Faculty of Law: The Probation Process for Academic Staff

What is probation?

Probation is a period in which a new employee of the University is given the necessary support and opportunity to show that they can meet its expectations about the performance of the duties for which they are employed. Although an appointment demonstrates the University’s confident belief that an appointee can meet its expectations, the probation period serves to provide evidence that this belief was well-founded. It is not in the interests of either an employee or of the University that employment continues if the employee cannot meet the expectations related to the role they occupy.

What are the expectations?

In very broad terms, the University expects that, by the end of probation an employee will have demonstrated ability in research, teaching and administration. The University framework stipulates that “there must be no doubt that the probationer has been performing according to all the relevant criteria and meets the standards of excellence in their performance and contribution within the Cambridge context”. The main focus of assessment will be on teaching, examining, and research. It is the policy of the Law Faculty also to take account of a positive general contribution to the work of the institution, as permitted by the University framework and in line with the School’s probation guidance and criteria. The Law Faculty will also take College teaching into account as part of the assessment of overall performance.

Research

School criterion for probation (Grades 9 and 10): Consistently conducts rigorous research addressing significant questions, contributing new ideas and advancing the boundaries of the field, whilst ensuring the highest standards of research integrity are promoted and maintained.

By the end of probation, the employee will have demonstrated that they can produce research that is an important point of reference in their field or sub-field, or that contribute important knowledge, ideas and techniques which are likely to have a lasting influence. The normal expectation is that there will be at least two articles, chapters or equivalent of this standard that were published or which have been finally accepted for publication during the probation period. In addition, the employee is expected to know how to apply for research grants when appropriate to the kind of research they are conducting. Furthermore, the employee should demonstrate an understanding of how to take steps to ensure that their research achieves impact among the

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1 “Probation is a formal arrangement at the start of an appointment, during which the probationer has the opportunity to understand the requirements of their role and to demonstrate their suitability within a reasonable timescale. Their performance will be assessed and monitored throughout the probationary period and they should be provided with guidance and support to enable them to become an effective member of the University.” (Council and General Board Report, 23 June 2020, University Reporter, 24 June 2020), Appendix para. 2.
2 In REF terms, the chapters or articles are at least 3* in quality.
3 It is not necessary to have made a research grant application, but a minimum would be attendance at appropriate University training. Information on Research Opportunities and Resources can be found at Arts Humanities and Social Sciences Research (cam.ac.uk). Please feel free to contact Maryam Ahmad with queries related to research administration, pre and post award.
appropriate users of research. This may include attending external conferences and seminars, both in the UK and abroad.

**Grade 9:** it is expected that there will be evidence of high-quality research performance, demonstrated by a sufficient portfolio of excellent published research which through their originality and rigour, make a significant contribution to the advancement of knowledge and understanding in their field. The School criterion also requires the production of a feasible plan for future research designed to result in further publications of the requisite high quality.

**Grade 10:** it is expected that there will be sustained achievement in research through a body of published research that is at least nationally recognized as excellent in terms of its originality, significance and rigour. Evidence of leadership in research may also be taken into account as appropriate.

**Teaching and examining and/or researcher development**

By the end of probation, the employee will have demonstrated that they can teach in a manner which is appropriately adapted to the needs of the relevant student body, that they can teach effectively lecture groups and small seminar or supervision groups, that they can prepare teaching materials that are well adapted to the subject matter of the teaching and to the students in question, that they can provide appropriate formative feedback to students, and that they can set assessment questions that are appropriate to the students and to the material of a course, and then mark the work fairly, efficiently, and with appropriate regard to the views of fellow examiners. Researcher development, such as fostering the development of research students and early career research staff, can also be taken into account towards probation.

**Grade 9 School criterion for probation:** Consistently contributes to the Faculty's or Department’s educational mission at undergraduate and postgraduate level and delivers excellent teaching that benefits from and engages with Cambridge’s research-rich environment and is intellectually challenging.

It is expected that Grade 9 postholders will provide evidence of an effective and timely contribution to the Faculty’s educational mission at undergraduate and postgraduate level as appropriate, through teaching and learning, PhD supervision, reporting and examining, and student recruitment where appropriate. Excellent teaching is expected, which can include College teaching and will be demonstrated by consistent positive student feedback. The extent of contribution made will also be taken into account.

**Grade 10 School criteria for probation:** i) Consistently delivers excellent teaching that benefits from and engages with Cambridge’s research-rich environment and is intellectually challenging; ii) Consistently delivers excellent research supervision that is engaging, intellectually challenging and supportive; and iii) Consistently ensures that early-career researchers receive excellent opportunities to develop their potential and prepare them for future success.

