

Disability Advisory Service Annual Report 2018-19



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Introduction

Over 4,350 students were known to the Disability Advisory Service (DAS) in 2018/19, representing nearly 18% of the total Oxford student population. This is significantly higher than the proportion who have recorded a disability on their student record (13%). Although overall numbers of registrations did not rise significantly on the previous year, at nearly 550 students per full-time equivalent disability advisor, the caseloads remain high for the sector, especially in the context of the added complexities associated with working within a devolved, collegiate institution.

Nevertheless, the DAS continues to offer a relatively bespoke, individual service. All students are offered contact with a disability advisor after they register in order to establish their disability-related study support requirements, and there is flexibility over whether this happens through an in-person appointment, or remotely through a telephone or Skype appointment, or via email correspondence.

The doubling in registrations between 2013 and 2018 was largely due to the steeply increasing number of students declaring a long-term mental health condition. In response, in August 2019 the DAS implemented a new sub-stream dedicated to supporting students with mental health disabilities, consisting of three full-time equivalent mental health disability advisors (including one new senior advisor) and incorporating the Service's 23 specialist mentors.

Student Outreach and Engagement

In addition to the DAS's core role in supporting individual disabled students who initiate contact with the Service, it proactively encourages prospective applicants, offer holders and enrolled 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. Just under 40% of all students known to the DAS require a Student Support Plan (SSP) detailing their institutional support requirements, and nearly half of these were produced for offer holders between January and September 2019 before their course started (SSPs are finalised for most of the remaining students within three months of matriculating).

In 2018/19 the DAS maintained its commitment to an ongoing presence at undergraduate Open Days, and continued to work closely with Undergraduate and Graduate Admissions Teams on messaging in prospectuses, application materials and webpages, and staff guidance documents. It also:

- facilitated **pre-application visits** (on request) outside normal Open Day events;
- delivered **information sessions for medieval and modern languages students** preparing for a year abroad;
- offered a **drop-in service** attended by 88 enrolled students over the three terms, enabling disability advisors to respond to quick queries about support arrangements and DAS registration in a more timely, efficient and flexible manner;
- delivered one-hour taster **sessions to introduce low/no-cost assistive technology** and apps to help with work and study – these sessions were run in conjunction with IT Services and made available to all students and staff of the University in an inclusive, anticipatory manner, but were designed to particularly target (and benefit) disabled students;
- offered two **pre-matriculation events** for incoming disabled students to help facilitate a smooth transition to Oxford. This included 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;

- facilitated a **social networking group for students with autism** (established in response to feedback from attendees on the transition event); and
- delivered '**revision and examination preparation**' **study skills workshops** that were attended by students with a wide range of disabilities.

Service Developments

High caseloads continue to limit the DAS's ability to deliver services that fall outside its core remit to work with individual disabled students. However, it has successfully progressed a number of key areas of work that are summarised here.

Disability Inclusion Project: Common Framework Handbook

In conjunction with the Centre for Teaching and Learning, in Michaelmas term 2018 the DAS recruited a Disability Inclusion Project Officer to develop an online staff handbook to underpin the University's Common Framework for Supporting Disabled Students (scheduled for completion in Trinity term 2020). Finishing the Handbook is a key priority for the Service and a precursor to addressing other recommendations in the 2017 Inclusive Practice Project Report. The work of the Project Officer also complements other important areas of activity on accessibility, inclusion and student wellbeing that are currently ongoing across the institution.

Assistive Technology in Examinations Project

Following a successful application to the University's Diversity Fund, in Michaelmas term 2018 the DAS worked jointly with colleagues from the Examinations and Assessments Team (EAT) to deliver a project exploring the use of assistive technology in examinations. This project also complements the University's wider inclusion agenda and Student Wellbeing and Mental Health strategy. Its findings were reported in Trinity term 2019; recommendations for further developments in this area are contingent on securing further funding.

Mental Health Stream

The significant increase in registrations from students declaring a long-term mental health condition at Oxford over recent years is consistent with trends across the wider higher education sector. In response to these rising numbers and changes in the presenting profile of disability, over the course of 2018-19 the DAS scoped and developed a new internal structure and operational model to help it better serve current and future students. This included new administrative leadership, a new disability advisor staff structure, and a new sub-stream dedicated to supporting students with mental health disabilities.

