.

Aga noted that the event provides excellent visibility for the Department but highlighted a challenge in recruiting staff to deliver sessions, as it requires a full-day commitment with back-to-back sessions. She suggested exploring whether undergraduate students could run some sessions in future, using ready-made materials and guidance. Laurie asked about incentives for undergraduates, and Aga confirmed that payment could be offered. He added that second- and third-year students might be available in September. Rachel commented that the programme participants would likely enjoy interacting with current undergraduates. Aga also noted that postgraduate students already support the other two days of the event.

The committee agreed that involving undergraduates could be a practical solution and that this approach should be trialled next year.

e. Cambridge Festival

Rachel reported that the next Cambridge Festival will take place on 21 March 2026 and will be an even larger event than previous years. For the first time, the Physics building will be open, and almost all departments in West Cambridge will participate. A working group has been established to coordinate logistics, and planning is already well advanced.

The Department's programme needs to be submitted soon. Around 20 activities are planned, including a scavenger hunt and three escape rooms, aiming to cater to a wide range of ages. Recruitment of stewards is underway.

Laurie asked about the challenges of finding volunteers. Rachel noted that Laurie's contributions had been excellent, along with those of Carrie Anne Philbin. She also mentioned that the security group is involved and highlighted that the Festival offers a valuable opportunity for PhD students to present their research and gain experience in communicating their research with diverse audiences.

Rachel observed that interest in contributing has grown significantly compared to previous years, with some faculty members regularly participating and appreciating the chance to showcase their work. Aga added that 20 students have already signed up to volunteer.

Laurie asked whether there were difficulties in recruiting contributors for outreach activities more generally. Rachel said that interest for the Festival is strong, but Aga noted that while seminar presenters are plentiful, finding mentors remains a challenge and often requires targeted follow-up emails. She suggested that promoting opportunities at Women@CL events might be more effective, as some students may miss email invitations.

4. Outreach Feedback from External Advisory Board

Aga noted that, although she had anticipated feedback on outreach from the External Advisory Board, none was received as the meeting focused on other topics.

5. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

Aga shared a question raised recently by a contact at Trinity Hall:

"Have you noticed any trends in the first-year cohorts as they've come through in the past few years – are they lacking particular skills or are weaker students consistently weak in a certain way that could relate to our outreach work?"

The committee discussed this question in detail:

- Jamie observed that more students are struggling with the mathematical parts of the first-year course, which are very demanding. In particular, the discrete maths course.
- Jamie noted that, at King's College, significant efforts are made to admit students from underprivileged backgrounds. While this is positive, he highlighted that students admitted on marginal decisions from disadvantaged contexts seem more likely to encounter serious difficulties, with some leaving before completing their degree.
- Aga explained that this concern aligns with a research project she is undertaking with the Centre for Teaching and Learning on student experience. The aim is to gather insights from staff and students to identify actions that could inform changes to the Tripos.
- The discussion touched on factors such as students' ability to dedicate time for study consolidation during holidays, with some needing to work to support their families. Jamie stressed that outreach should not assume students can succeed under standard conditions without additional support and emphasised the importance of avoiding situations where students are set up to fail.
- Jeremy asked whether anything could have been done differently. Jamie mentioned that expanded supervision (initially for first-year students but now extended to all years) is offered, but students often decline additional help, possibly due to perceived stigma or lack of time.
- The committee discussed bridging programmes and pre-arrival support. Jamie noted that initiatives such as college bridging weeks do not fully address the gap; more substantial measures—such as a discrete maths course at the start of summer or funding students eligible for free school meals to stay in college during holidays—would be more effective. Laurie confirmed that some colleges offer bridging weeks, but provision is inconsistent.
- Jamie asked whether data is collected on student performance by background. Aga confirmed that this is a priority for the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, with work underway to compile relevant data. She emphasised that the goal is not only to admit

students from diverse backgrounds but to ensure they succeed and remain in computer science.

- The discussion also touched on the ongoing Tripos Review. Jamie expressed concern about its slow progress and suggested that the committee could advocate for changes to support outreach objectives. Aga noted that while targeted support is important, changes to the Tripos would benefit all students. Jaime added that proposed reductions in course content have been scaled back, and Becky confirmed that further updates are expected soon.
- Aga agreed that evidence from her research could help push forward necessary changes and offered to share preliminary student feedback with Jamie.

6. Any Other Business

Aga reported that the Department recently received funding through the EPSRC AI initiative. When applying, the intention was to upgrade Raspberry Pis for outreach activities. Since then, some Raspberry Pi5 units have already been purchased and promised for outreach use, leaving approximately £5,000 available for additional hardware.

Aga invited suggestions for how this funding could be used, ideally linked to AI outreach. Laurie suggested options such as Raspberry Pis and micro:bits. Aga agreed and emphasised the importance of connecting purchases to AI-related activities.

Jamie raised the issue of his Qubit simulators, which have broken and require repair. He noted that previous attempts to secure funding for repairs were unsuccessful and that the main challenge is the time required for the repair work. Jamie suggested that the Department's Hardware Specialist might have capacity to undertake the repairs if funding were available. Jamie agreed that if time and resources could be arranged, this would be a worthwhile investment, as the simulators have been popular in past workshops.

Jamie agreed to consult the Hardware Specialist about repairing the Qubit simulators.

7. Date of Next Meeting

A meeting poll will be circulated to schedule the next meeting.