Student project report (A1 – Supervision)

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British undergraduates	✓
	Undergraduates with mental health conditions	
Topic	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning in Dept/Colleges	✓
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	✓
Topic	Undergraduate Supervision: Black British perspective	
Specific research question	Does the undergraduate supervision system sufficiently meet the educational needs of Black students, which ensure the best chances of success?	
Student co-researchers	Tolu Mustapha, undergraduate Law (2019), Fitzwilliam College	
	Renae Dale, undergraduate Education (2020), Gonville and Caius College	

2. Executive summary

This study explored the student and staff perceptions, specifically undergraduate supervisors, of the extent to which the undergraduate supervision system sufficiently meets the educational needs of Black students. The method used involved two online surveys, one sent to students and one sent to academic staff, with 20 similar questions based on three themes (interest, comfort and belonging, and feedback). These online surveys were predominantly distributed through student and staff networks including the African-Caribbean society, BME Campaign, Faculty of Law, and the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning's (CCTL) Teaching Associates' Programme (TAP). The findings were as follows:

- Interests: Despite an overwhelmingly high level of interest in discussing race expressed by the student respondents, this interest is not sufficiently met (through opportunity or encouragement) in the supervision system. Potential reasons disclosed were a perceived lack of relevance to the module and a perceived lack of confidence by the supervisors.
- Comfort and Belonging: Black students are typically the only Black person in their supervision group, which exacerbates their feelings of imposter syndrome. Some students feel that racial trauma negatively impacts their supervision experience. However only a small number of supervisors said they can recognise signs of racial trauma in supervisions.
- Feedback: Despite the importance of feedback in the teaching and learning opportunity within the supervision system, the topic of race is insufficiently dealt with as supervisors are sometimes unable to see the relevance of race to the discussion. Particularly, White

supervisors voiced their discomfort in discussing race and as having an insufficient understanding of race in relation to their course.

- The recurring theme of lack of confidence can lead to passivity, i.e., race is ignored or insufficiently explored in the supervision system.

To combat the above issues and ensure Black students have better chances of success, we recommend introducing:

1. College-led supervision feedback forms or mechanism to identify subject-specific deficits and generate actions based on the feedback.
2. Faculty-led reviews of the curriculum incorporating insight from student-led and/or staff-student partnered decolonise networks.
3. Coordination of resources and support through the Black Advisory Hub for supervisors on how to approach, engage in and navigate topics about race, race theory, racial trauma, and imposter syndrome at Cambridge.

3. Rationale

In response to "*Why Cambridge?*" on the University of Cambridge website, Professor Stephen Toope states,

> "*Today, Cambridge continues to reach outwards, welcoming an ever more diverse group of students who have the desire and ability to learn and produce new insights that shift and deepen our understanding of the world around us.*"

This quote suggests that students' interests, comfort, and feedback are important value measures for the University of Cambridge. We believe that these factors are educational needs that are conducive to academic success and that they are well measured within the supervision system which is a central and unique aspect of Cambridge education.

As Black students studying Law and Education, we have experienced how supervisions are an amazing opportunity for academic discussion and development. However, they can also be an environment where discussion is restricted, particularly where race is discussed, due to a lack of understanding or interest in the topic from supervisors. While race frequently seems pertinent to the discussion to us, it is often not mentioned, it is brushed over, or it is challenged as irrelevant to the supervision discussions which takes away from the fullness of our learning experiences. We have heard from our Black peers how this can feel isolating and increase imposter syndrome, particularly in the common situation where they are the only Black person in their supervision group.

In this study, we aimed to explore whether Black students do feel welcome (comfort and belonging) and whether their desires to produce new insight (interests) and learn (feedback) are being met in the undergraduate supervision system.

Reference:

- https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/why-cambridge

4. Contextual information

The supervision system at Cambridge is instrumental in the learning experiences of Cambridge students. It provides the opportunity for further exploration of key topics and for sophisticated discussions with peers and supervisors. However, prior to our investigation, we had observed that supervisions, as they stand, may not always meet the needs of Black students pertaining to three key areas of interest, comfort and belonging, and feedback, particularly based on discussions of race. It is acknowledged in varied forms of academic literature that Black students' experiences with the curriculum and academia are starkly different to students of other ethnic backgrounds. Haskin et al (2013) conducted a phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of master's students who identified as Black in predominantly white institutions (PWI's). The Black students experienced much higher levels of stress than their White counterparts. This experience led to feelings of invisibility, alienation, and marginalisation within Black students. As a result, Black students often felt disconnected from the curriculum, where "*scenarios used were from the White professor's perspective*" (p.170), with the university branded as naïve to the students' experiences. Such experiences arguably reflect a lack of culturally relevant and equally engaging curriculum and institutional experience for Black student's, which can have negative implications for the success of such students in academia.

