



Disabled Access Report 2020

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Varsity Investigations Editor, Easter 2020

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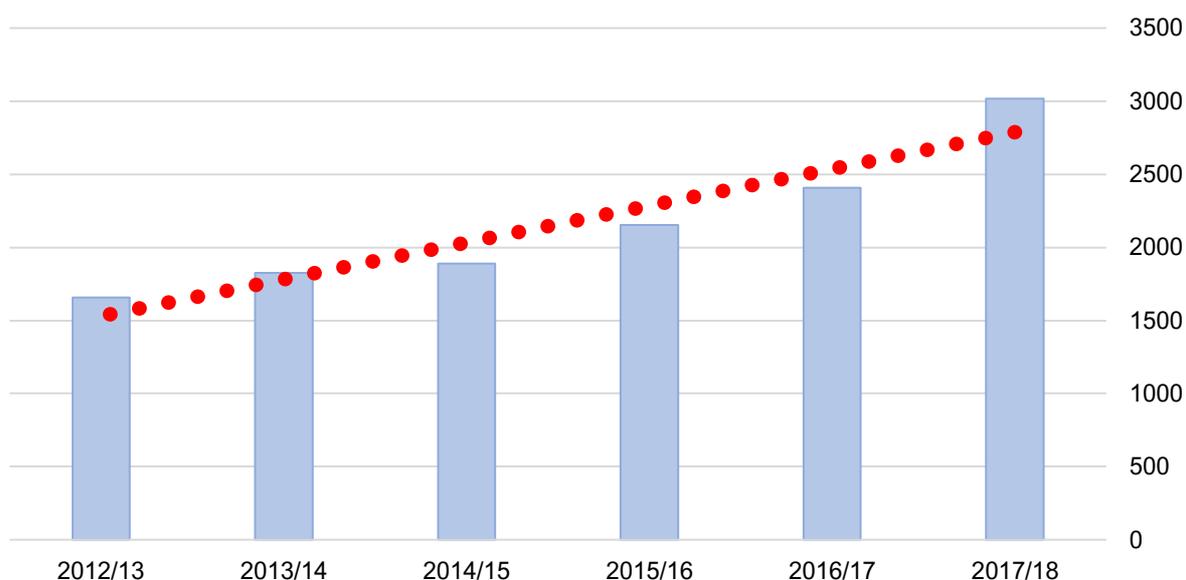
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Introduction

In 2018, 14% of Cambridge students were registered with the Disability Resource Centre (DRC) [1, 2]. Given the stigma surrounding disability disclosure, the proportion of disabled students is likely much higher. One college survey indicates that the proportion of disabled students may be closer to a fifth [3].

The number of disabled students at Cambridge has been increasing year upon year. The number of students registered with the DRC almost doubled between 2012/13 and 2017/2018 [2, 4–8].

Chart 1: Number of students registered with the DRC



Source: Disability Resource Centre Annual Reports between 2012/13 and 2017/18

Accessibility is thus a pressing concern for the University and its constituent colleges.

Since the introduction of a CUSU Sabbatical Disabled Students' Officer (DSO) in 2017, there has been a permanent voice within the union to encourage the University to address accessibility concerns.

To date, CUSU has published three disability reports. These have exposed issues with the distribution and implementation of student

support documents (SSDs), students' knowledge of existing services and staff training [9–11].

There is still much work that needs to be done. Only 3 colleges responded fully to Emrys Travis' (DSO 2018/19) Freedom of Information requests concerning wheelchair and step-free access in 2018 [11]. There is limited information on practical wheelchair accessibility across colleges, the provision of accessible accommodation and the training of JCR and MCR officers in disability issues.

This report seeks to bypass an apparent uncooperativeness of the Colleges by asking Cambridge students directly about accessibility. As I wrote in my first email to JCR and MCR committee members: "Colleges' poor responses to date highlight that we cannot rely on the University to make information available on disabled access. If we work together, we can create a University that caters for and supports all students".

I would like to thank all those who completed my surveys and responded to my many emails. Without the help and support of the disabled students' community, this report could never have been produced.

Special thanks go to Rensa Gaunt (DSO 2020/21) for happily answering all my disability-related questions and the Varsity editorial team for their help and support in producing this report.

Key findings

- **Wheelchair accessibility is significantly worse than college data suggests, due to obscured access routes, the removal of temporary ramps and heavy non-automatic doors.** When students were asked to discount highly inconvenient, frequently broken or frequently obscured access routes, less than three-quarters of libraries, serveries/halls, bars and common rooms were reported as wheelchair accessible.
- **Nearly half of all colleges do not provide wheelchair access to all college facilities¹.** At 5 colleges, there are no wheelchair accessible laundry facilities.
- **A lack of accessible accommodation is forcing disabled students to live in rooms not suitably adapted to their needs.** The number of students per fully wheelchair accessible room ranges from 75 students per room at Trinity Hall to 664 students per room at Robinson.
- **Disabled students are socially isolated by the location of accessible rooms and room ballot systems.** Half of all respondents disagreed that they could choose an accessible room close to their friends. In some colleges, disabled freshers are forced to live with second and third years.
- **Some students report college staff making ableist comments and insulting disabled students.** Just under a fifth of all respondents reported negative experiences of college staff. One respondent stated a supervisor had suggested their memory was so bad that they must have had a stroke.
- **Disabled students are underperforming in examinations due to insufficient and inappropriate exam allowances.** One college forgot that a student had an exam and did not organise an invigilator.

