Disability Advisory Service Annual Report 2017-18

Introduction

4,107 students were known to the Disability Advisory Service (DAS) in 2017-18, representing 17.5% of the total student population and a doubling of registrations over five years. Increasing student mental health declarations are largely behind the rise in numbers, which have also led to a significant expansion of the specialist mentoring service. All students are offered contact with a disability advisor after they register with the Service in order to establish their disability-related study support requirements, and there is flexibility over whether this happens through an in-person appointment (the majority of cases), or remotely through a telephone or Skype appointment, or via email correspondence.

Student Outreach and Engagement

Despite the rising numbers, the Service continues to work proactively to encourage prospective applicants, offer holders and enrolled students to disclose and register with the DAS as early as possible so they might access any necessary support and resources. In 2017-18, DAS representatives had a presence at Open Days, UNIQ Summer Schools, and Freshers' week events, and delivered information sessions for medieval and modern languages students preparing for a year abroad. Pre-application visits were facilitated on request. Some systems developments have allowed the Service to take assertive action to engage with offer holders earlier in the year after they have receive their offer and, where all necessary information has been supplied by the student, to produce a substantial number of Student Support Plans (SSPs) before matriculation.

A new drop-in service was introduced in Hilary term 2018 in response to student feedback about the speed with which appointments could be offered. The drop-in has been positively received and well attended, and has provided students with more flexible options for addressing quick, straightforward queries.

The annual pre-matriculation transition event for incoming disabled students remains popular. The programme includes presentations from DAS staff, a senior tutor, a college disability coordinator, and Oxford Students' Union Disabled Students' Campaign, as well as representatives from the Counselling Service, the Careers Service, and the Bodleian Libraries. Additionally, in 2017-18 a feasibility study funded by MPLS enabled the DAS to demonstrate the potential benefits of offering a dedicated induction event for students with autism spectrum conditions (ASC), and to secure funding to develop and run a pilot for incoming students in the 2018-19 academic year. The event was well attended and student feedback was extremely positive; there are plans to offer it on an ongoing basis each year, and an ASC social networking group has been launched as a direct result of attendee feedback.

The DAS has also continued to collaborate with IT Services to deliver a series of one-hour taster sessions throughout the year, introducing low-cost/free assistive technology and apps to help with work and study. Sessions are free and open to all students in an inclusive anticipatory fashion, but were designed to be particularly beneficial for disabled students. For students registered with the DAS, a follow-up 1:1 session can be arranged to help them get set up with any software recommended in their study needs assessment report.

Service Developments

The DAS and Oxford University Assessment Centre (OUAC) continue to be audited annually by the external regulator of Disabled Students' Allowances (QAG). The Services have successfully maintained the necessary accreditation for in-house delivery of DSA-funded study needs assessments and non-medical helper support (i.e. SpLD study skills tuition and specialist mental health and autism mentoring) in the context of continually evolving quality assurance frameworks.

The recommendations in the inclusive practice research project report were considered in 2017-18 and additional resource was secured through the Napier Fund for a fixed-term (18-month) project officer to substantially develop materials for the Common Framework Handbook; this area of work is a key priority for the Service and a precursor to work in other important areas of disability inclusion across the institution. A post holder was recruited in September 2018 and work is underway. The project is being jointly managed by the DAS and the Oxford Learning Institute (OLI), and the first phase is expected to be complete before the start of the 2018-19 academic year.