Explicit research into the Cambridge supervision system further highlights the differences in supervision experiences between different class groups, which can give insight into the extent to which Black students may have differing or negative views on supervisions. Gaston and Duschinsky's (2020) research into the supervision systems at Oxbridge details the tendency for students to perform, in a dramaturgical sense, by using skills that are assumed to already be in one's repertoire. Particularly, the ability to discuss ideas freely and to use supervisions as "*spaces for experimentation and intellectual creativity*" (p.1227) were not universal experiences and depended upon the student's background, including ethnicity.

In our research, we found that the contents of curriculum, particularly in relation to subject content and reading lists, did not adequately provide the scope for Black students to discuss issues such as race, thus limiting the scope for students to delve into such topics and integrate these discussions into essays and other independent study. It is observed that the supervision system, as it stands, does not serve to engage Black students in issues surrounding race, and equally does not allow for a full sense of comfort in such intense environments. It is acknowledged that the current supervision system should be reviewed through the perspectives of both students and supervisors to begin to unpick the gaps in the existing Cambridge education and develop solutions to enhance the educational experience of Black students.

Reference list:
- Haskins, N., Whitfield-Williams, M., Shillingford, M. A., Singh, A., Moxley, R., & Ofauni, C. (2013). The experiences of Black master's counseling students: A phenomenological inquiry. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, *52*(3), 162-178
- Gaston, A., & Duschinsky, R. (2020). Students' experiences of the Cambridge supervision system: performance, pedagogy and power. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *41*(8), 1218-1234.

5. Generation of evidence

Preliminary Discussion

We conducted preliminary discussions with other Black British student co-researchers in the Access and Participation Plan Participatory Action Research Project (APP PAR Project) to gain a wider sense of experiences within supervisions across different subject disciplines. We identified common experiences and used this to formulate a combination of closed and open questions which we aimed to encapsulate a range of responses.

Online Surveys

Data was collected through two Qualtrics surveys, one for undergraduate supervisors and one for students. The online survey questions were divided into three themes: Interest, Comfort and Belonging, and Feedback. Each survey contained similar questions to facilitate in-depth comparative analysis of whether Black students' educational needs were being met by the supervision system. For example, supervisors were asked *"to what extent are you confident in discussions of race in relation to your subject areas?"* while students were asked "*to what extent are you interested in discussions of race in relation to the subjects you are studying?"* Questions were mostly closed questions and some questions requested participants to rate the extent to which certain statements applied to them on a Likert scale. Since feedback is typically conducted by supervisors, we provided more opportunities to elaborate in the supervisors Feedback section, which led to more detailed qualitative data than our feedback section for students. Our investigation had a total of 108 respondents, including 80 supervisors and 28 students.