¹ College facilities include the servery/hall, the first floor of the library, common rooms, the bar, the Porter's lodge and the laundry.

- **Over half of disabled students report not attending events due to their disability.** Accessibility problems include a lack of step-free access, quiet rooms and comfortable seating.
- **Of the JCR/MCR committee members aware of future developments, 70% agreed that their college was prioritising disabled access in the construction of new buildings.**
- **JCR and MCR committee members are receiving inadequate training on how to support students.** 70% of survey respondents disagreed that they had received adequate training on student support.
- **Postgraduates receive less disability support than undergraduates.** Of the 30 MCRs, only 3 had a DSO. In comparison, all JCRs had a DSO.

Methodology

Data was collected using two surveys:

- Varsity's JCR and MCR Committees Disabled Access Survey
- Varsity's Disabled Students Disabled Access Survey.

The survey questions are printed in **Appendix A** and **Appendix B**.

The JCR/MCR survey was emailed to relevant JCR and MCR officers² at all colleges. Email addresses were gathered using JCR and MCR websites and, where not available, from college members. Responses were received between 29th April 2020 and 9th June 2020. In total, there were 60 survey responses, as well as two responses not through the survey form.

The disabled students survey was posted on the Facebook Cambridge Uni DSC Community group on 14th May 2020 and then again on 31st May 2020. The survey was also shared on the Facebook CUSU Disabled Students' Campaign page, Facebook JCR and MCR groups and private Facebook member pages. Some JCRs and MCRs also emailed the survey to college members. Responses were recorded between 14th May 2020 and 1st June 2020. In total, there were 57 responses. 4 of these responses had to be deleted due to providing invalid CRSIDs. The deletion of these responses did not affect the conclusions of this report.

Demographics

JCR/MCR survey

Responses were received from 29 out of the 31 Cambridge colleges. There were no responses from Trinity Hall or Wolfson.

The three most commonly listed committee positions were Disabled Students' Officer (DSO) (31%), President (26%) and Welfare Officer (13%). In two cases, the response was submitted on behalf of the whole committee.

² Where email addresses could be found, it was emailed to the President, Vice-President, Disabilities Officer, Welfare Officer and Services Officer.