The mental health stream was officially launched in August 2019. It consists of three full-time equivalent mental health disability advisors (including one senior advisor) and incorporates 23 specialist mentors already working for the Service. Funding was also secured to pilot the employment of a small number of salaried mentors in order to explore alternative models that may help the DAS continue to respond to high levels of demand for this support in future.

The mental health stream will be fully implemented and evaluated over the course of the 2019-20 academic year.

Student Support Plans (SSPs): Student Records Systems Development

Student Systems worked closely with the DAS through 2018-19 to scope and develop a new functionality within the student record system (SITS) to support more secure and efficient means of disseminating Student Support Plans (which contain reasonable adjustment recommendations) across the collegiate institution. Significant progress was made and work is expected to complete in the spring of 2020.

SpLD Diagnostic Assessment Guidelines

In December 2018 the government announced changes to the evidence requirements for students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD), with direct implications for the University's internal criteria for diagnostic assessment reports and processes for managing examination arrangements for this substantial group of students. Consequently, this area of work was prioritised for urgent review, resulting in a series of recommendations to align the University's guidance with government policy, whilst continuing to reflect standards set by UK national professional bodies and applying appropriate quality assurance measures. The changes were approved in Trinity term 2019, and will result in a faster, more efficient process for implementing reasonable adjustments, as well as a reduced burden on students with an SpLD to meet evidential standards not required by other groups.

External Regulation of Accredited Services

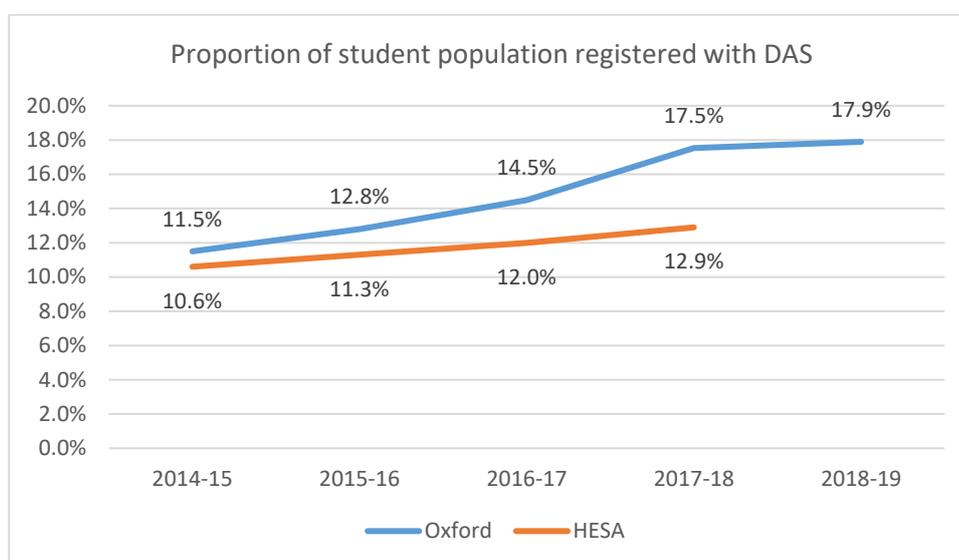
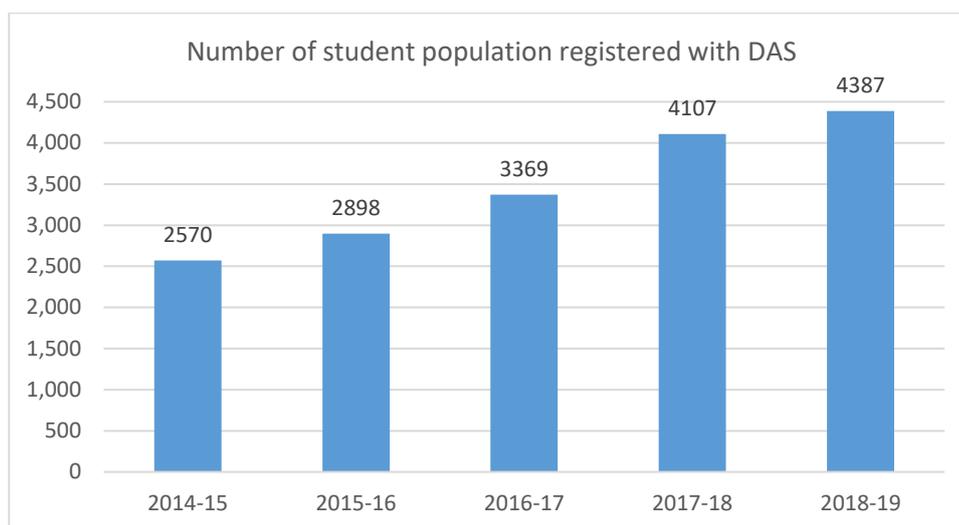
The Service continues to be subject to a rigorous annual audit that assesses ongoing compliance with a continually evolving framework of statutory quality assurance standards and mandatory qualification criteria. In 2018-19 it successfully retained formal accreditation with the external regulator of its Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funded study needs assessment and specialist non-medical helper services (i.e. SpLD study skills tuition and mental health/autism mentoring). This important achievement enables the University to continue to deliver these services in-house whilst awaiting announcements about further changes in government policy in this area (currently expected in 2020; see 'Forward View').

