



Disability Advisory Service Annual Report 2019-20



Contents

Introduction	3
Student Outreach and Engagement	3
Service Developments and Institutional Work	4
Registrations	5
Disability type	6
Student Status	7
Students registered by division	8
Ethnicity and gender	9
Student Support Plans	10
Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)	11
Non-medical helper (NMH) provision	11
Assessments	12
Study Needs Assessment	12
Diagnostic Assessment Service for Specific Learning Difficulties	12
Examination Adjustments	13
Service Evaluation	14
Staffing and Caseloads	15
Forward view	16

Introduction

In 2019–20 more than 5,280 students were known to the Disability Advisory Service (DAS). This figure represents 21.5% of the total Oxford student population, and is significantly higher than the proportion who choose to formally record a disability on their student record (13.6%). The increase from 2018–19 is over 20%. Oxford's disability disclosure rates are already higher than the sector average, which HESA reports as being 14.6%¹. Disability advisor caseloads also remain high compared to many other universities, with nearly 660 students per full-time equivalent disability advisor.

Despite this, and the added complexities that come with working within a devolved collegiate context, the DAS offers a relatively bespoke, individual service. All students that register with DAS are offered contact with a designated disability advisor to establish any study support requirements. Although most appointments were conducted in-person before the coronavirus pushed all service delivery online, some remote working and service provision was already in place. These pre-existing practices provided a useful grounding for transitioning to an entirely online working model and managing the many logistical, operational and administrative challenges that emerged with the first set of national lockdown restrictions. The hard work, collaboration and dedication of the whole DAS staff team enabled the Service to successfully navigate one of the most challenging periods the world has faced in recent decades.

Student Outreach and Engagement

DAS proactively encourages prospective applicants, offer holders and matriculated students to disclose and register a disability as early as possible so they might access and gain full benefit from any necessary support and resources that are available to them.

DAS's outreach and student engagement work in 2019–20 included:

- Presence at all undergraduate Open Days, including the inaugural online Open Days in June 2020 where DAS staff responded to nearly 100 questions from individual prospective students.
- Ongoing close work with Undergraduate and Graduate Admissions Teams on messaging in prospectuses, application materials and webpages, and staff guidance documents.
- Information sessions for Modern Languages students preparing for a year abroad.
- A popular drop-in service attended by 71 enrolled students over Michaelmas and Hilary term before lockdown restrictions prevented further in-person work. The DAS drop-in enabled disability advisors to respond to quick queries about registration, funding applications and support arrangements in a more timely, efficient and flexible manner than was possible before all remote working. Moving provision online has removed the space constraints that previously severely limited appointment availability.

¹ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>

- Two pre-matriculation events for incoming disabled students to help facilitate a smooth transition to Oxford – including a one-day event available to all new disabled students, consisting of a programme of speakers and presentations on a range of pertinent issues, as well as a dedicated two-day induction event aimed specifically at students on the autism spectrum.
- Three Exam Preparation talks in Hilary term 2020, delivered by specific learning difficulty study skills specialists.

Service Developments and Institutional Work

Under normal circumstances high caseloads can limit the extent to which additional service developments or institutional work is possible beyond DAS's core role of supporting individual disabled students. These issues were further compounded by the operational challenges posed by the global pandemic, which made it necessary to defer a number of planned pieces of work.

From March 2020 resources were largely diverted to enable the Service to respond quickly to the new priorities emerging from the impact of the pandemic on disabled students. For example, working with Education Policy Support (EPS) and the Examinations and Assessments Service (EAS) to develop a new temporary evidence policy and procedure for provisional Student Support Plans (SSP). This work helped to ensure disabled students who needed reasonable adjustments during Trinity term 2020 would not be disadvantaged if they were unable to produce evidence that met the University's normal requirements². DAS, EPS and EAS also worked closely together to create a framework for reasonable adjustments for online open-book exams, and to respond to the many and varied queries arising from students and staff in this area.

Additionally, significant progress was still made in a number of other areas. The DAS Staff Guide³ (formerly Handbook) was completed and made available online in Trinity term 2020. This major piece of work constitutes a comprehensive and essential set of resources that underpin the implementation of the principles within the University's Common Framework for Supporting Disabled Students⁴.

Relatedly, the Disability Inclusion Project Officer became a permanent role with a new job title of Inclusive Education Officer. Now based in the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), this postholder worked closely with DAS throughout Trinity term 2020 to produce extensive staff guidance on making remote teaching inclusive and accessible for disabled students⁵.