In the meantime, other inclusion-related activities have included the co-curation and facilitation of an immersive inclusive teaching workshop with students and staff at the Blavatnik School of Government in Trinity term 2018, which resulted in the production of written guidance on delivering inclusive lectures for visually impaired students.
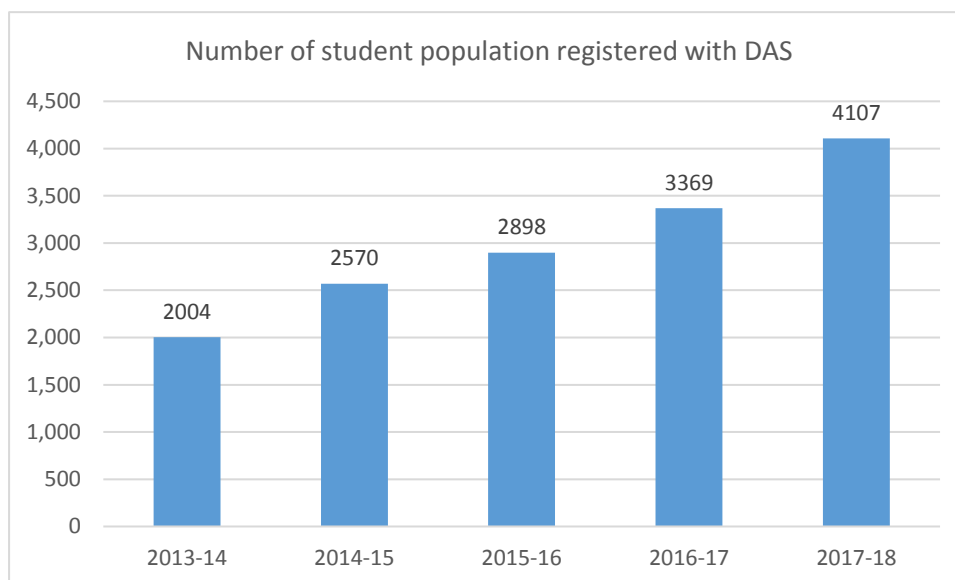
A successful application to the University's Diversity Fund enabled another piece of joint work with colleagues in the Examinations and Assessments Team (EAT) on a targeted six-month project to research the use of assistive software in examinations. The project contributes to the collegiate University's wider inclusion agenda and will report on its findings in Trinity term 2019.

Funding from the van Houten Fund also made it possible to pilot the expansion of a programme of study skills workshops, which had previously only been available to students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD). All students registered with the DAS (regardless of disability type) were invited to attend and a range of sessions were delivered on revision and exam skills, and planning and organisation. An untested prototype for a 'reading skills and notetaking' workshop has also been developed. Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive and, with sufficient resource, there is appetite to further develop this pilot.
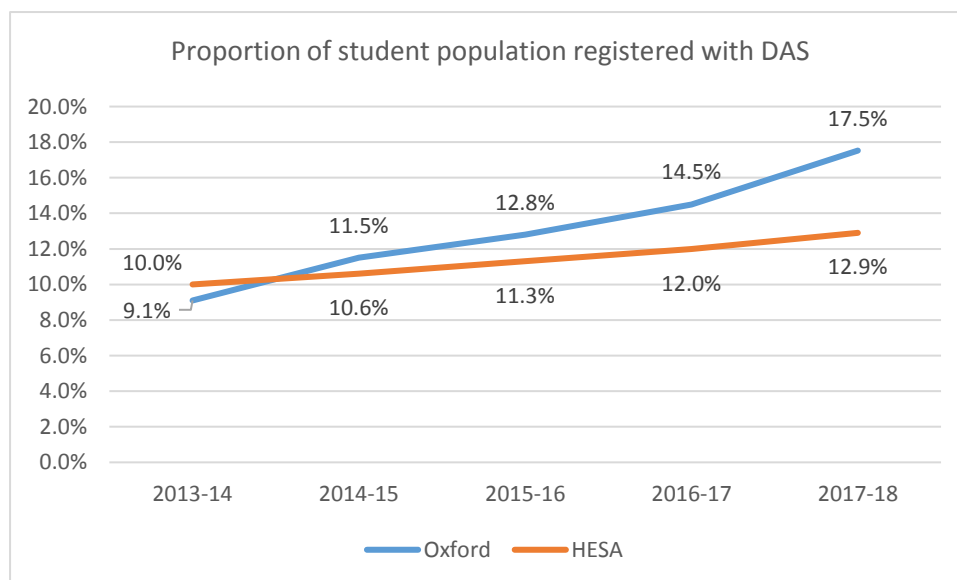
Disability advisors continue to assist academic and support staff across colleges and departments in their roles working with disabled students. However, it has not been possible to fully meet demand for bespoke staff training or to repeat/further develop the disability coordinator training that was successfully piloted in 2016 due to the pressures on the Service associated with the rising numbers of student disability declarations. Nevertheless, the DAS continue to run a well-attended Disability Professionals' Forum each term. New staff resources have been developed as a result of the productive themed discussions at these events, including written guidance on the role of a disability coordinator in the production of a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP), which was developed in collaboration with colleagues in Estates Services and the Safety Office.

