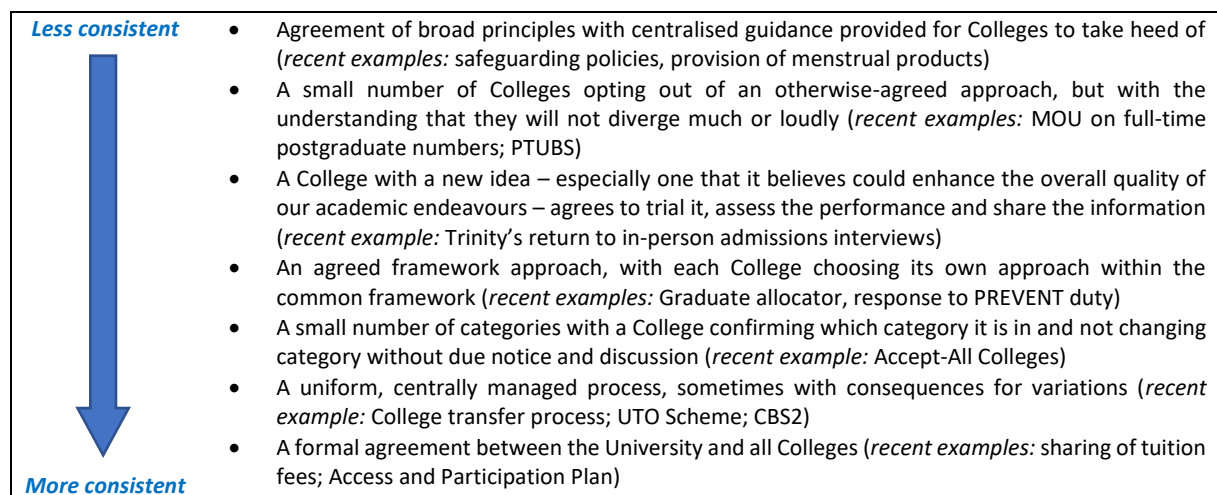


Intercollegiate decision-making

Context

1. The Colleges are autonomous and devolved, yet are all tied into the University, its reputation and its regulation. In many circumstances, the College self-determine their own priorities, strategies and operations, which can differ substantially between Colleges with little or no external impact. This is considered to be the default position in any given situation. (Of course, there is much benefit in the discussion and sharing of wisdom, experience, information and practice, to evolve the best approaches to any given circumstance.)
2. There are, however, some situations when a consistency of approach is helpful – and some where it is proven to be (or agreed to be) necessary. Even here, there are occasions where alignment may not be immediately necessary, or where it is advantageous in the short term to undertake initiatives that include only a subset of Colleges (e.g. a pilot programme) or multiple concurrent solutions.
3. In some matters, universal alignment between Colleges is essential (or at least helpful) in partnering with the University.
4. The Oxford Colleges found over 10 years ago a voting approach to take collective decisions. In practice, this is used infrequently, but its very existence is believed to increase the degree of alignment between Colleges on the few, truly critical matters. After some years of work, however, it is unlikely that the Cambridge Colleges will agree to replicate such a mechanism.
5. The Cambridge Colleges have nevertheless agreed to work towards a framework for intercollegiate decision-making, which should include mechanisms that (a) determine whether or not a converged or universal alignment is necessary, beneficial or neither and (b) where it is agreed or proven to be necessary (or beneficial) to determine the most effective solution in the interests of all students and the Collegiate University.
6. Recent areas of tension in this area have centred around undergraduate admissions but there are other areas of Collegiate University provision (e.g. mental health support; postgraduate admissions; bursaries and scholarship provision) that require increasing attention and methods to improve collaborative decision-making.
7. The Collegiate University has been good at finding such solutions when given the time in the past. Approaches may include (with increasing convergence of approach):