Staff Training and Support

Alongside these major projects and service developments, disability advisors have continued to assist academic and support staff across colleges and departments in their roles working with disabled students. Whilst it has not been possible to fully meet the high level of demand for staff training, a number of sessions were delivered, including workshops on supporting students with visual impairments and mental health conditions (the latter in conjunction with the University Counselling Service). The Service has also continued to run a termly Disability Professionals' Forum, which is consistently attended by large numbers of staff across the collegiate University, and facilitates the sharing and promotion of best practice in disabled student support.

Registrations

The number of students registered with the DAS has increased by 7%, with a total of 4,387 student records in 2018-19.

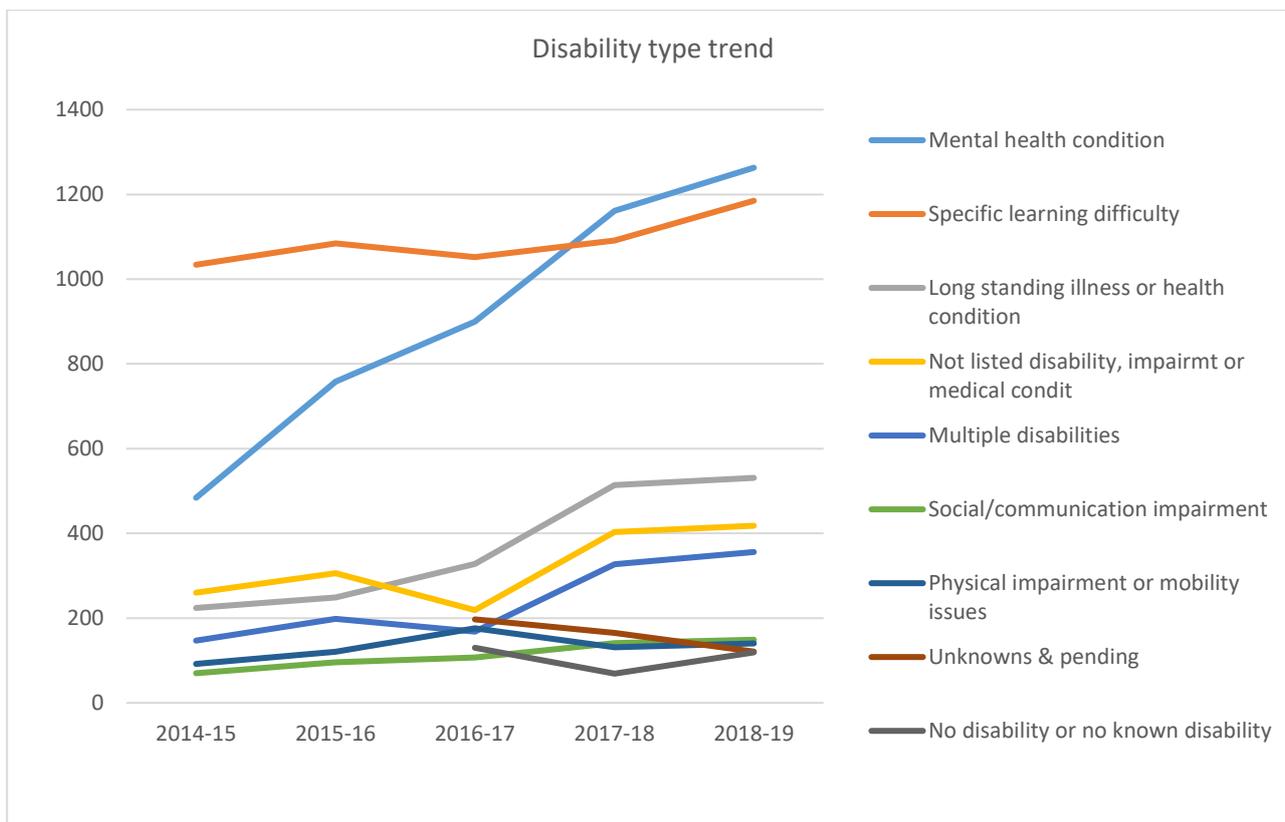


The number of students registered with the DAS corresponds to an increasing proportion of the total student body, with 17.9% of all students known to the DAS in 2018-19. The slowing of the proportion increase is due to a smaller increase in registrations compared to the previous year (which may have been notably higher) and the increase in the overall student population which increased by 4.6% over the last academic year. However, 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.

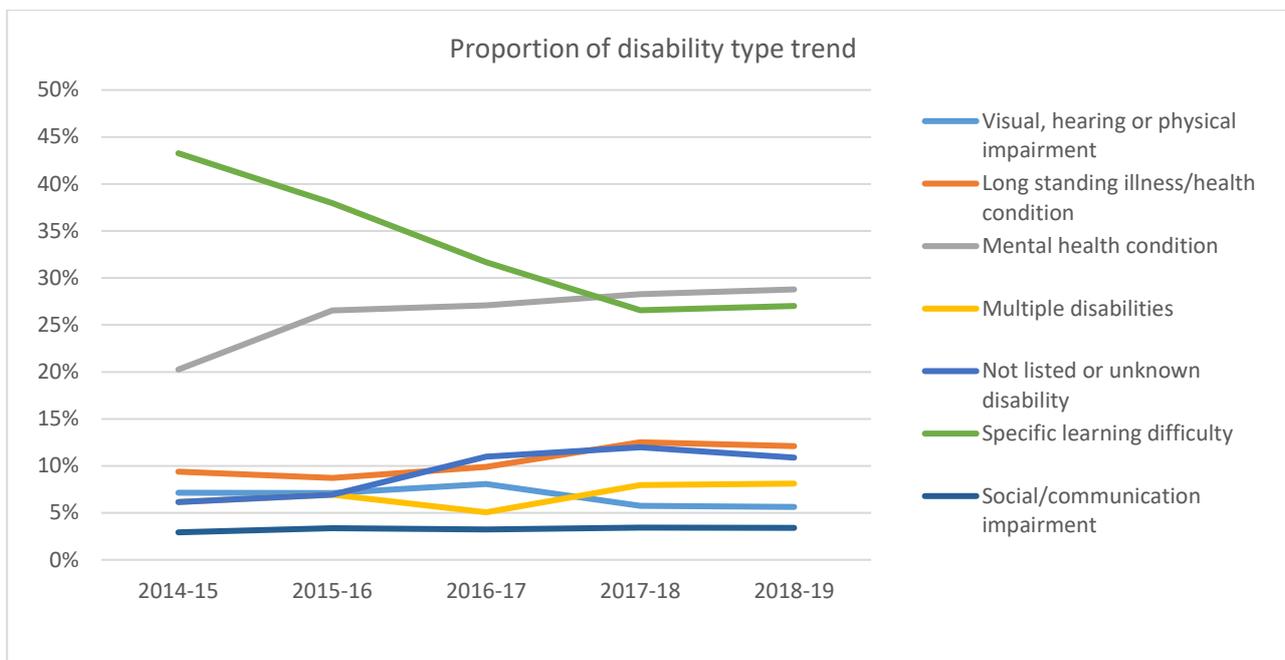
The overall proportion of students accessing disability services remains higher than the previous national rate from the HESA, although 2018 figures have not yet been released.