Registrations

The number of students registered with the DAS has continued to steadily increase, with a total of 4,107 student records by the end of 2017–18. This represents a doubling of registrations over five years.

Number of student population registered with DAS

Year	Number
2013-14	2004
2014-15	2570
2015-16	2898
2016-17	3369
2017-18	4107

The number of students registered with the DAS corresponds to an increasing proportion of the total student body, with 17.5% of all students known to the DAS in 2017–18. This is significantly higher than the national rate from the HESA survey which reported a rate of students reporting a disability at 12.9%.

Proportion of student population registered with DAS

Year	Oxford	HESA
2013-14	9.1%	10.0%
2014-15	11.5%	10.6%
2015-16	12.8%	11.3%
2016-17	14.5%	12.0%
2017-18	17.5%	12.9%

Disability type

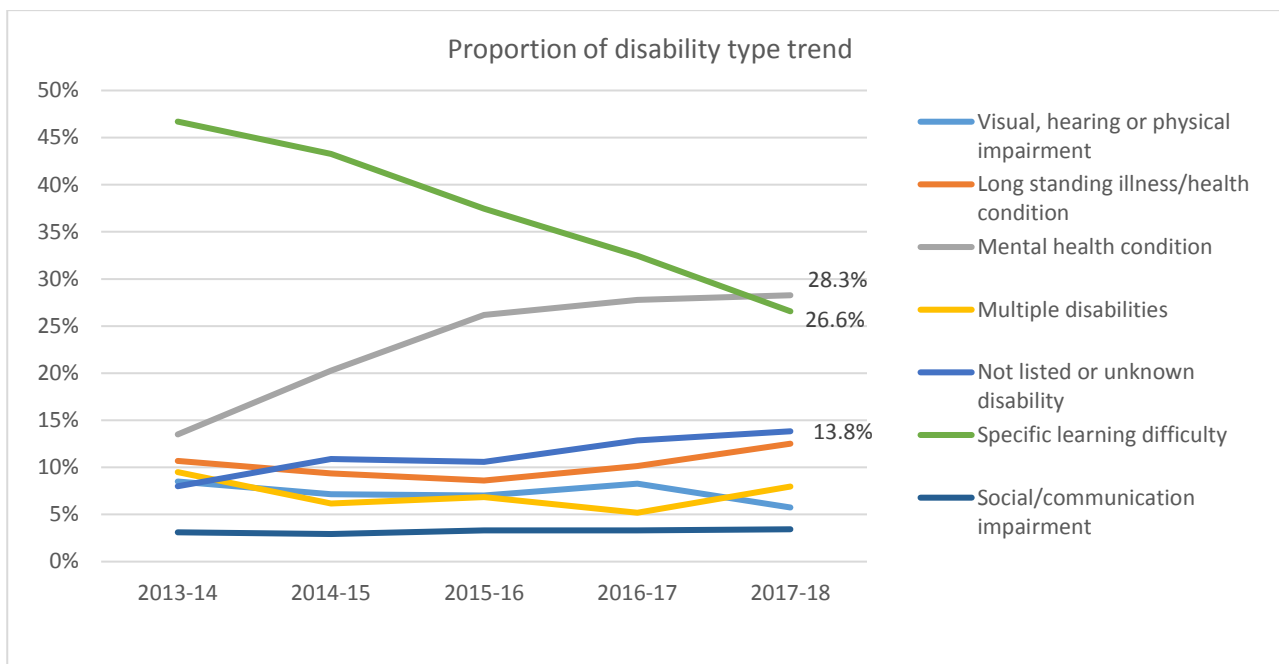DAS support students with a hugely broad range of complex needs, and these do not fit naturally into neat categories for reporting purposes. However, the growth in overall numbers of students registering with the Service has largely been driven by a significant increase in those reporting long-term mental health conditions, which have risen nearly five-fold over the past five years from 240 cases in 2013-14 to 1,161 in 2017-18. Mental health conditions are now the most prevalent disability type within the DAS. More recently, the number of students with disclosures of long standing illness or health conditions and multiple disabilities have also increased; multiple disability disclosures often include a mental health condition. Specific learning difficulties (SpLD) continue to be a significant proportion of disability type within the service.
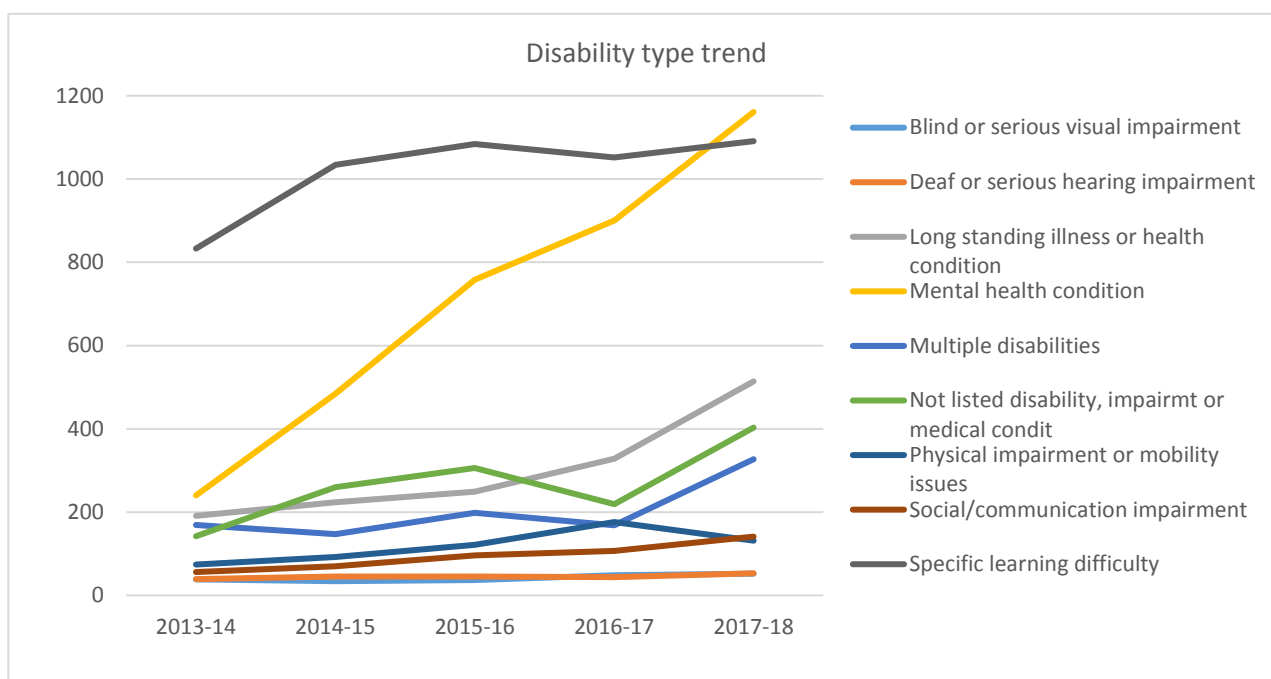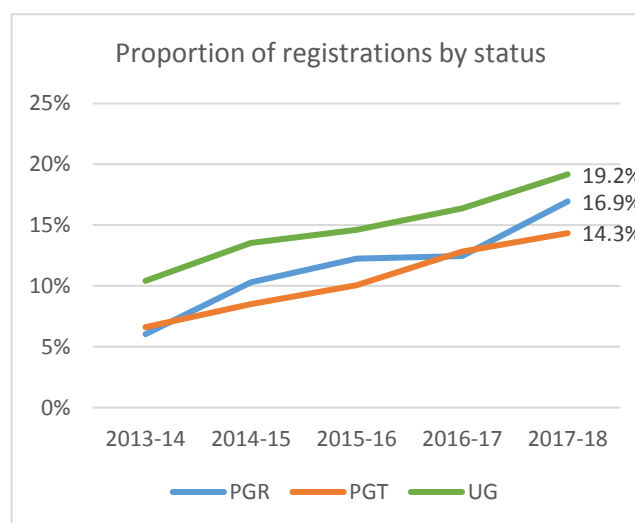

