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# **Laundry Service JCR Review and Proposals**

Easter Term, April 2007

Prepared for:

**JCR Committee 2007-8**

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## Objectives

- To examine the current system in place to provide laundry facilities for the students of Downing College
- To examine how other Cambridge colleges provide equivalent services to their students
- To determine if any improvements can be made to the current system or if an entirely new system altogether could be implemented
- Any new system would need to be on a 'no-additional-cost' basis for the College

## Introduction

The current system used by Downing College (the College) to provide laundry facilities to students has long been a contentious issue for both students and College authorities. It seems that there is a catch-22 situation; students believe that the current cost of laundry, especially the use of tumble driers, is too high while the College is being pressured by the company who provide those facilities to raise prices; students believe the current washing machines and tumble driers are unreliable and not environmentally friendly, while the company who provide them are unwilling to replace them without making more profit in return for their capital investment.

I will begin this report by analysing the current system used by the College to provide a laundry service to students, before carrying out research into how other Cambridge colleges provide a similar service to their students. I will then look at the feasibility of creating a new system for the College to implement which will resolve most, if not all, of the current problems which exist.

This report is written from the point of view of a student, but I will draw on evidence for all arguments and will conclude with clear recommendations as to how both the JCR and the college can proceed with a system which is hopefully beneficial to, but at least fair to both parties.

Before this report is delivered to the relevant College authorities it will be subject to approval of the entire JCR Committee. Any questions, suggestions or complaints regarding this report should be made to the JCR Services Officer.

## **Part I – Research Into Current Processes**

Downing College currently hold a contract with Associated Laundry Systems Ltd (ALS). The terms of this contract place an obligation on ALS to provide facilities for the undergraduate population of Downing to wash and dry their clothes when necessary. This means that ALS must provide maintenance support when the machines break down, refurbish the laundry rooms up to every three years and provide a system of payment so students can be charged for the use of the facilities.

ALS provide 6 washing machines and 7 tumble driers in two locations on the main campus of the college which any member of the student population can use. There is a further laundry room attached to the Singer Building. The cost for a single wash is £1.20 and an hour in a tumble drier costs £1.50.

Currently students have to use pre-pay laundry cards, which can be topped up in multiples of £10 only in the Porter's Lodge. This system replaced a coin operated system and was introduced in an attempt to improve security following a series of attempted burglaries of the money boxes in the laundry rooms. The theory behind this decision was that the money would be safer when under 24 hour supervision, an assumption which has so far proved accurate.

There are a number of limitations in the current payment system, not least the risk of losing, or having stolen, a card with a fair amount of money on and the large amount of money which must be placed on the card each time. A number of students, who wished not to be named, have expressed concern over the so-called security afforded by these cards.

A further area of some considerable dislike among students is the current method of requesting a refund should money be wrongly deducted from a card for example when the driers are out of order or broken down. The current system involves a student having to submit their card to the Head Porter, who sends it off to ALS, who refund the money and then send the card back to the Head Porter, who returns it to the student in question. This complicated process means many students are willing to forgo the hassle and not claim the money back, a situation which is unacceptable in its own right.

Currently the College receives a fixed payment of £1,500 per year from ALS to site and maintain washing machines. In return ALS receive all takings from the facilities. The College uses this money to pay for the running costs of the washers and driers, including the water, electricity and gas. ALS use their money to pay for the maintenance and renovation of the laundry machines and rooms.