Disability type

DAS support students with a hugely broad range of complex needs, and these do not fit naturally into neat categories for reporting purposes. However, the growth in overall numbers of students registering with the Service has largely been driven by a significant increase in those reporting long-term mental health conditions, which have continued to rise significantly and remain the most prevalent disability type within the DAS. Specific learning difficulties (SpLD) have also shown an increase having remained at a broadly similar level for a number of years.



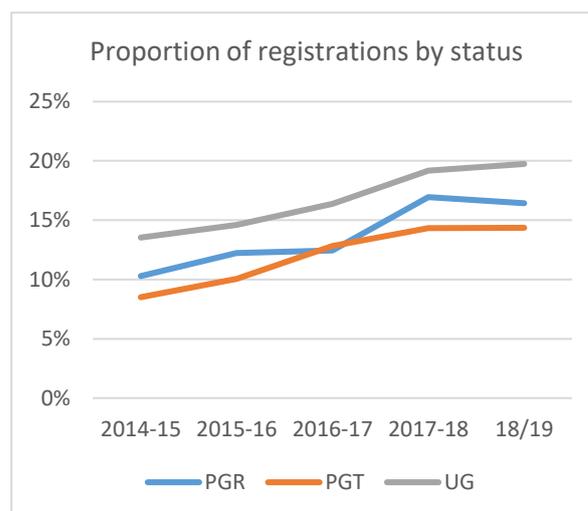
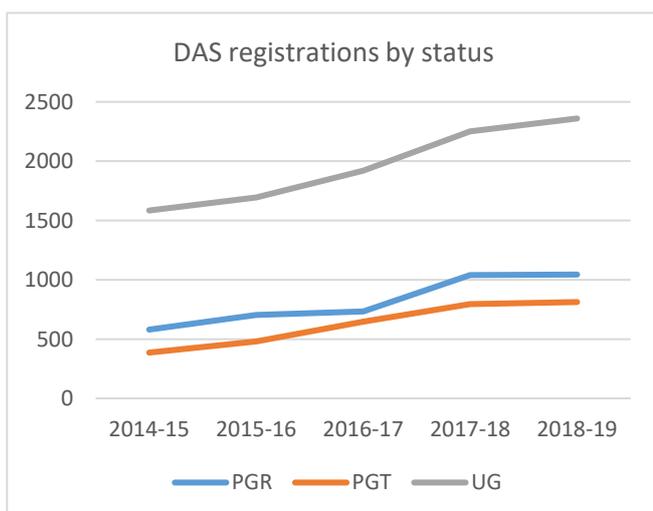
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Mental health condition	758	900	1161	1263
Specific learning difficulty	1084	1052	1091	1185
Long standing illness or health condition	249	328	514	531
Not listed disability, impairment or medical condition	306	219	403	418
Multiple disabilities	198	168	327	356
Social/communication impairment	96	107	141	149
Physical impairment or mobility issues	121	176	131	140
Unknowns & pending		197	165	121
No disability or no known disability		130	69	119
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	45	44	53	54
Blind or serious visual impairment	37	48	52	53



The disability type data as a proportion of all service users indicates a predominantly steady distribution, with mental health conditions and specific learning difficulties accounting for 55.8% of the Service’s workload.