Decision-making framework

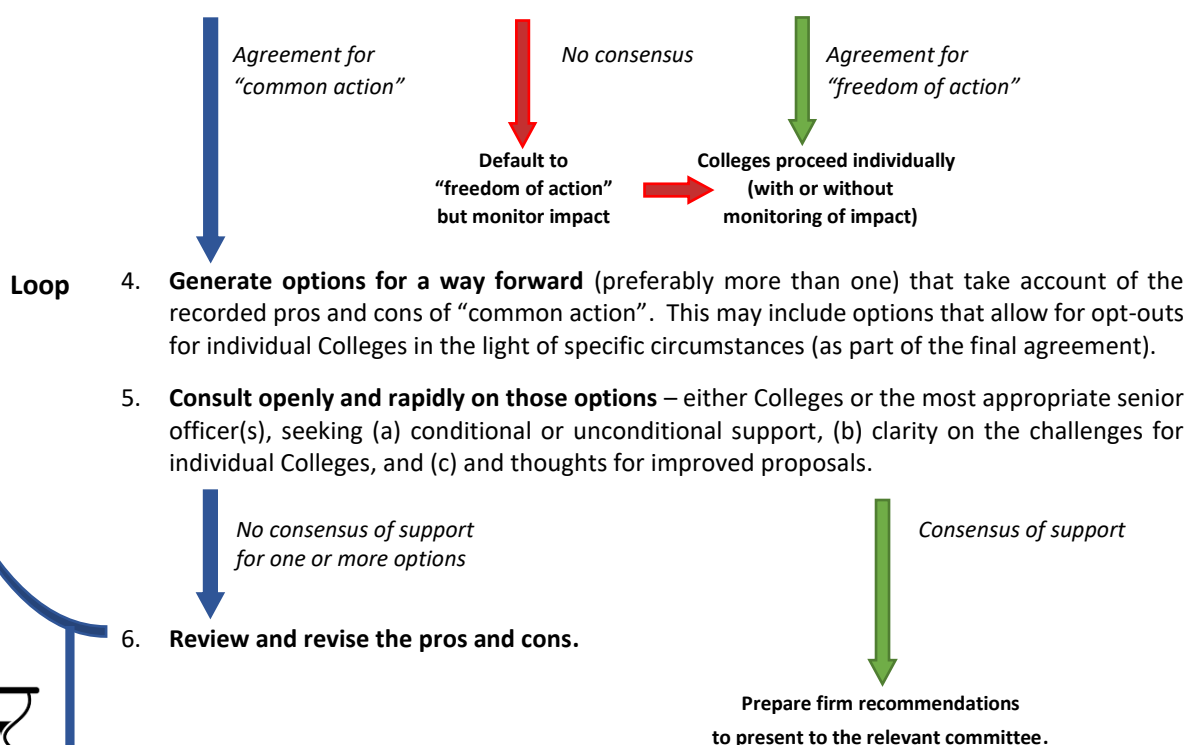
8. A Working Group of Colleges' Committee has developed the following proposed approach to determining the best way to reach a consensus position:

1. **Agree the goals and objectives in advance of decomposing the task** – what is the core of the problem that needs to be solved?
2. **Determine whether the matter in hand is (a) one for individual Colleges to address separately, (b) one where the Colleges might work collectively, or (c) one where the Colleges might work collectively - and with the University** – how does the matter affect each of the parties individually and collectively? Proceed only if (b) or (c) applies.

This may require formal or informal discussions between the officers of the principal intercollegiate committees (Colleges' Committee, Bursars' Committee, Senior Tutors' Committee), consulting as appropriate the Colleges' Standing Committee and the members of the University and Colleges Joint Committee (either at scheduled meetings or by circulation). Any discussion will need to take account that the perception of the material impact of the matter may be different for the University, and for individual Colleges.

3. **Assess (or re-affirm) whether the agreed goals and objectives require a universally-consistent approach by the Colleges.** This should be through a clear articulation of the pros and cons of both "freedom of action" and "common action", taking into account various constituent parts of the overall choice (e.g. looking at differing wealth/missions/types of College).

This may require formal or informal discussions within Colleges, and/or at an intercollegiate level to enable the pros and cons to be articulated fully. Informal mechanisms of intercollegiate consultation include "Friday at 9" meetings and other online discussions, representative Task and Finish Groups and use of in-person or on-line discussions (e.g. Bursars' Network meetings, and the Heads of House and Senior Tutor Forums on Moodle).



If time runs out:

- a) if it is entirely an intercollegiate matter (and it does not affect the University), the default position is one of "freedom of action". (This may mean a majority of Colleges still agree to adopt a common approach.)
- b) if the matter materially affects the University, an "urgent action" meeting will be set up between College representatives (appointed by the Colleges' Standing Committee) and senior officers of the University to determine the necessary actions in the short term.