² <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/disability/needs>

³ <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/supporting-disabled-students>

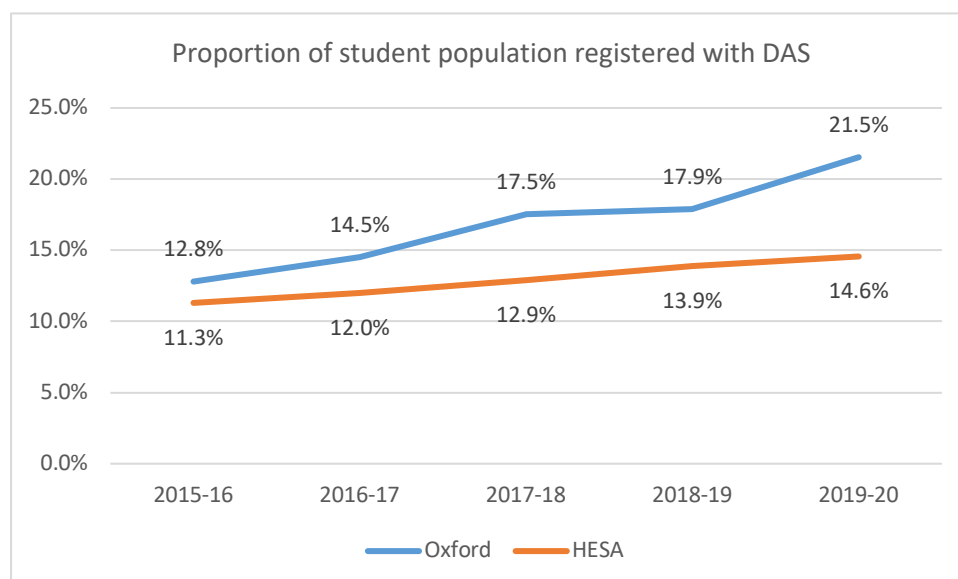
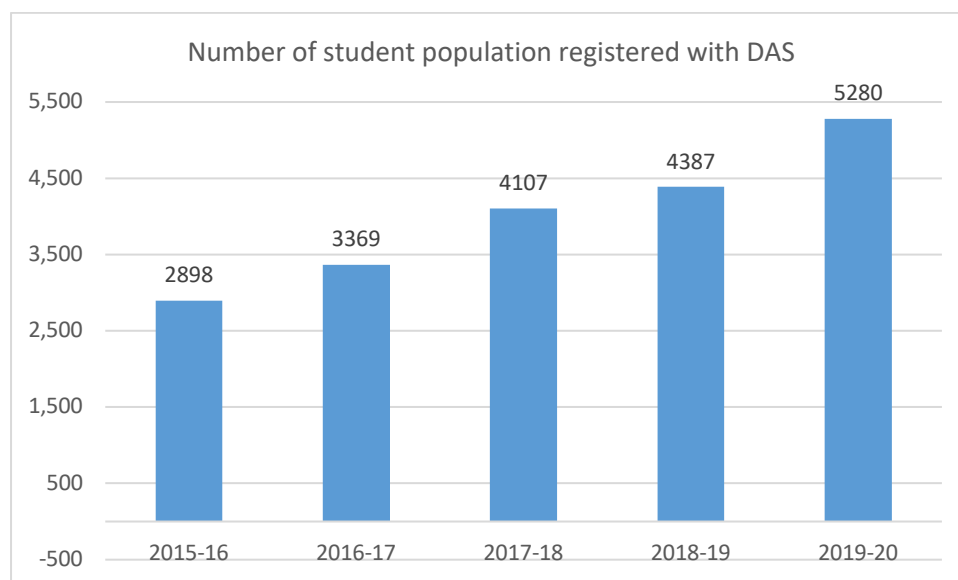
⁴ <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/common-framework-for-supporting-disabled-students-0>

⁵ <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/teaching-and-learning-reasonable-adjustments#collapse2419556> and <https://ctl.ox.ac.uk/accessibility-teaching>

Some progress was also made in developing the longer-term vision for the DAS mental health sub-stream. The Napier Trust Fund supported a small pilot which allowed us to employ three part-time mental health mentors on a salary for the year. Mentors ordinarily work on a sessional basis, which creates some significant operational challenges for the Service. The information gleaned from this pilot suggested strongly that additional payroll budget and dedicated management would be required if we were to move towards an alternative employment model in future. These important insights will feed into longer term strategic planning on how DAS evolves its services to meet changing demand from students with mental health difficulties.

Registrations and demographic data

The number of students registered with the DAS has increased in the last year by 21%, with a total of 5,280 student records in 2019-20.