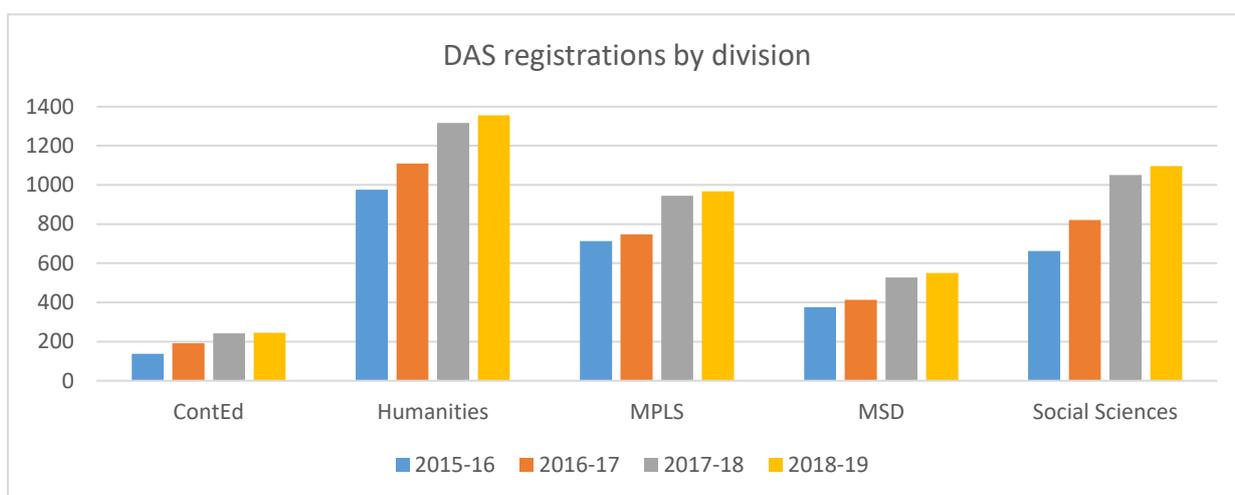
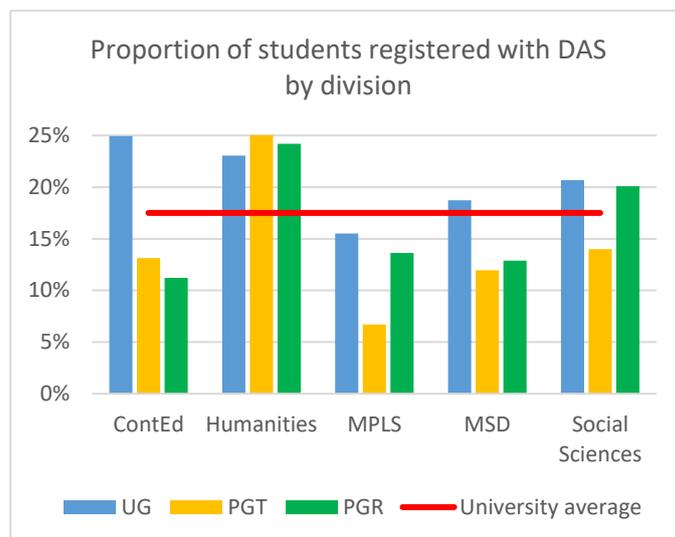
Students registered by status

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. The proportion of each student type accessing the service shows the undergraduate demand is not matched by postgraduate demand, with postgraduate taught support remaining flat and a small decrease for postgraduate research students. The postgraduate figures are not statistically significant given the relatively small numbers.