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Blind or serious visual impairment	34	37	48	52
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	45	45	44	53
Long standing illness or health condition	224	249	328	514
Mental health conditions	484	758	900	1,161
Multiple disabilities	147	198	168	327
Not listed disability, impairment or medical condition	260	306	219	403
Physical impairment or mobility issues	92	121	176	131
Social/communication impairment	70	96	107	141
Specific learning difficulty	1,034	1,084	1,052	1,091
Unknowns & pending			197	165
No disability or no known disability			130	69

Proportion of disability type trend

Legend:
- Visual, hearing or physical impairment
- Long standing illness/health condition
- Mental health condition
- Multiple disabilities
- Not listed or unknown disability
- Specific learning difficulty
- Social/communication impairment

Labels at 2017-18: 28.3%, 26.6%, 13.8%

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. The proportion of each student type accessing the service has continued to grow at a similar pace.

DAS registrations by status

Labels at 2017-18: 2252 (UG), 1041 (PGR), 795 (PGT)

Legend: PGR, PGT, UG

Proportion of registrations by status

Labels at 2017-18: 19.2% (UG), 16.9% (PGR), 14.3% (PGT)

Legend: PGR, PGT, UG
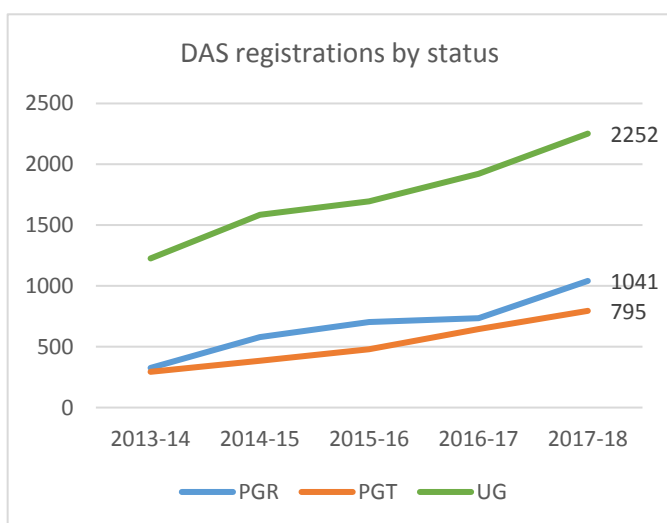
Students registered by division

The increase in student numbers is shown below by division, with the biggest contributors being Humanities and MPLS undergraduates. The proportion of the student population accessing the services presents a different picture that maps more closely with welfare provision in general, namely that Humanities students have a higher than average service use.