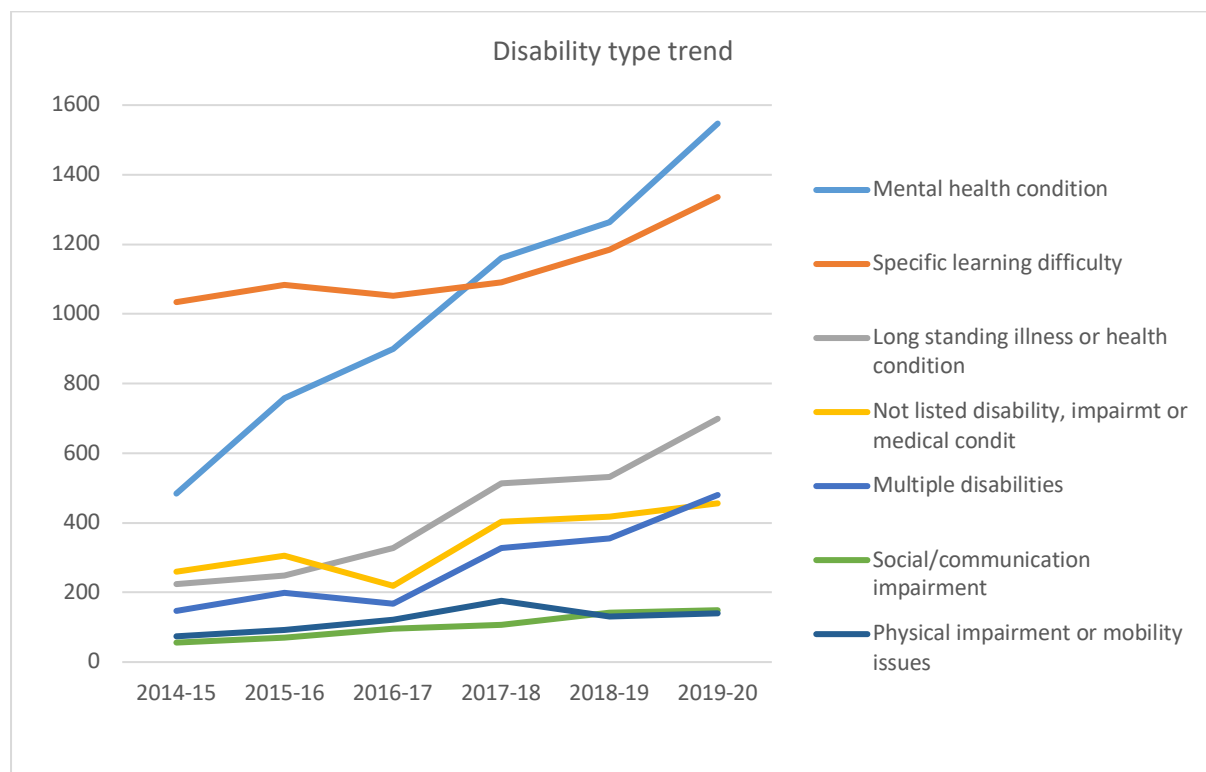
Demand for DAS provision remains above student population growth, and further increases in either demand or student growth (particularly planned growth such as in the Strategic Plan) will have a significant impact on the ability of the DAS to support students.

The overall proportion of students accessing disability services remains higher than the previous national rate from the HESA, although 2019 figures have not yet been released.

Disability type

DAS supports students with a hugely broad range of complex needs, and these do not fit naturally into neat categories for reporting purposes (especially students who declare multiple conditions).

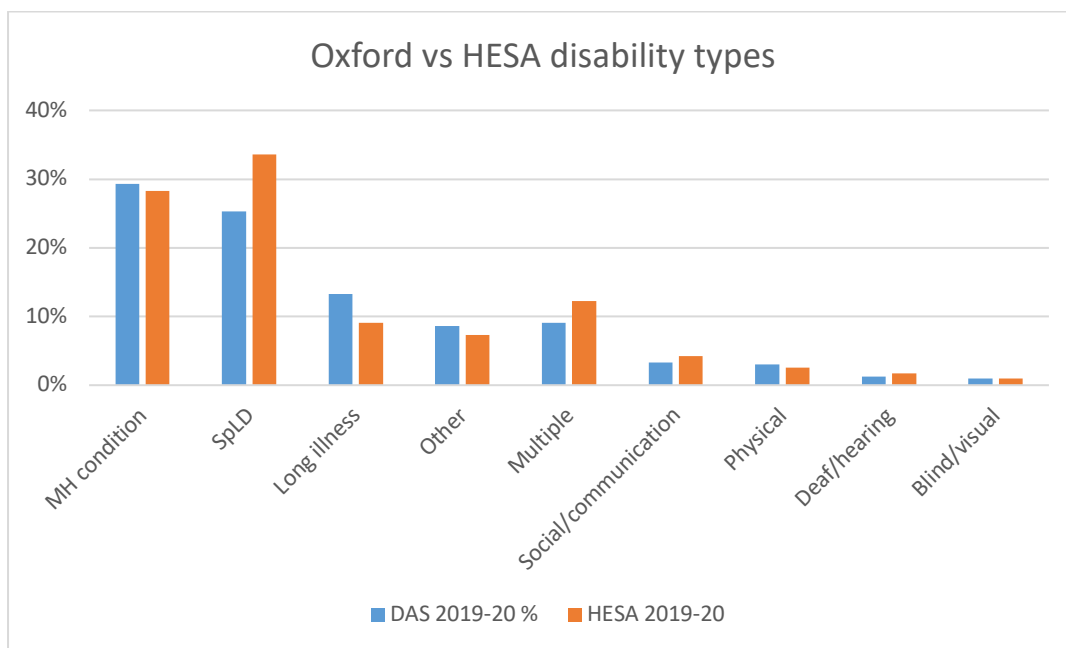
Students who declare mental health conditions remain the highest proportion of DAS users, followed by those who declare SpLDs. The number of students with long-standing illnesses or multiple conditions has continued to rise.