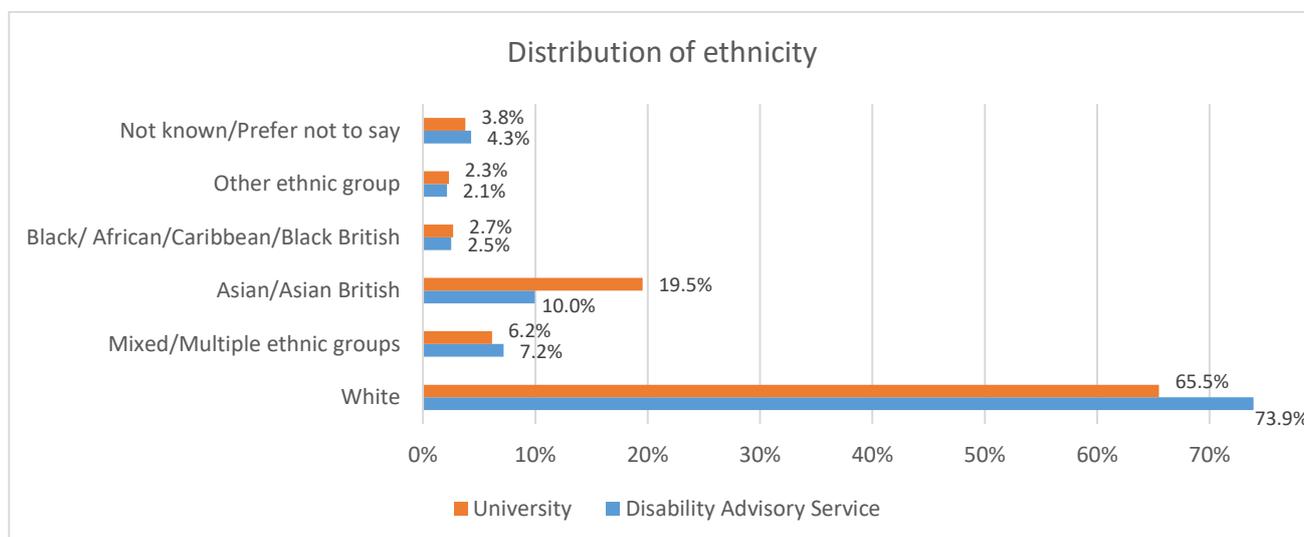
Students registered by division

The increase in student numbers is shown below by division; the biggest contributor remains Humanities undergraduates. The proportion of the student population accessing DAS's services presents a different picture that maps more closely with welfare provision in general, namely that Humanities and Social Science students have a higher than average service use whereas the STEM subjects have a lower engagement with welfare provision.



Ethnicity

Across most ethnic groups the DAS sees a similar proportion of students compared to the general student population, however amongst students from India and China there is notably lower proportion of students than might otherwise have been expected.



Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)

The proportion of students who receive the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) increased slightly in 2018-19:

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Students claiming DSA to fund support	939	765	1,029	1,096	1,266
Students with non-DSA funded support	169	166	223	304	332

Where students are ineligible for DSA support (e.g. because they have international student status), the University provides equivalent support to these students through an internal funding mechanism. This includes non-medical help (i.e. support workers) 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) allocation and management

Non-specialist NMH refers to the human support provided to students; it encompasses roles such as note-taking, library support work, laboratory assistance and examination scribes. However, an important change took place in September 2016 as the government no longer covered these services through the DSA and the University was therefore expected to provide these NMH services or make appropriate alternative provision (such as lecture capture in place of note takers where appropriate, or access to assistive technology in examinations instead of a scribe). These services are one element of support which is particularly sensitive to individual student need, and is therefore subject to significant demand variation.

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; the latter provision was brought in-house in 2017-18 for the first time.

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Students receiving non-specialist NMH	139	105	101	59	53
Students receiving mentoring	199	288	359	414	434
Students receiving SpLD tuition	-	-	-	259	260

	2018-19
Hours of non-specialist NMH	2,663.9
Hours of mentoring	4,445.2
Hours of SpLD tuition	1,307.5

Assessments

Diagnostic Assessment Service for Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD)

Students can be screened for an SpLD by a disability advisor if they wish. If sufficient supporting evidence of an underlying SpLD exists, then they are referred for a full diagnostic assessment which the University pays for in full. If the student has an existing diagnostic report but it does not meet the University's criteria, then the relevant top-up tests may be arranged in some instances where it is not necessary for the student to undergo a full new assessment.

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Students with existing history of SpLD (top-up tests administered)	23	39	36	39	32
No previous history of SpLD/new full assessment required	183	173	192	224	236
Total	206	212	228	263	268
SpLD confirmed	94%	88%	98%	97%	95%

Study Needs Assessment

The Oxford University Assessment Centre (OUAC) provides the study needs assessments required to access the DSA. OUAC is open to Oxford students and those from other HEIs. Similarly, some Oxford students will choose to attend another assessment centre, often one that is more local to their home residence if they are arranging their assessment pre-matriculation or outside term-time. The decrease in non-UK assessment numbers is due to a change in process with a move towards more being done by advisors wherever possible and appropriate, to streamline and improve the overall student experience.

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
UK Oxford students	333	257	248	248	317
Non-UK Oxford students	78	63	33	11	9
Other HEI students	306	341	298	297	174
Total	639	661	579	556	500

Exam Administration Processes (EAPs)

The EAP is an assessment undertaken by a qualified assessor for students with SpLDs in order to suggest appropriate adjustments for examinations. EAPs are produced each time a student has a new diagnosis or if a student transfers colleges or changes course or needs another EAP because they have gone from UG to PGR for example.