Staff Survey

The staff survey was sent to the 2020-21 cohort of CCTL's Teaching Associates' Programme as well as to everyone who had attended CCTL's 'An introduction to undergraduate supervision' workshop during the academic years 2019-20 and 2020-21. This also allowed for a broad range of supervisors in different faculties to contribute to our investigation and provide insight into potential inequities in supervisory experience between subjects. The Faculty of Law was also contacted to distribute the online survey to staff within the Faculty. A total of 80 undergraduate supervisors responded to the online survey (see Figure 2). Staff respondents were primarily members of the Natural Sciences faculty (22.22%) and the Faculty of Law (20.83%). This was beneficial to our analyses as we had a significant contribution from both Humanities and STEM subject areas. Most of the staff participants had less than 1 year of experience of supervising undergraduate students (41%), while 18.7% of the staff participants had over 5 years of experience (see Figure 1).
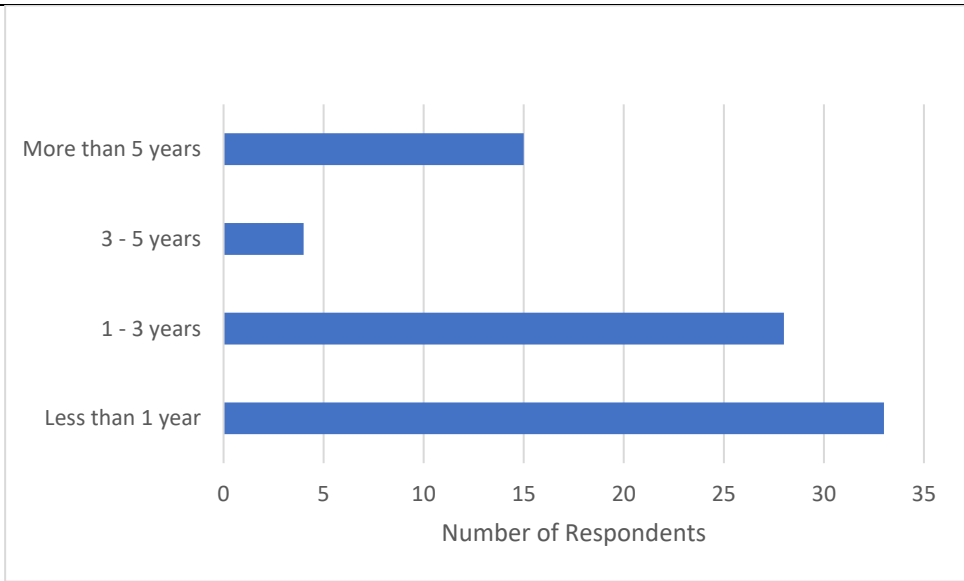
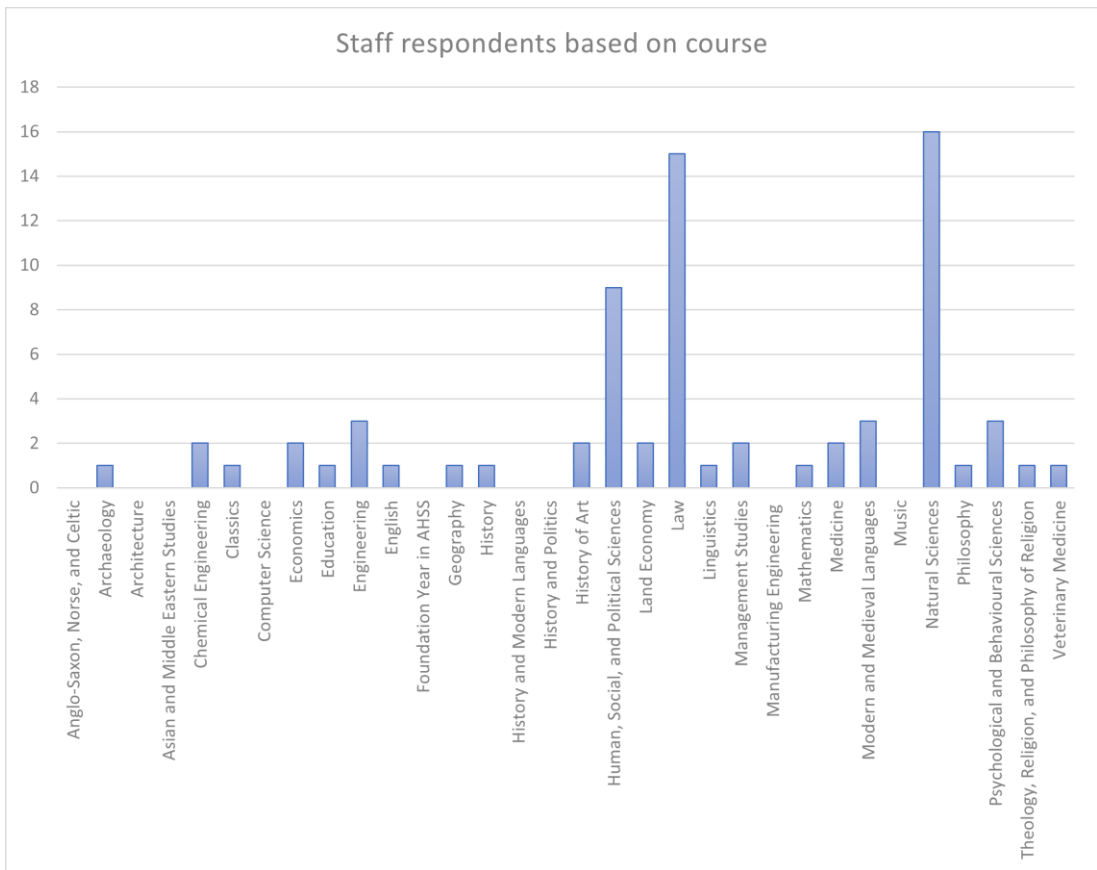*Figure 1: Years of experiences as an undergraduate supervisor.*

Figure 2: Courses supervised by staff respondents.