	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Mental health condition	900	1161	1263	1547
Specific learning difficulty	1052	1091	1185	1336
Long standing illness or health condition	328	514	531	699
Not listed disability, impairment or medical condition	219	403	418	456
Multiple disabilities	168	327	356	480

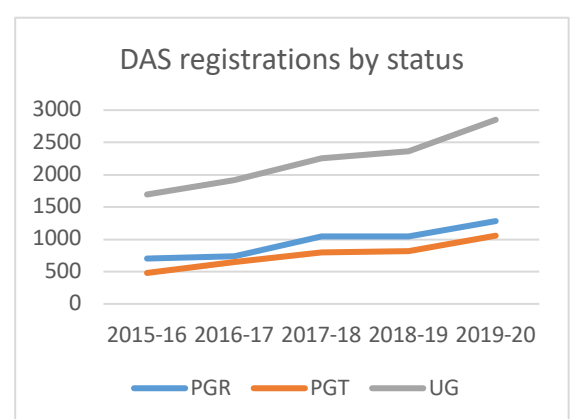
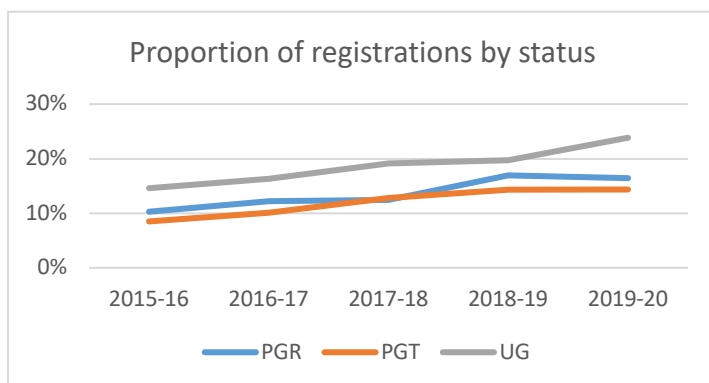
Social/communication impairment	107	141	149	174
Physical impairment or mobility issues	176	131	140	162
Unknowns & pending	197	165	121	235
No disability or no known disability	130	69	119	77
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	44	53	54	64
Blind or serious visual impairment	48	52	53	50

Relative to the national average for HE institutions, Oxford has a smaller proportion of students declaring a SpLD. This may indicate this category could continue growing at Oxford in future.⁶



Student status

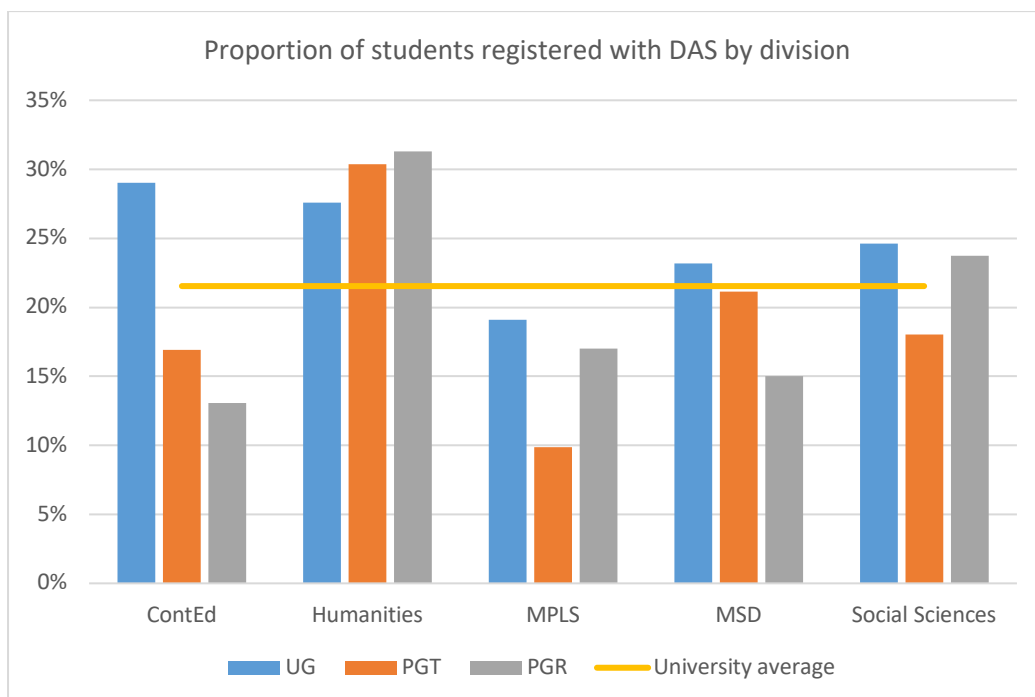
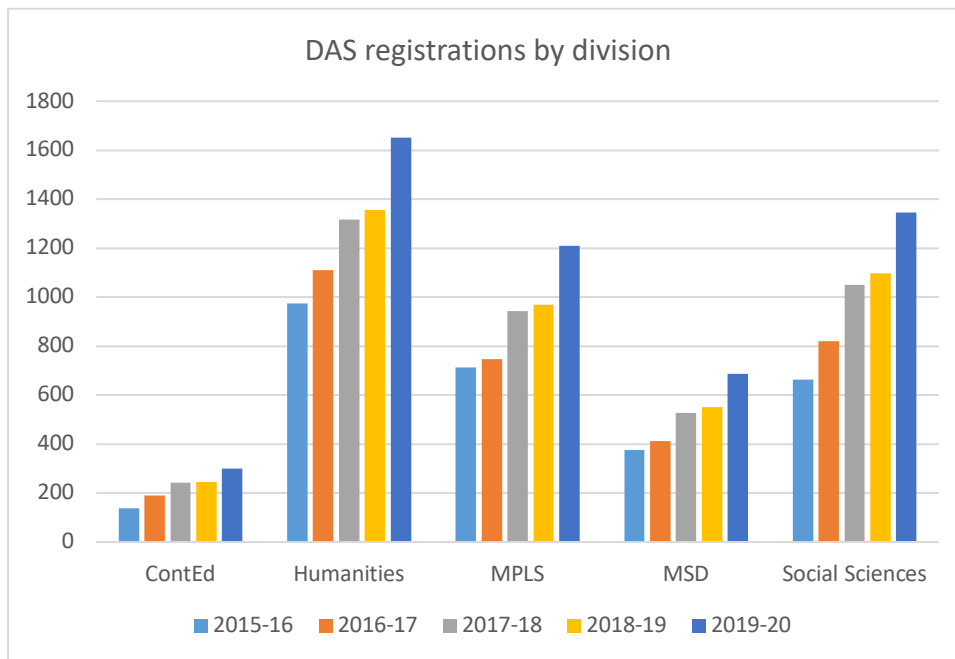
The number of students has been rising across all statuses, with undergraduate students continuing to represent the majority of students registered with the DAS and accounting for most growth in year.