Proportion of students registered with DAS by division

DAS registrations by division
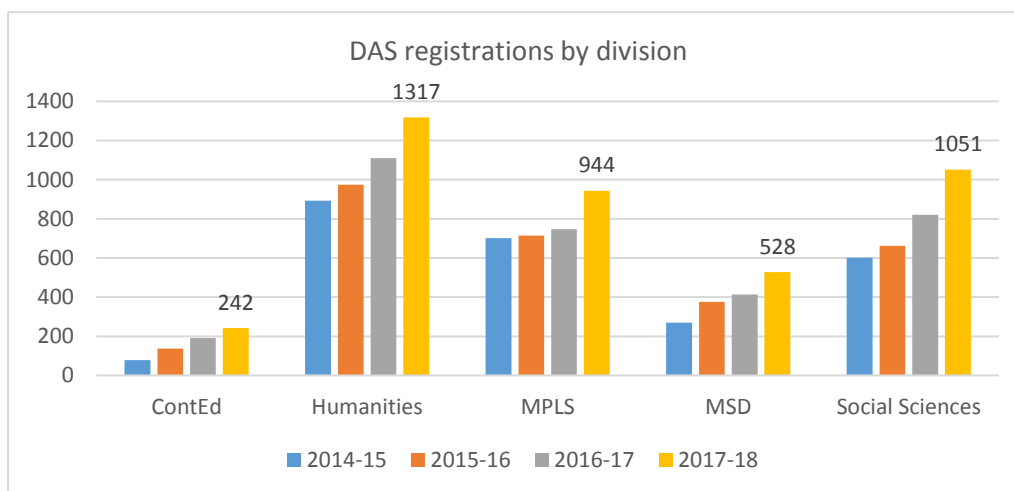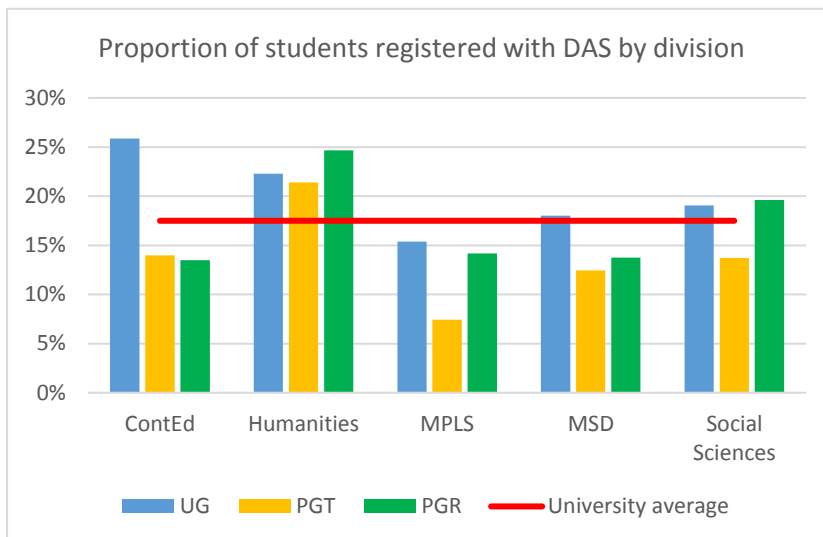
Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)

The proportion of students who receive the Disabled Student Allowance increased slightly in 2017-18:

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Students claiming DSA to fund support	813	939	765	1,029	1,096
Students with non-DSA funded support	143	169	166	223	304

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 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.

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.

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Students with existing history of SpLD	41	23	39	36	39
No previous history of SpLD	196	183	173	192	224
Total	223	206	212	228	263
SpLD confirmed	94%	94%	88%	98%	97%

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 in the first instance.

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
UK Oxford students	242	333	257	248	248
Non-UK Oxford students	70	78	63	33	11
Other HEI students	255	306	341	298	297
Total	567	639	661	579	556

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.

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Students receiving non-specialist NMH	115	139	105	101	59
Students receiving mentoring	205	199	288	359	414
Students receiving SpLD tuition	-	-	-	-	259

	2017-18
Hours of non-specialist NMH	4,146.7
Hours of mentoring	4,633.85
Hours of SpLD tuition	1,432.75

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
EAPs completed	334	332	334

Alternative Exam Arrangements

1,032 students had alternative exam arrangements in 2017-18 and of these 800 (67.6%) were known to the DAS. 329 (31.9%) of those students with alternative arrangements had exam adjustments on mental health grounds and of these students, 231 (70.2%) were known to the DAS.

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.
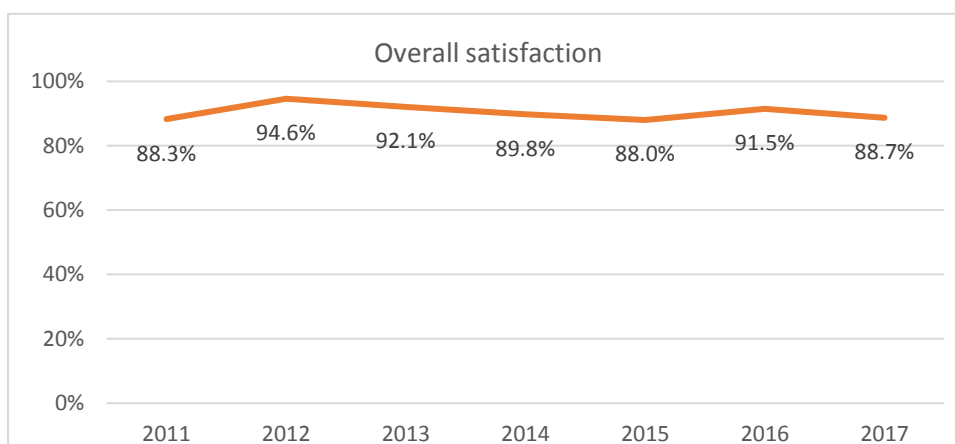
Within the Barometer the service performs higher than all UK institutions (86.9%) and the Russell Group (78.1%)