It is expected that Grade 10 postholders will provide evidence of consistent and sustained excellence in providing high-quality undergraduate and postgraduate education that benefits from and engages with Cambridge’s research-rich environment and/or nurturing the professional and personal development of research students and early career research staff. There should be
sustained excellence and leadership in contributing to teaching, research training and mentoring, which should be demonstrated with reference to at least two of the three criteria above.

**Service to the University and to the academic community (Administration)**

During the currency of their probation period, the employee will be asked to take on only those administrative tasks that are appropriate to their position. By the end of probation, an employee will have demonstrated an ability to undertake administrative tasks related to teaching, such as the provision of academic advice to students, the organisation of teaching activities, being an effective participant in committees, the writing of academic references, or the organisation of conferences or events. In the performance of these tasks, the employee should demonstrate an ability to work in accordance with established procedures, to work effectively and collegially with administrative staff as well as with academics, and to meet deadlines.

*Grade 9 School criterion for probation:* Consistently makes an effective contribution of service to the University and to the academic community beyond the University, promotes collegiality, and engenders a culture of mutual respect.

All employees of the University are expected to exemplify and promote collegiality and to foster a culture of inclusion and mutual respect in the workplace. For Grade 9 postholders, there will be evidence of the willing, timely and competent performance of Faculty administrative responsibilities appropriate for an academic at this stage of their career in line with the Faculty’s stint expectations in this regard. Individuals will need to demonstrate an effective contribution to the Faculty. Service to the academic community beyond the University may also be taken into account.

*Grade 10 School criterion for probation:* Consistently makes an effective contribution of service to the University and to the academic community beyond the University. Promotes collegiality and engenders a culture of mutual respect.

All employees of the University are expected to exemplify and promote collegiality and to foster a culture of inclusion and mutual respect in the workplace. For Grade 10 postholders, there will be evidence of sustained effectiveness in Faculty administration in line with the Faculty’s stint expectations for an academic at this stage in their career. In addition, there will normally be some engagement at School or University level or beyond.

**Personal effectiveness**

By the end of probation, an employee should be able to demonstrate the ability to plan work effectively so as to balance a range of research, teaching, and administrative activities both in the University and in a College. An employee must be able to relate appropriately to academic and administrative staff as well as to students. An employee should demonstrate strong abilities to work positively and collegially with colleagues in their subject area and beyond. General engagement with the intellectual life of the Faculty, such as by attending research seminars, contributing to the Working Paper Series and, where relevant, participating in Centre activities, is desirable. No employee could be expected to meet these expectations without support. Part of effective planning of work includes the ability to seek advice in a timely fashion in relation to the performance of tasks.
How does the Faculty provide support?

The Faculty provides support in three ways. In the first place, it appoints a mentor who will engage with you frequently to monitor progress – to listen to how you perceive that things are going, to provide advice or guidance, and to offer support. The mentor may well observe your teaching and offer comments, discuss research strategy, and offer suggestions and help you sort out the balance between conflicting commitments.

In the second place, the Faculty will seek to ensure that its own demands on your time are appropriate to your probationary status. In particular, it will seek to ensure that your Faculty workload enables you to attend staff development events appropriate to your stage of career and reflects the larger amount of time you will need to prepare teaching or launch a programme of research publications e.g. it may be agreed that you may have an initial reduced teaching load under the Faculty’s stint system. On the whole, the Faculty will ensure that administrative burdens are lighter than average in the early years of probation. The Faculty has limited influence to affect your College commitments. Nevertheless, it will use its good offices to encourage a College to moderate its requirements to reflect the needs of a probationary member of staff.

In the third place, it offers a number of individuals other than your mentor who can provide support. In relation to teaching, support can be found from the convenors of the subjects you are teaching and/or the Director of the relevant programme. They should provide advice on supervision and lecture reading lists, effective teaching exercises, the scope of lectures, and how to prepare students for assessments. During the first three years of your probation, a small team of Faculty colleagues may attend your lectures from time to time. Their role will be to provide constructive feedback to you and also to advise the Chair of the Faculty of any matters that should be taken into account in the evaluation of your teaching.

In relation to research, the Director of Research is able to discuss with you your research plans and the Research Grants Administrator is able to give advice on seeking sources of funding and practical help with grant applications. Many members of the Faculty work in areas that come under the umbrella of a Faculty Research Centre. Centre seminars and other events provide opportunities to discuss ideas with colleagues who have similar interests and for you to present work in progress. Some Centres have agendas that provide opportunities for colleagues to work jointly on research projects. You should also feel free to approach any Faculty colleague for advice and assistance in relation to any aspect of your research.

The Library staff will also be very willing to offer support. In relation to administrative tasks, the Deputy Chair, Academic Secretary of the Faculty or the Faculty Administrator (Secretary to the Faculty Board) can offer advice on the performance of administrative tasks. Within your College, the Senior Tutor is often the appropriate person to advise on such matters.