⁶ HESA disability type benchmarking data is for UK domiciled.

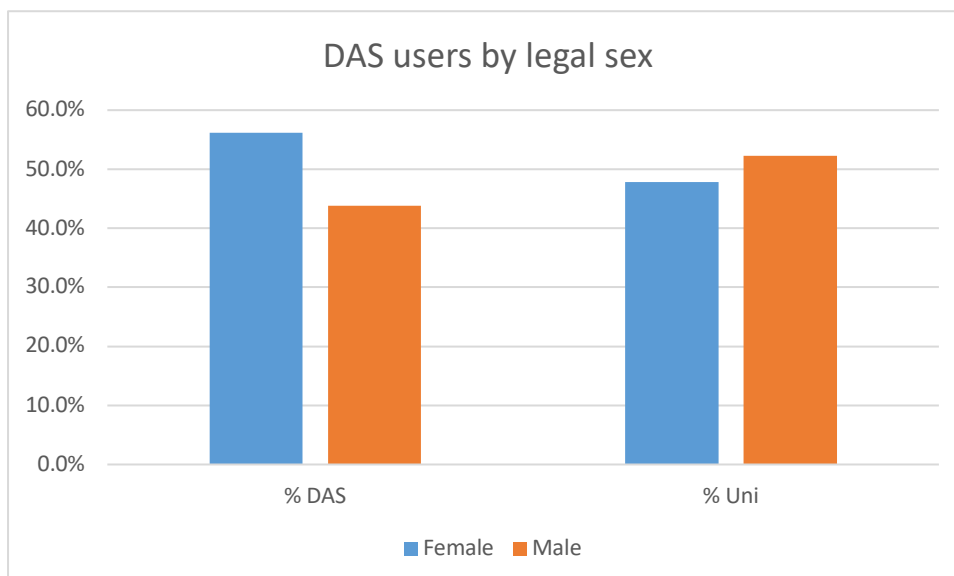
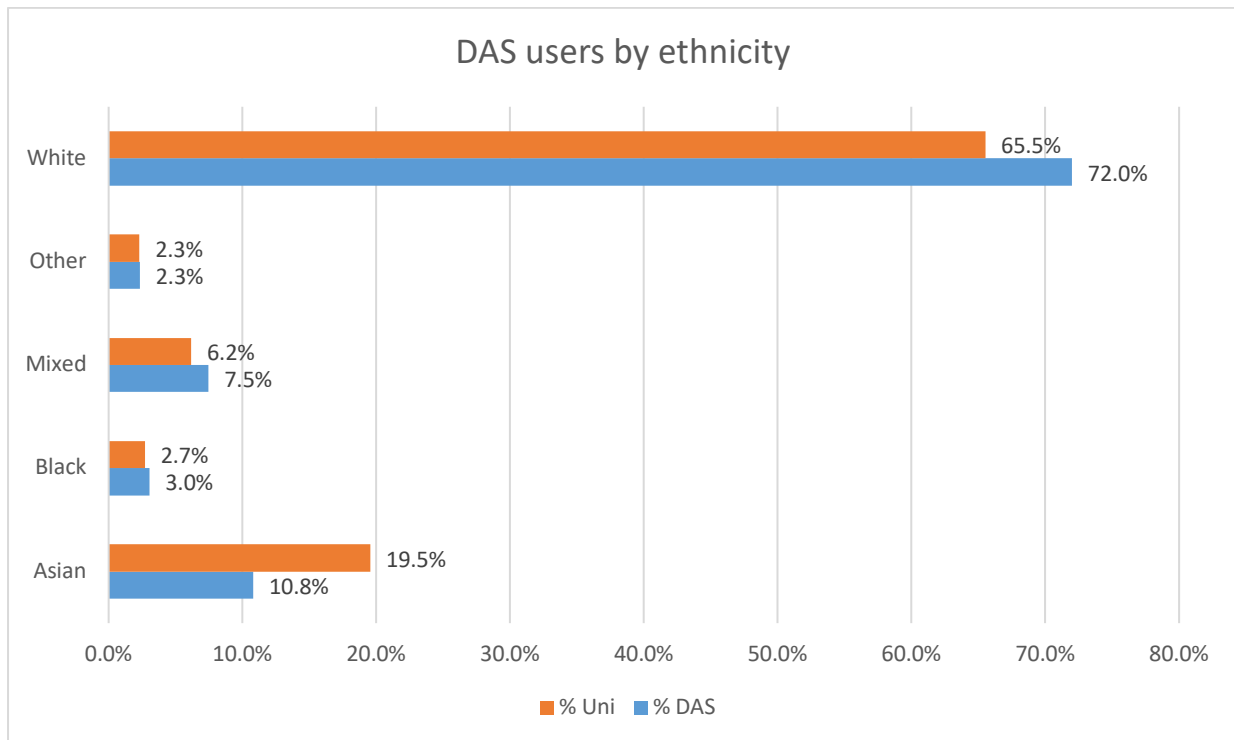
Students registered by division