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) was not released due to a sub-50% response rate, driven by the student boycott of the survey. Work is being undertaken to identify alternative evaluation methods that will provide useful data to inform service development.

Staffing and Caseloads

The DAS is staffed by disability advisors (6.4 FTE), administrative support (4.3 FTE), 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. Each disability advisor is allocated to be a link advisor with a group of colleges.

Year	Students	Advisor FTE	Caseload: FTE Advisor
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
2013-14	2,004	4.4	455

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[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).

The caseload figure reflects the FTE available each year. Of the 40 HEIs who have completed a sector-wide benchmarking exercise, Advisor: Student ratios range from 177 to 721 students per advisor. Oxford currently ranks number 34 of 40 with only 6 HEIs having a higher ratio.

Forward View

A new internal structure and operational model has been developed to help the DAS better serve current and future students in the context of rising numbers and changes in the presenting profile of disability. This will be fully implemented over the next academic year and involves new leadership of the administration staff, a new internal disability advisor staff structure and responsibilities, and the implementation of a new service to support students with mental health disabilities.

The DAS are working with Student Registry on a student record system development that will enhance the communication and secure sharing of Student Support Plans (SSPs) via SITS; full implementation is currently anticipated in Trinity term 2019. Alongside this, other IT and administration processes and systems still require enhancement to support efficient service administration going forward.

Completion of the online Handbook to support the Common Framework for Disabled Students is scheduled for 2019-20. This will provide a substantial resource to assist staff in their roles supporting and working with disabled students, and is expected to help inform further policy development work across the collegiate institution. As part of this project, the Disability Inclusion Project Officer will undertake an analysis of reasonable adjustment recommendations in Student Support Plans (SSP) to inform related work on the development of inclusive practices. Work is also 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 reasonable adjustment provision.

Evaluation of Demand and Emerging risks

Despite the new service structure and operational model, until inclusive teaching practices are widely adopted and fully embedded across the collegiate University, the DAS will remain under pressure with continually rising numbers of students declaring a disability; meeting increasing operational demands whilst continuing to offer a high quality and timely service to students, assisting staff in their work with disabled students, and contributing to the wider inclusion agenda of the collegiate University, remains both a significant challenge for the DAS and an area of risk for the institution.

The continued absence of dedicated SpLD or assistive technology resource remains problematic. The Government's Department for Education (DfE) have recently announced plans to change the requirements for SpLD assessments, which will directly impact on the University's existing criteria for diagnostic reports and the DAS processes for managing examination arrangements for this large group of students; this whole area of work urgently requires review.

Huge increases in the numbers of students accessing the specialist mentoring service and the associated increase in staffing that has been necessary to meet demand, is placing pressure on facilities (room provision for 1:1 sessions) and management resources within the Service. Awareness that DSA funding can provide access to longer term one-to-one specialist support

than is typically available through other routes is likely to be driving up demand; if this continues to increase at the current rate there will be an impact on waiting times, the level of support that can be offered, and on student satisfaction in relation to expectation of provision. In the meantime, the future of the Government DSA funding for specialist support remains uncertain, and maintaining compliance with the quality assurance framework imposed by the external regulator of DSA-funded support presents a significant ongoing administrative and operational burden. It is imperative that the current specialist mentoring service model is reviewed, and a cost-benefit analysis is undertaken of continuing to engage with DSA funding for the provision of specialist mentoring and study skills tuition, so that the University can assess whether this support would be best delivered with institutional funding.

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