Student Survey

Student respondents were contacted through student networks including the African-Caribbean Society, Cambridge Student Union's BME Campaign, and BME Officers' network to gather responses from our target audience (Black British students) across a range of subject disciples and years of study. A total of 28 students responded to the online survey (see Figure 3). 26.92% of student respondents were studying Human, Social, and Political Sciences (HSPS) while only 7.64% of the respondents were studying Medicine. This could reflect the unequal balance of Black British students within STEM and Humanities. This is particularly significant for the theme of "Interests" as student responses to questions about the role of race in supervision discussion, e.g., HSPS are more likely to discuss race in their curriculum. While the number of student responses is limited, the patterns that emerged were fundamentally consistent with our larger pool of staff responses and have been helpful in providing an insight into current student perspectives.
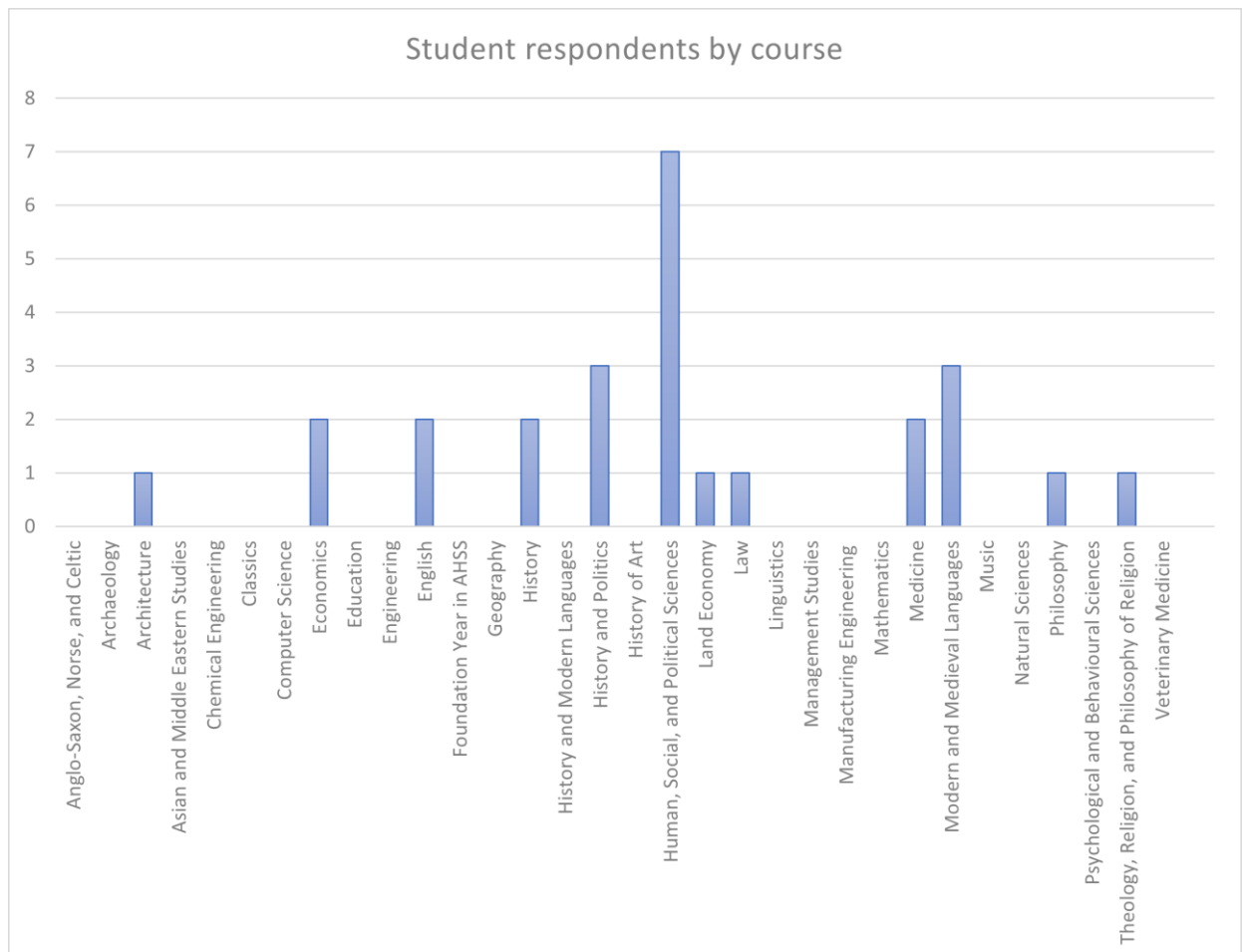

Figure 3: Student respondents based on course.