The Divisions with the largest number of student users of DAS remain Humanities and Social Sciences, although numbers across all Divisions rose in 2019-20, with a noticeable increase in students from MPLS. Except in the Humanities, PGT users are less likely than other cohorts to declare a disability.



Ethnicity and gender

White students are over-represented amongst DAS users. Students are asked to self-categorise their ethnicity when enrolling for their course. Students who select the label 'Asian' at registration includes those from China, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan (amongst others), and they are relatively under-represented in the DAS.



Female students are over-represented in the DAS users, although compared to the national picture the difference is less pronounced. (HESA 2019-20: 63% Female, 36% Male).

Student Support Plans

Each year just under 40% of all students known to the DAS require a Student Support Plan (SSP) recommending institutional reasonable adjustments. The remainder do not engage with the Service, or do not need or want an SSP.

Around 1,300 students starting a course in Michaelmas term 2019 declared a disability or were known to the DAS. High caseload numbers and student response times mean it is not possible to ensure every student who needs an SSP has one in place by the start of their course. Furthermore, new diagnoses and disclosures emerge throughout the academic year. However, nearly half of the 2019-20 starters who would require an SSP (213 students) had one in place before they matriculated. A further 194 SSPs were produced within three months of matriculation. Overall, three quarters of first year students with an SSP had one in place before the end of their first term at Oxford.

Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)

The proportion of students who receive the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) increased in 2019-20 on the previous year:

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Students claiming DSA to fund support	765	1,029	1,096	1,266	1,548
Students with non-DSA funded support	166	223	304	332	594

Where matriculated students are ineligible for DSA support (e.g. because they have international student status), the University provides equivalent support through an internal funding mechanism. This includes non-medical help (see below) and access to assistive technology and ergonomic furniture. We are able to offer greater flexibility in the support provided to these students and substantially reduce the administrative burden as we are free of the restrictions imposed by external funding bodies' processes and regulatory requirements.

Non-medical helper (NMH) provision

The term NMH refers to the human support provided to students. These services are particularly sensitive to individual student need, and therefore subject to significant demand variation which is difficult to predict in advance.

Non-specialist NMH support

Non-specialist NMH roles include notetakers, library support workers, laboratory assistants, autism study support workers, and examination scribes. The government withdrew DSA funding for these roles in September 2016 and universities have since been expected to provide non-specialist NMH services, or make appropriate alternative provision – for example, lecture capture in place of notetakers, or access to assistive technology in examinations instead of a scribe.

Specialist NMH support

Specialist NMH includes mentoring support for students with mental health disabilities or autism spectrum conditions, and one-to-one study skills tuition for students with SpLDs (specific learning difficulties). At Oxford both provisions are usually delivered in-house, although some universities fully outsource this support.

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Students receiving non-specialist NMH	105	101	59	53	61
Students receiving mentoring	288	359	414	434	439
Students receiving SpLD tuition	-	-	259	260	261

	2018-19	2019-20
Hours of non-specialist NMH	2,663.9	2,628.23
Hours of mentoring	4,445.2	5,070.75
Hours of SpLD tuition	1,307.5	1,659.58

In 2019-20 the numbers of students receiving specialist mentoring and SpLD tuition remained broadly the same, but more support hours were delivered overall. Slightly more students received non-specialist NMH than in the previous two years, but with a slight decrease in the number of support hours per student.

Assessments

Study Needs Assessment

The Oxford University Assessment Centre (OUAC) provides the study needs assessments required to access DSA funding. OUAC is open to Oxford students and those from other HEIs.