How should I monitor progress?

At the beginning of your probationary period, you will develop, in conjunction with the Faculty Chair, a probation plan. Each person comes with a unique set of skills and prior achievements, so each probation plan will be tailored to the individual. Your probation plan will then form the agreed basis on which the success of your probation will be judged, and will be a reference point for your annual meetings with the Faculty Chair.
You should make a note of meetings with your mentor, training events you have attended, and the achievement of particular milestones identified in your probation plan. This log of your probationary activity can then serve as the material on which you draw for any periodic reports you have to produce.

What are the steps in reviewing my progress?

You will have an annual meeting with the Chair of the Faculty (or with another person to whom the Chair has delegated the role of overseeing your probation) to review the progress on your probation. Before that meeting, you will be invited to submit a brief report on your activity, which should be related clearly to the criteria set out in your probation plan and in the work plan for the year that you have agreed with your mentor. Your mentor will also be invited to send comments to the Chair. After your meeting, a formal note will be sent to you by the Chair.

**Fixed-term posts**

During the final year of your probation period, you will be invited to report formally to the Faculty Selection Committee on your probation, inviting it to recommend to the University that you have satisfied the conditions of probation and that your position be confirmed until the end of your tenure in post. You can seek the advice of your mentor in preparing this report and contextual factors will also be taken into account, as appropriate.

**Established posts**

For University Teaching Officers with a five-year probation period, there will be a more formal meeting after three years to review your progress. By this point, it should be clear whether you are going to meet the probation criteria. For most people, this is not a problem. If there are problems for you in meeting the probation criteria, this is an opportunity for you to talk about them openly and for appropriate action to be agreed. You can seek advice from your mentor in preparing this report, and there will be a formal meeting with the Chair of the Faculty (or delegate). A formal record of this meeting will be produced and recommendations recorded. Contextual factors will also be taken into account, as appropriate. You may in addition be given specific targets for the remainder of the probation period. A report may be made by the Chair of the Faculty to the Selection Committee of the Faculty containing the documentation and inviting the Committee to approve the action suggested in the Chair’s report.

At the beginning of your fifth year, you will be invited to report formally to the Faculty Selection Committee on your probation, inviting it to recommend to the University that you have satisfied the conditions of probation and that your position be confirmed until the conventional retirement age. You can seek the advice of your mentor in preparing this report. There will be a formal meeting with the Chair of the Faculty to discuss it and they will indicate to you the tenor of the recommendation that will be made to the Faculty Selection Committee. The Faculty Selection Committee will then report to the University. The Selection Committee must make a decision, if possible, at least 9 months before the end of your probation.\(^5\)

\(^4\) This may be appropriate, for example, where the Chair and the probationer work in the same field or are in the same College.

\(^5\) General Board Report, note 1 above, Annex B, section 3.6.
In the light of progress and at a point earlier than the fifth year, the Faculty Selection Committee may be invited by the Chair of the Faculty to recommend your appointment to the conventional retirement age.6

Support during Probation

Staff Development

The University Personal and Professional Development (PPD) section provides a range of courses which may assist you in enhancing your skills in the Cambridge environment Personal and Professional Development | (cam.ac.uk). Some courses are on-line and some are face-to-face, and some are blended learning. In addition, the University Computing Service offers a range of training opportunities to enhance your IT skills. The timing and pacing of staff development activities during probation should be discussed with your mentor.

During probation, probation reviews replace the University Staff Review and Development process (aka ‘Appraisal’). Towards the end of your probation, you will need to become familiar with this process.

Support outside Cambridge

Nationally, AdvanceHE Home | Advance HE (advance-he.ac.uk) offers support for teaching. AdvanceHE organises a number of events each year which may be of interest to you. The Association of Law Teachers ALT – Association of Law Teachers provides a forum for reflection on law teaching. Its main focus is on institutions with large undergraduate cohorts, but Cambridge academics may find its events of interest. It publishes a journal, the Law Teacher, which has articles on research into law teaching, and it has a connected Legal Education Research Network (LERN).

Cambridge academics will usually join and take part in the activities of one of the UK national subject associations, notably the Society of Legal Scholars The SLS - Society of Legal Scholars and the Socio-Legal Studies Association Home (slsa.ac.uk). Both of these run annual conferences and other events. Both annual conferences offer good opportunities to present work in progress and to network with scholars across the country working in your field.

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6 The probation period may not be less than 3 years for the holder of an academic office: General Board Report, above note 1, para. 4.2. However, probation can be waived where the officer has held a senior academic position at another university and has already acquired relevant skills and experience.