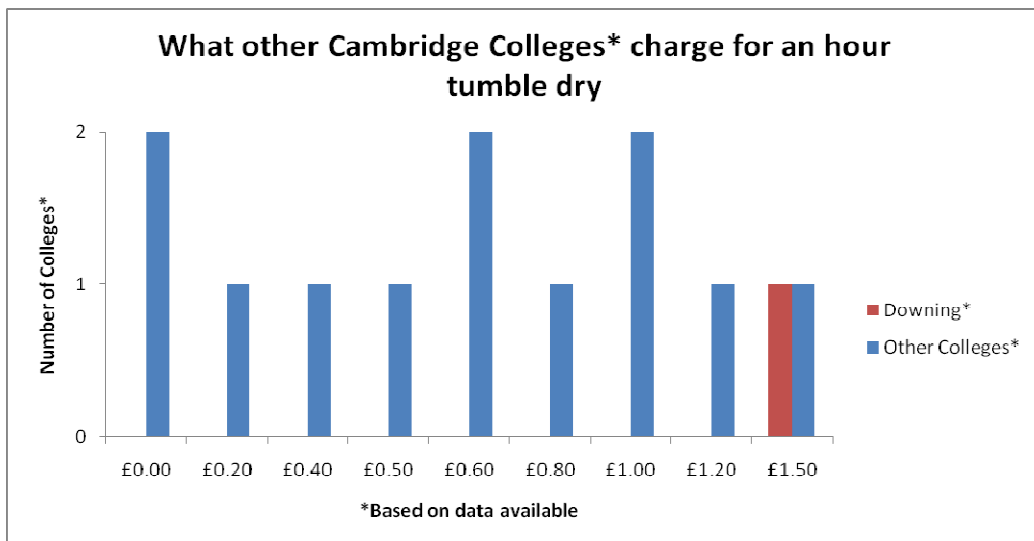
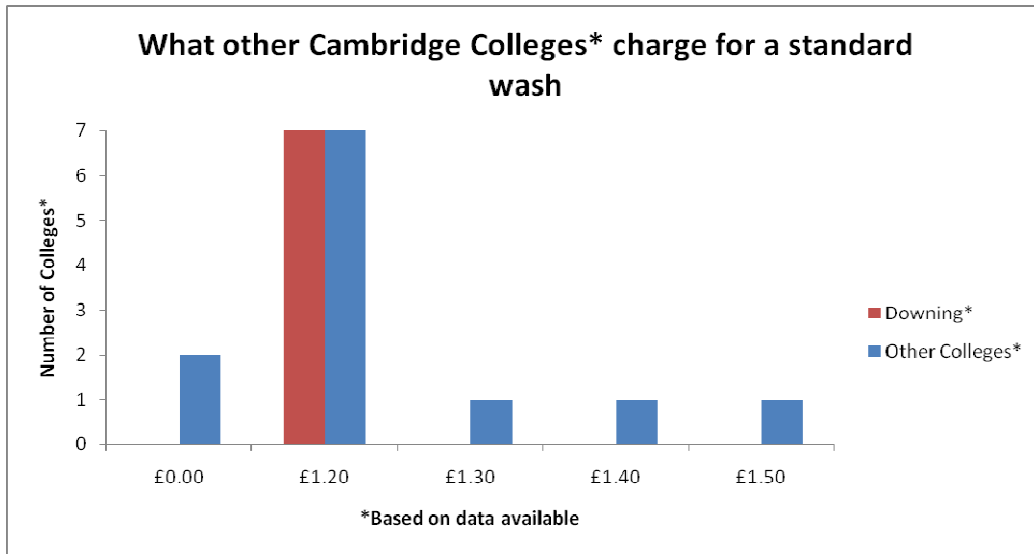
One last area which is of concern is the current double standards which some students feel exist. In some Lensfield Road houses washing machines and tumble driers are provided for use by students free of charge. The cost of this is offset by an increase in room rates. Room banding is a complicated issue, and one which is outside the remit of this report, but the issue of some receiving free laundry while others not is a matter of some discord among students. Maintenance for the laundry facilities in these houses is dealt with in the current contract with Cofathec, who deal with all maintenance requests in the college.

To sum up; the college currently receives £1,500 per annum which goes towards paying for the running costs of the laundry facilities and an estimated further £8,000<sup>1</sup> per annum is given to ALS for the maintenance of those facilities as required.

## Part II – Research Into Alternative Processes

Following a request for information, a number of JCR (or CSU) Officers from other Cambridge colleges provided an overview (in varying detail) of how the laundry facilities in their college work. By collating that data, and making several estimations, a number of charts were produced. The raw data can be found in the appendix.