Principles of “common action” decisions

9. The Working Group also proposes the following principles to guide the management of “common action” decisions:

- A. “Common action” decisions are made in the best interests of the Colleges collectively. This often requires a careful balancing of the impact of the decision on individual Colleges and/or the University, and on the workings of the Collegiate University as a whole, noting that the impact may be operational, financial, regulatory or reputational in nature. Any decision will need all parties to take account that the perception of “impact” may be different for the University, and for individual Colleges.
- B. “Common action” decisions are arrived at by consensus, notwithstanding any immovable deadlines by which a decision must be taken. This may include a consensus decision to allow individual Colleges to opt-out in the light of specific circumstances (as part of the final decision).
- C. Any “common action” decision should have a clear end date, which may be a date for a review of the current position and whether it should continue for another defined period.
- D. “Common action” decisions can only be made either by the Colleges’ Committee, Bursars’ Committee or the Senior Tutors’ Committee. In most cases, it will be obvious from the nature of the business which of these is the most appropriate to manage the making of the decision and, in cases of doubt, the Chairs of the three committees will make a collective recommendation to the Colleges’ Standing Committee. Where other intercollegiate committees or groups seek to make a “common action” decision, these must always be ratified at one of the three committees listed above, and thereafter recorded formally (see point J below).
- E. Members of intercollegiate committees commit to undertaking consultation on the matter within their College prior to the meeting, and to promote the collective or agreed view of their College in any discussions or communications. Such consultation should normally include the voting members of the three principal intercollegiate committees (the Head of House, the Bursar and the Senior Tutor), but otherwise the level of internal consultation is at the discretion of the College and its agreed governance framework and levels of delegated authority.
- F. Should it be apparent that a consensus cannot be reached equally or quickly, the relevant intercollegiate committee should consider:
 - (i) the possibility of framing the decision, such that not all Colleges are required to commit to it.
 - (ii) the feasibility of operating the decision in the first instance as a time-limited pilot project (working only with those Colleges in agreement).
 - (iii) whether the ultimate outcome will be to close the matter at that point, noting that unanimous agreement on the matter cannot be reached, and even a partial agreement (see i and ii above) is not feasible.
- G. All discussions about “common action” decisions should outline clearly what the default or *status quo* position will be should consensus not be reached.
- H. Should a College wish to reject a proposal that includes an “common action” decision, it is beholden on it to make clear the nature of its objections and what steps – if any – could be made to approve the proposal subsequently.
- I. Should it prove necessary, members of the intercollegiate committees shall declare what level of endorsement a College view on an intercollegiate decision has – i.e. is the response from the governing body, a council, all senior Colleges officers, a single College officer?
- J. Any “common action” decision, even if agreed by consensus, should be marked clearly in the minutes of the relevant meeting and recorded in a register held at the Office of Intercollegiate Services. Where a College is not represented at the meeting at which an “common action” decision is made, the relevant member will be contacted as soon as practicable by the Secretary to confirm in writing that the College agrees with the intercollegiate decision.

Factors that may lead Colleges to adopt “common action”

10. The default position on any issue should be one of “freedom of action”, but Colleges (individually and collectively) should be mindful of factors that may lead or compel them to accept “common action”. These factors may include (but not always be limited to):

- national legislation.
- expectations of the Office for Students of its registered higher education providers (which includes the University, but not the Colleges).
- intercollegiate or University-Colleges financial agreements (e.g. formal fee agreements, universal bursary, scholarship or hardship arrangements, or mandatory intercollegiate levies).
- external perceptions that the Collegiate University is a single entity, and the matter in hand has serious reputational repercussions, either for the University, the University and College collectively, or for other individual Colleges.

In any event, any stated reasons for “common action” would need to address questions of whether the issue can tolerate minor differences between Colleges, and/or tolerate a small number of Colleges actively opting-out.

Examples of “common action” decisions

11. The principal intercollegiate committees make “common action” decisions that, in one way or another, commit Colleges to certain actions, behaviours or policies. Examples include:

- **formal agreements of the University and the Colleges:** e.g.-
 - the undergraduate and postgraduate fee agreements (2012 and 2014, with revisions since).
 - funding arrangements for Cambridge in America (2018).
 - the Cambridge Bursary Scheme (2021).
 - Memorandum of Understanding of Growth in Postgraduate Numbers (2017 and 2022).
- **formal agreements between the Colleges,** either relating to common agreed standards or intercollegiate procedures: e.g.-
 - undergraduate admissions standards and operation of admissions pools.
 - intercollegiate expenditure levels and allocation of costs (annual).
 - College transfer procedure.
 - management of undergraduate admissions complaints.
- **external regulatory or statutory requirements:** e.g.-
 - a common approach to the management of sexual harassment or misconduct allegations.
 - management of employment or student sponsorship of international staff or students.
 - decisions of the Office for Students (including but not limited to the Access and Participation Plan).

Such committees also make a range of decisions and recommendations on matters referred to them that do not necessarily commit their College to the same degree.¹ These are not the subject of this paper.

Dr Matthew Russell, 20 February 2023

¹ This includes decisions which relate to the conduct of business of the committee itself (e.g. changes to terms of reference; appointment or nomination of representatives on other bodies) and well as feedback requested on matters referred to them, where the expression of any view falls short of formal commitments on the Colleges (e.g. views that will inform the development of strategies and policies of other bodies in the Collegiate University).