6. Small project research findings

We asked students and supervisors similar questions on undergraduate supervision system. Their responses were compared and have been presented according to the underlying themes of Interest, Comfort and Belonging, and Feedback.

Interest

Students and staff were asked about how interested they are in the way race relates to their subject and the extent to which the supervision system aligns with their level of interest.

64% of the student respondents indicated that they were 'very interested' based on a scale from 'very interested' to 'very uninterested.' No student indicated that they were uninterested. Such an interest was also expressed by supervisors but to a slightly lesser extent. When asked to rank the topics they were most interested in from a selection of 5 identity characteristics (i.e., disability, sexuality, gender, race, and class), Black students ranked race first followed by class and gender. Supervisors ranked gender first, followed by class and race. We believe this reflects the dynamic of many supervision discussions.

When considering whether the supervision system met the needs of students, the two key findings (highlighted by both supervisors and students) were that there is a lack of opportunity to explore race in their supervisions (57% students, 64.5% staff), and that some supervisors lacked confidence in dealing with race as a topic of interest. 53.9% of staff respondents did not feel confident in offering course reading recommendations relating to race. 36% of the staff respondents felt 'neutral' about their confident in discussing race in relation to their subject. While this is not an inherently negative response, in this context where supervisors often plan and lead the discussion, neutrality does not sufficiently meet the high interest needs of Black students and therefore, discussions about race can be easily ignored.

A member of staff supervising Chemistry, a course often not associated with discussions of race, wrote:

> "[...] In supervisions - there are certain conversations to be had about these topics [race]in relation to science and structural biases, but these fall outside the scope of the course [...]".

While it is impossible to design a course that tailors to all the interests of each student, it is evident that that race is an important topic of interest to Black students. However, a lack of opportunity to discuss race in supervisions due to a perceived lack of relevance to the course and supervisors not taking charge of these discussions means a lack of opportunity to develop unique critical insights for all. This can be observed to be of greater prevalence in STEM subjects, where large proportions of existing reading lists may not adequately relate to and offer understandings of Black experiences, e.g., Medicine having specific readings on the experiences of Black patients. This is summarised in the following quote from a student respondent:

> "I think that it is difficult for Black students to pursue their interests in supervisions - if these interests pertain to race - because of lack of engagement with race by the curriculum and supervisors being uncomfortable to address these topics".

Comfort and Belonging

Students and supervisors were asked about the interconnected student experiences of impostor syndrome, racism, and racial trauma surrounding supervisions.

Most student respondents felt that the supervision system may contribute to feelings of imposter syndrome (74.07%). The following quote from a student gives an insight into how Black students uniquely experience imposter syndrome in supervisions.

> *"I feel like unless I am with another Black student I don't feel comfortable enough to say certain opinions because they may be belittled or easily refuted and not seen as valid. I don't think I've had bad supervisors at all but I do find it harder to grasp certain concepts and I am hesitant to ask for help because I don't want to highlight my differences any further".*

Black students are usually the only Black person in their supervision, when accounting for both students and staff. Our study found that only 3.5% of the students surveyed had been supervised by someone Black. This insight of imposter syndrome may be one explanation for why only 17% of students had reached out to ask for further reading about race despite the high level of interest.

Almost 70% of Black students answered either 'yes' or 'maybe' when asked whether they thought racial trauma impacted their supervision experience. Only a small number of supervisors said they had recognised this in students (5%), with one stating they were not *"aware that 'racial trauma' is a specific concept or experience"*. However, those who recognised the potential impact of racial trauma were proactive in their support. When asked how they responded to identifying signs of racial trauma, one supervisor wrote:

> *"Yes, last summer during the George Floyd/BLM protests, which coincided to a stressful run-up to the emergency-convened covid summer exam period [...]. Rather than singling out the Black students I was teaching and making assumptions about how they might be feeling, I posted a general message to all my students on my Teams chats that alluded to the stress that everyone was feeling at the time [...]".*

Feedback

Students and staff were asked questions to gauge what happens when race is mentioned in supervision discussion conversation or in essay feedback. We decided to include this section as one of the most important ways students learn at Cambridge is through feedback and informed conversations from supervisors who are experts in their field.