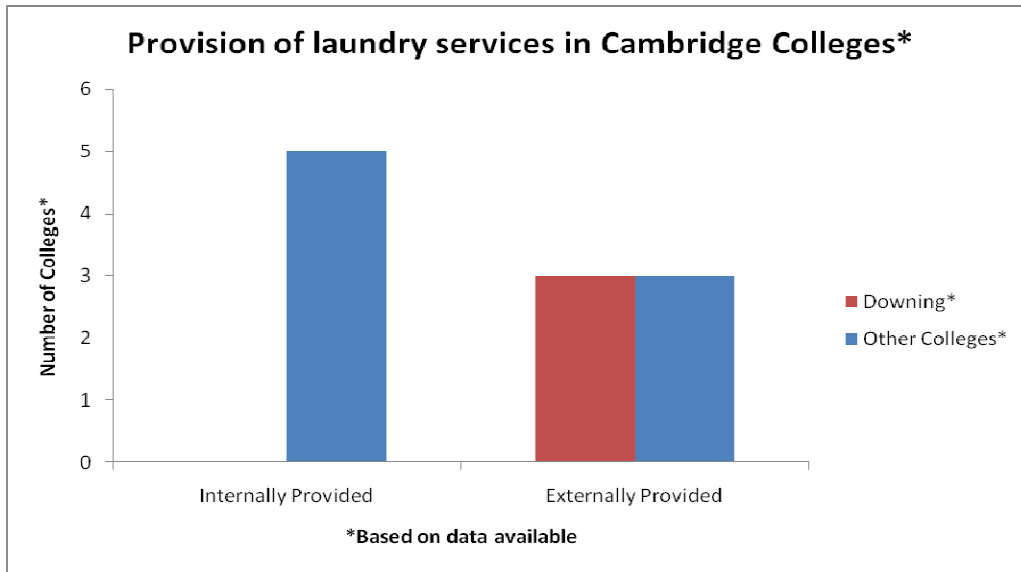
The main area of contention regarding the current system is the cost for the students of Downing. These two charts show how that cost compares to other colleges.



As these charts show, the cost for an hour tumble dry in Downing is the most expensive of all the colleges which replied. However Downing is average for the cost of washing.

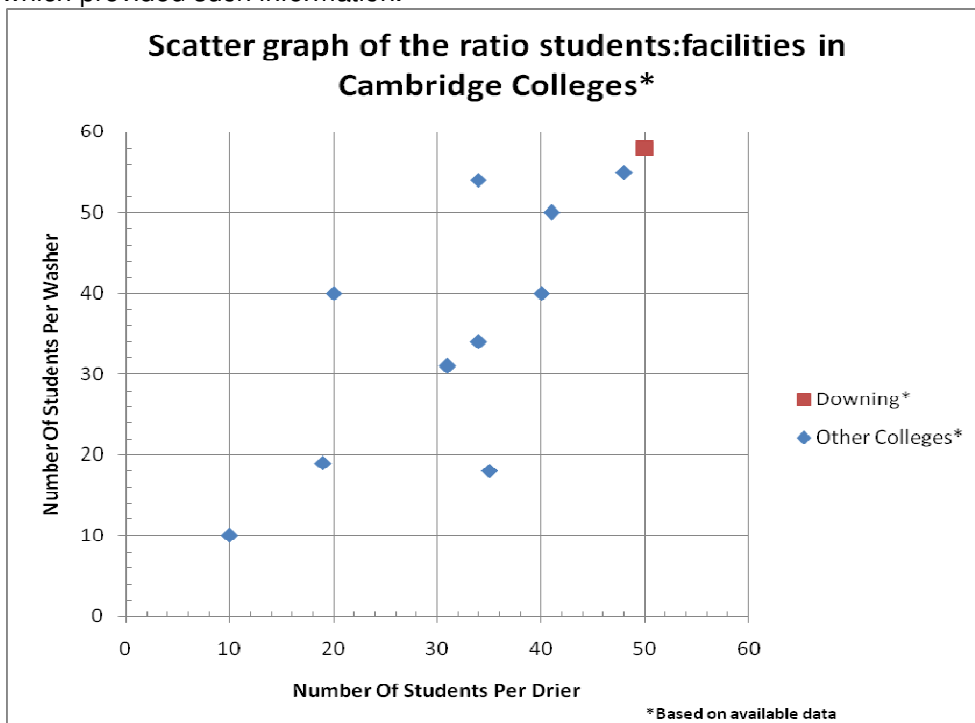
<sup>1</sup> This estimate comes from 400 students paying £20 per year

Downing has a privatised provision of laundry facilities. The next chart shows the number of colleges who have privatised laundry facilities compared to those who provide facilities internally, based on the available data.



As this shows, more colleges, of those which replied, have internally provided facilities rather than privatised facilities. This suggests that it is possible to 'break-even' when it comes to running an internal system.

The next graph shows how the ratio of students to facilities varies between colleges. The data on which this chart is based is the number of undergraduate students compared to the number of washing machines and tumble driers for each college which provided such information.



This shows, rather disturbingly, that Downing has the least number of washing machines and tumble driers per head than any other college which provided data. The reliability of the available data could be contested, so perhaps the previous statement is a little unsubstantiated, however the fact that Downing is in the top-right quadrant of the graph, rather than the bottom-left proves that Downing is undoubtedly lacking in facilities compared to some colleges.

### **Part III – Possible Alternatives to Current Processes**

The question now naturally becomes; ‘How can Downing improve its provision of laundry facilities?’ The answer, however, is a little harder to find.