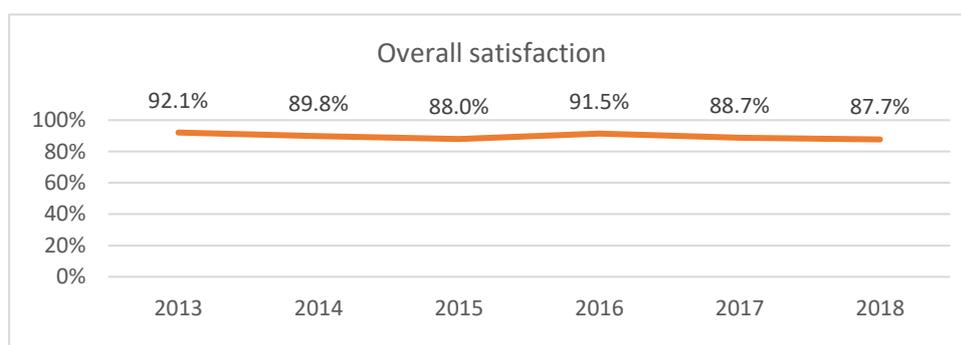
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
EAPs completed	334	332	334	344

Alternative Exam Arrangements

1,105 students had alternative exam arrangements in 2018-19, and of these 74% were known to the DAS. This figure is up from 67.6% in 2017-18 and may reflect efforts from colleges to signpost students with chronic conditions to the DAS were it is suspected that they may benefit from other disability-related study support arrangements.

Service Evaluation

Oxford uses the **Student Barometer** in late November each year to survey PT and FT students with some exclusions.¹ 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 utilised the service.



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.

The DAS conducts its own **annual student survey** at the end of each academic year. In 2018-19, 90% of respondents reported that the support arrangements made by the DAS were helpful.

Staffing and Caseloads

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

Year	Students	Advisor FTE	Caseload: FTE Advisor
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
2014-15	2,302	4.8	479

¹ Undergraduates in their final year - these students are surveyed in the National Student Survey.

b) Students of the Doctor of Clinical Psychology - these students are surveyed separately.

c) Students in years 2 and 4 of the undergraduate medical course -- to prevent over-surveying.

d) Part-time students on non-matriculated courses (these students are surveyed through a tailored form of the Barometer but the resultant data is reported separately).

Forward View

2018-19 was a year in which the DAS experienced substantial internal reorganisation and change, most notably in relation to the introduction, integration and operationalising of its **mental health sub-stream**. The Service will undertake a comprehensive review of the new stream at the end of 2019-20, including the introduction of specialist advisor roles and the piloting of salaried mentoring posts, and will develop plans for further embedding/enhancing this aspect of its service provision over the coming years.

It will also be necessary to continue actively **reviewing the nature of the DAS's core activity**, student case-management practices, and internal processes, to ensure the Service can effectively manage further increases in registrations and changing student profiles.

Relatedly, another crucial aspect of its operational activities concern the DAS's **institutional provision**, specifically in terms of how it supports staff across the collegiate University to deliver best practice in relation to disabled students. Completion and launch of the **SITS development** for the dissemination of **Student Support Plans (SSPs)** and the online **Common Framework Handbook** in late 2019-20 will denote significant progress in this area of work.

The Service will continue its fruitful working partnerships with the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), Education Policy Support (EPS), and other stakeholders, to progress the development of inclusive practices and policies. Of particular relevance to this area of work, subject to resourcing, the DAS will produce an **online staff-training module** to accompany the Common Framework Handbook, and will undertake an **analysis of reasonable adjustment** recommendations in SSPs and their wider implementation.

Work is also currently underway to revive a **data project** that will explore the disabled student journey, 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 \(APP\)](#).

Going forwards it will be essential for the Service to position itself to respond effectively to further changes in **government policy**. The announcements currently anticipated in 2020 specifically concern the assessment of disabled students (which potentially places the Oxford University Assessment Centre and, by implication, the Department's budget, in serious jeopardy) and funding arrangements for the provision of specialist mentoring and study skills tuition (with associated threats to continuity and quality of service delivery). Once more information is available about the changes, the DAS will formulate a strategic response and undertake an informed cost/benefit analysis of continuing to engage with Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funding in respect of its specialist support provision.

Concluding remarks

Offering high-quality, bespoke and timely services to students against a backdrop of space and resource constraints, high caseloads, and mercurial government policy and regulatory frameworks, remains a significant challenge for the DAS and area of risk for the institution. Until inclusive teaching practices are widely adopted and fully embedded across the collegiate University, the DAS is likely to experience continued pressure and to be compromised in its ability to deliver other important institutional services, such as staff training, in-depth caseload consultation, and enhancing its offering to departments.

Katherine Noren-Curtis, Head of the Disability Advisory Service