Students indicated that they received "less detailed" feedback for their assigned if they had discussed race. They also noted that it was marked as "off-topic." Staff respondents were invited through open ended questions to reflect on their level of confidence in discussions of race during supervisions. Below are some of the quotes from the staff respondents.

> *"I feel like if race came up in our supervisions, many supervisors in my field wouldn't know what to say, so they'd play it down and change the subject."*

> *"It can also be really difficult to engage with issues that Black students can relate to. Whilst this can, at times, be easy in my subject - e.g. we can discuss the differences between the regulation of BLM protests and other protests - it can also be hard to find relevant literature and further*

reading in other areas - e.g. an account of African systems of Government to compare and contrast with the Westminster model. I am also acutely aware that I am culturally ignorant of many of the issues that affect Black and other ethnic minority students and this alone may mean that I inadvertently cause Black students to feel uncomfortable."

"In relation to not feeling confident when giving feedback to black students who discuss race in their assignment: in my case, I feel like I have invested a lot in learning about the topic, but it is all theory. Who am I to discuss race issues with someone who is living with the disadvantage? It feels wrong, on many levels."

On the other hand, one supervisor wrote,

"Although I do not supervise black students, I am a black woman myself and I am confident in discussing issues of race with all students I supervise."

These quotes suggest that the lack of confidence expressed is a consequence of an insufficient level of understanding of the topic as an academic subject as well as discomfort with discussing race.

7. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.

Supervisions are an important opportunity for students to explore specific interests and use discussions with their peers and supervisor to engage with the topic critically. However, the study indicates that the supervisory environment does now provide space for the exploration of interests and intellectual discussions in relation to race.

Additionally, in relation to discussions around race, our investigation has highlighted a perceived lack of confidence in supervisors and a lack of awareness of how race is related to the curriculum. We found a range of experiences that highlight the inconsistency between faculties. We recognise that these have implications on the design of the curriculum along with the improvements in supervisory system. An openness to change in the existing curriculum which accounts for the interest in critical discussions and feedback around race can contribute to closing the existing awarding gaps.

8. RECOMMENDED ACTION

Our recommendations focus on enriching and improving the quality and experience of supervisions in three key areas, which aim to address the most prevalent issues raised upon analyses of our survey data.

1. College-led supervision feedback system to identify subject-specific deficits and generate actions based on the responses

We recommend the implementation of a special feedback system to facilitate a dialogue between supervisors and students. There could be options for both anonymous and named submissions.

- Students can provide feedback about their supervision experiences on areas of interest, comfort, and feedback.
- Feedback forms should exist on an updated CamCORS system, to maintain familiarity but may be submitted during term-time as well as at the end of term.
- Reviewed on a case-by-case basis by Directors of Studies (DoSes) and Senior Tutors to address students' and supervisors' feedback before the end of term when it belated.
- Reviewed by DoSes, Senior Tutors, and Heads of Faculties at the end of each term to facilitate discussions about supervision and curriculum reform.

2. Faculty-led reviews of the curriculum incorporating insight from student-led decolonise networks

We recommend working with existing student and staff-led groups to ensure that decolonising the curriculum is not on the periphery but truly integrated into course structures and supervision discussions.

- Creation of collaborative faculty forums with members of the Decolonise Network.
- Assigning relevant student decolonise networks a faculty point of contact and inviting members of such networks during discussions around course redesign.
    - Course redesign may resemble diversifying reading lists as fuelled by both students and supervisors, e.g., having more contemporary readings on race theories and general readings around race pertaining to their subjects. This would ideally be of greater prevalence in STEM subjects, where it is observed that large proportions of existing reading lists do not adequately relate to Black experiences, i.e., Medicine having specific readings on the experiences of Black patients.

3. Coordination of support and resources through the Black Advisory Hub for supervisors on how to engage in and navigate topics about race, race theory, racial trauma, and imposter syndrome at Cambridge.

Finally, we recommend a professional development and support program for current and incoming supervisors, coordinated through the Black Advisory Hub, which offers support for staff who may have difficulty navigating the issues highlighted in this report.

- Topics shall be centralised around navigating topics about race, race theory, racial trauma, and Black student experiences of imposter syndrome at Cambridge.
- To be offered in conjunction with the aforementioned feedback system, to provide additional support if needed.
- The program would have scope for supervisors to be paid, particularly those on temporary contracts, and to be made mandatory for all supervisors.