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
UK Oxford students	257	248	248	317	249
Oxford-funded (international) students	63	33	11	9	3
Other HEI students	341	298	297	174	212
Total	661	579	556	500	464

The total number of study needs assessments conducted has been steadily going down over the last five years. Whilst the number of UK Oxford students which the OUAC assesses has remained broadly steady, it is seeing fewer Oxford-funded (international) students after a change in process in 2017. Wherever possible and appropriate, Disability advisors themselves now undertake more comprehensive preliminary assessments for

these students, thereby streamlining and improving the overall student experience and reducing the number who need to access OUAC. The numbers of students we assess from other universities crept back up slightly in 2019–20, but the overall downwards trajectory is likely to be attributable to other centres opening locally

Nevertheless, we're hopeful that numbers could increase in the 2020–21 academic year. University of Oxford students are not obliged to use OUAC and may choose to attend another assessment centre if they wish. However, notwithstanding any further changes from the DfE to assessment centre provision (see forward view), we believe that the move to remote, online delivery with the pandemic could substantially increase the number of assessments OUAC are able to conduct. There are currently no space constraints and assessors therefore have greater flexibility in their availability. Most significantly, students needing to arrange an assessment before they matriculate or whilst they're away from Oxford (e.g. during vacation periods) are no longer restricted by travel to using a centre more local to their home residence.

Diagnostic Assessment Service for Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD)

DAS advisors offer a preliminary screening service for students who believe they may have an undiagnosed specific learning difficulty (SpLD). Following the screening, if sufficient supporting evidence exists, the student is referred for an assessment which the University pays for in full. For existing diagnostic reports that do not meet the University's assessment criteria⁷, in some instances DAS can undertake the relevant top-up tests where it is not necessary for the student to undergo a full new assessment.

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
New full assessment	173	192	224	236	156
Top-up tests for existing report	39	36	39	32	4
Total	212	228	263	268	166
SpLD confirmed	88%	98%	97%	95%	92%

In Michaelmas term 2019 changes to the University's SpLD diagnostic report criteria were introduced to align with new Department for Education (DfE) regulations which removed the requirement for assessments to be post-16 age. This substantially reduced the number of new full assessments or top-up tests undertaken in 2019–20, and significantly accelerated the examination adjustment process for those students.

Furthermore, all diagnostic assessments were put on hold during the first coronavirus lockdown because the SpLD Assessment Standards Committee (SASC)⁸ deemed some of the core tests unsuitable for use in a remote format. From June 2020 the Department for Education (DfE) and Student Loans Company (SLC) agreed, for a limited period, to accept 'Evaluation of Needs' reports as evidence of a disability for the purposes of a DSA

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https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/field/field_document/Guidance%20on%20SpLD%20Diagnostic%20assessments%20May%202016.pdf

⁸ <https://sasc.org.uk/NewsItem.aspx?id=90>

application. These reduced assessments must meet strict professional guidelines⁹ but can be conducted online. The University also accepts that these reports are sufficiently detailed to be used by DAS to recommended institutional reasonable adjustments, including alternative examination arrangements, and we started taking appointment bookings from August 2020.

Examination Adjustments

DAS start the application for examination adjustments for students with SpLDs, with a qualified assessor confirming the recommended arrangements. For students with other disabilities, the college starts the application and the Student Support Plan (SSP) can be used as supporting evidence. A new application for exam adjustments is are produced each time a student has a new diagnosis or if they transfer colleges or change course.

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
New exam adjustment application for students with SpLDs	334	332	334	344	361

During the pandemic the University’s Education Committee agreed to accept recommendations from DAS on the basis of a reduced evidence threshold to ensure that disabled students could still access reasonable adjustments. Between March and July 2020, before Evaluations of Need had been established as an alternative route to a diagnostic assessment, provisional exam arrangements were made for 36 students (included in the total 361 reported in the table above). Each had been individually screened by a DAS advisor and SpLD professional, and deemed very likely to have an SpLD. Six of these students were finalists but the remaining 30 went on to receive an ‘Evaluation of Need’ which indeed confirmed an SpLD profile that did warrant the adjustments.

In 2019-20, 968 applications for examination adjustments were made for 877 individual students across the collegiate university. 84.5% of these students were known to the DAS.

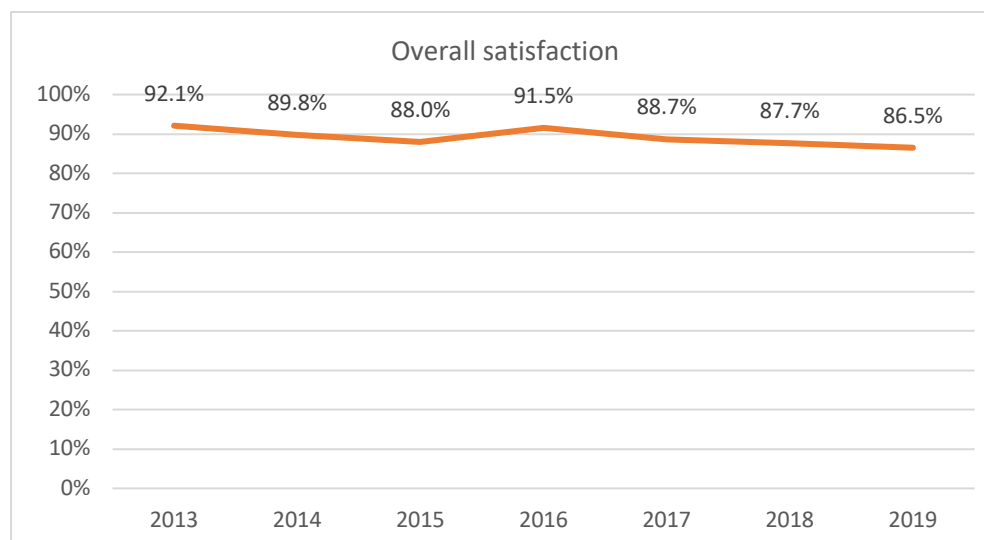
	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Total number of applications for exam adjustments	-	1,105	968
% of which are known to the DAS	67.6%	74%	84.5%

The % increase in students with examination adjustments known to the DAS may reflect ongoing efforts from colleges and other central departments to signpost students with chronic illnesses and long-term mental health conditions to us where it is suspected that they may benefit from other disability-related study support.