The one overriding factor which will govern any new system is the cost to the College. Currently £1,500 is spent on running costs alone. If the provision of facilities was to be brought back under College control then the maintenance and repair of machines would need to cost no more than £8,000, unless the running costs could be reduced. Assuming that the current machines do not have optimum energy efficiency, it is not too difficult to envisage saving money by replacing them with new, more economical ones. Also a ‘green-drive’ where students are encouraged to wash at 40° rather than 60° could save money in conjunction with reducing the college’s carbon footprint.

The question of reducing the cost to students still remains. One possible solution which is worth exploring is a small addition to college accommodation bills which could provide students with free use of washing machines and tumble driers. This would also eliminate the worry of losing laundry cards. Developing this idea further, a total of £12,000<sup>2</sup> could be raised by adding £1 per week per room to rent prices. This would leave about £10,000<sup>3</sup> which would have to cover maintenance and renovation.

However, this may create a new problem whereby students would not worry about how many washes they did, leading to a possible increase in running costs. One way to combat this would be to issue each student with a quota of, say, 10 washes and 10 hours of drying per term. Enforcing this quota would require a system such as the use of Uniware software to debit a student’s account with each wash, or indeed the current card based system which receives an automatic balance at the beginning of each term. Another alternative is the issue of 20 tokens per term which need to be inserted into the machines to make them run, this shouldn’t suffer the same fate as the coin boxes of being subject to thefts, as the tokens would be effectively worthless. This is something which needs further examination by the College, assisted by the JCR Committee.

The question of whether £10,000 would be enough to provide effective maintenance of the laundry machines is one which should be posed to Cofathec, as it would make sense to see if they could be rolled into the existing contract with them, rather than trying to organise a second contract with another external company. This is another area which requires further examination by the College and JCR Committee.

To sum up this part, the addition of £1 per week to current room rates would generate an additional £10,000 for the college to spend on the replacement of the current machines and the maintenance and repair of those new machines. A system whereby students were limited to 10 ‘free’ washes and dries per term would prevent

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<sup>2</sup> This figure comes from 3 terms of 10 weeks for 400 students

<sup>3</sup> This comes from £12,000 less £2,000 which is an over estimate of the running costs

overuse, and an ideal solution would cater for students purchasing more washes at a reasonable rate, which research shows is significantly cheaper than is currently being paid by students.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude this report I will begin by reiterating the original objectives. The current system used by Downing College to provide laundry facilities to students has been subject to increasing dislike by students, principally due to the cost of washing and drying clothes while in residence. I aimed to investigate the current system and, following some research, present a clear recommendation for change.

Following that research I feel certain that the current system at Downing is fundamentally flawed. I received information on- and off-the-record which suggested that ALS were, and indeed still are, pressuring the College into raising rates still further, placing yet more strain on Downing students' finances.

However, perhaps the most important problem which has come to light thanks to my research is that Downing has arguably the worst facilities for the highest cost to students, a situation in need of urgent rectification.

I believe the best way to improve facilities for students is to bring the provision of laundry facilities back under the control of the College, so that pricing and availability can be managed in a more accountable manner. This obviously raises the issue of whether the college can afford to charge less and yet offer a better service, and I believe that the most profitable line of enquiry will be the addition of a 'Laundry Charge' equal to £30 per year to every students' college bill. This would provide sufficient revenue to provide up to 30 washes and dries per year to each student, provided that the maintenance of facilities can be rolled into the current Cofathec contract.

I will finish by highlighting once again the need for a change to the current system of laundry provision in Downing College, in order to provide students with a service of which the college can be proud.

## Appendix

- Colleges for which at least some data is available;
  - Churchill
  - Claire
  - Corpus Christi
  - Emmanuel
  - Girton
  - Jesus
  - Pembroke
  - Queens
  - Robinson
  - St Catherine's
  - Selwyn
  - Sidney Sussex
  - Wolfson

- Wash and dry costs at other colleges;

Wash Cost    Number of Colleges

£0.00	2
£1.20	7
£1.30	1
£1.40	1
£1.50	1

Dry Cost

£0.00	2
£0.20	1
£0.40	1
£0.50	1
£0.60	2
£0.80	1
£1.00	2
£1.20	1
£1.50	1

- Number of colleges providing facilities;

<u>Internally</u>	5
<u>Externally</u>	3

- Number of students per washer and drier in other colleges;

<u>Washers</u>	40	34	34	31	48	19	35	20	10	35	41
<u>Driers</u>	40	34	54	31	55	19	18	40	10	18	50