⁹ <https://sasc.org.uk/NewsItem.aspx?id=91>

Service Evaluation

Oxford uses the **Student Barometer** in late November each year to survey PT and FT students with some exclusions; the overall response rate was 28% for 2019. The following data covers the % satisfied for the DAS. Note that the data may be skewed by the fact that students with no-declared disability may have responded to questions related to the DAS, even if they had never used the service.¹⁰ The satisfaction was broadly similar across PGT, PGR and UG respondents.



There is an awareness that the use of the Student Barometer as the only measure of evaluation is not ideal, particularly as elements of the service provided through Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) are delivered by external agencies.

The Oxford data from the **National Student Survey (NSS)** continues not to be released due to a sub-50% response rate, driven by the student boycott of the survey.

In Trinity term 2020 the Oxford SU Student Welfare Report indicated that 88% of students who had used the DAS found it somewhat or very useful, one of the highest satisfaction rates amongst survey respondents.

The DAS conducts its own **annual student survey** and 144 students responded to our survey at the end of 2019-20.

- 90% confirmed they had a Student Support Plan in place and, of those, 93% reported that the support arrangements made by the DAS were helpful.
- 87% found it easy or very easy to make an appointment with the service.
- 47% of respondents had accessed at least one remote appointment with the Service after the lockdown started in March 2020, with the majority reporting no significant preference between in-person or remote contact.

¹⁰ 540 responses to this question.

- 88% rated their overall experience of DAS as satisfactory or above, with 41% of these rating the service as excellent.

Staffing and Caseloads

The DAS is staffed by ten disability advisors (8.0 FTE casework carrying), administrative support staff, a Head of Service, and a Deputy Head of Service who is also Head of the Oxford University Assessment Centre (OUAC).

Year	Students	Advisor FTE (carrying casework)	Caseload: FTE Advisor
2019-20	5,280	8.0	660
2018-19	4,387	8.0	548
2017-18	4,107	6.4	641
2016-17	3,369	5.2	648
2015-16	2,876	4.8	599

Forward View

2019-20 was an exceptional year for everyone and required substantial focussed resource in order to adapt quickly to unprecedented challenges and levels of change imposed by the global pandemic. Nevertheless, the wholesale move of teaching, assessment and other services to an online format has also created important opportunities for the University to rethink how it can create a more flexible and inclusive environment that enables disabled students to flourish.

Moving forwards the institution will need to tackle challenges around how to retain the positive practices that have emerged from remote teaching and assessment, and how to further optimise their accessibility. For example,

- Continued widespread use of lecture capture and improvements in captioning facilities, which we know can be helpful for everyone but have disproportionate benefits for disabled students.
- Further developing resources for students on skills for remote or blended learning.
- Promoting diversity in assessments and launching a new online examination platform with an accompanying framework that is accessible and inclusive of disabled students' needs.
- There will also be opportunities for DAS to review its own service delivery and consider what elements of remote provision it might preserve when social distancing measures are lifted once and for all.

In 2020-21 DAS will formally introduce the Staff Guide to Support Disabled Students, and will complete work with Student Systems to launch the SSP SITS development. We will then begin a project to review reasonable adjustments to teaching and learning, seeking to better understand some of the barriers to implementing SSPs.

We also anticipate resuming work with SDMA and EPS on a data project to explore the disabled student journey at Oxford, to improve understanding of the impact of student engagement with support services and institutional reasonable adjustment provision on disabled student attainment, in line with the University's targets in its Access and Participation Plan (APP)¹¹.

To date the Government has delayed planned changes to policy on disabled student funding and support, but we anticipate directives will emerge from research and work being undertaken by the relatively newly formed Disabled Students' Commission¹². It is also expected that the 2021 calendar year will bring long-awaited announcements in changes to the provision of study needs assessments, specialist mentoring and SpLD study skills tuition. There is not currently enough information available to formulate a detailed strategic response, but the Service will begin preliminary work on evaluating possible future service models pending further details.

Lastly, DAS looks forward to continuing its fruitful working partnerships with key stakeholders, including the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), Education Policy Support (EPS), Examination and Assessments Service (EAS), the Proctors' Office and Students' Union, with a view to supporting the University's strategic aims of providing an inclusive environment that enables all students to thrive, and proactively removes barriers for disabled students.

Katherine Noren-Curtis, Head of the Disability Advisory Service

¹¹ <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/app>

¹² <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/disabled-students-commission>