Chart 2: Responses by college

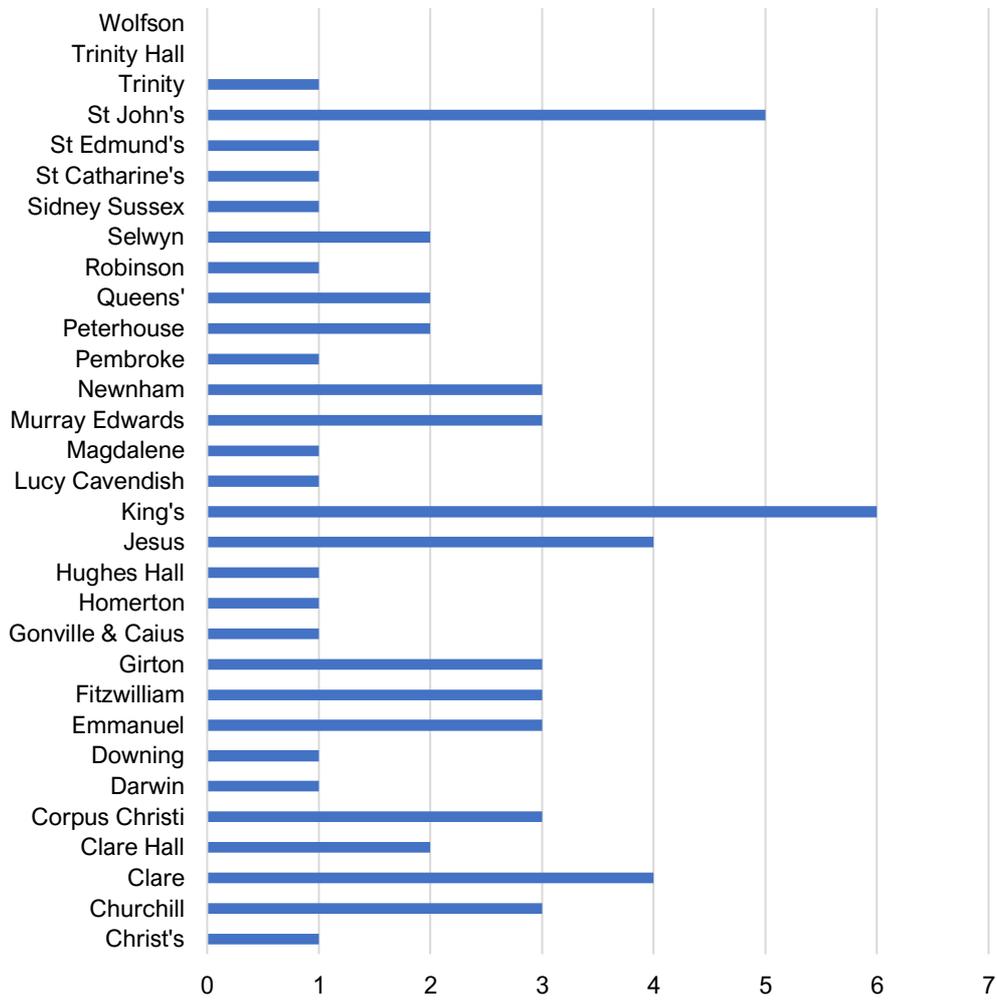
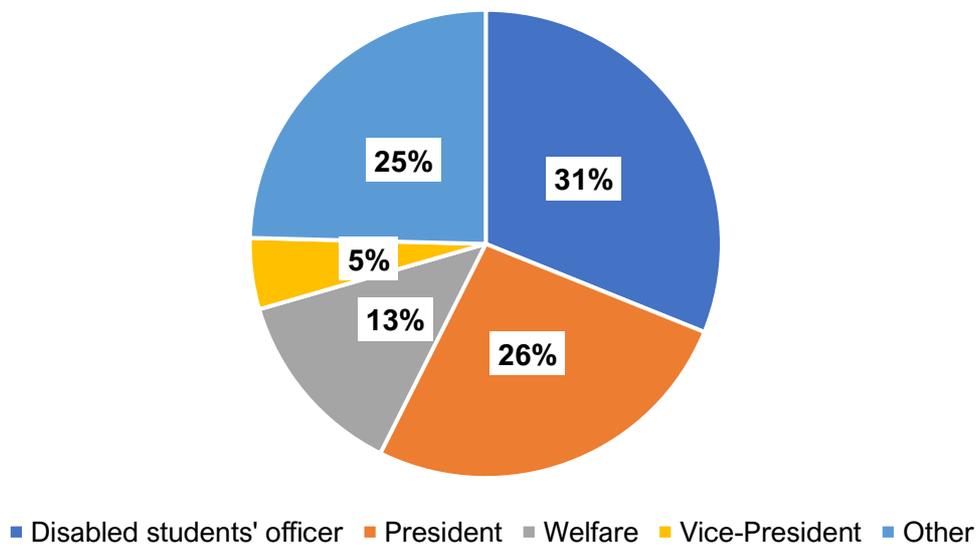


Chart 3: Responses by position



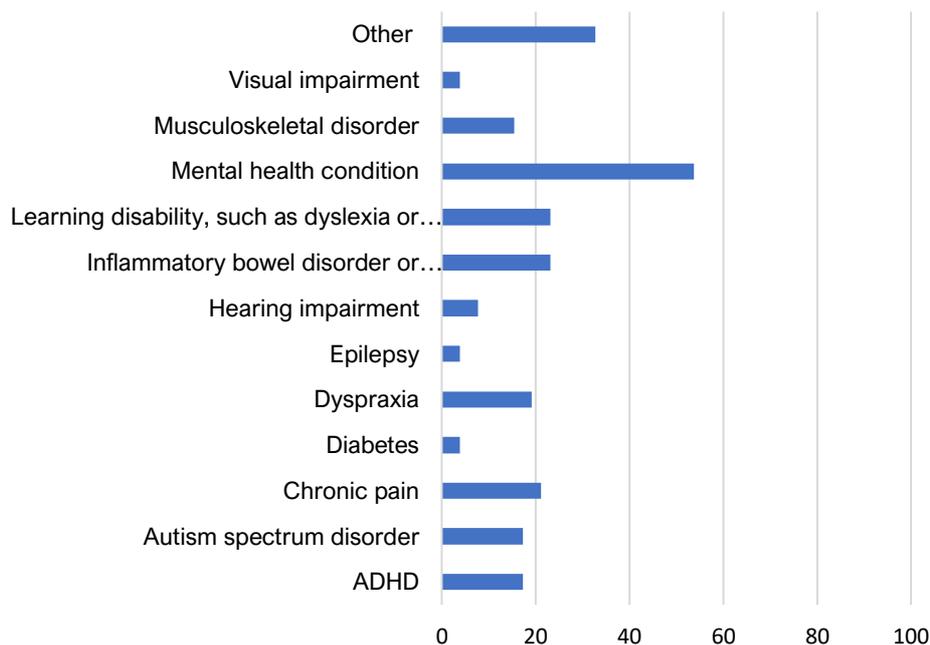
Most respondents were undergraduates (58%). This could be partially explained by the larger size of most JCR committees and the absence of a DSO on most MCR committees.

Disabled students survey

Responses were received from 23 out of the 31 Cambridge colleges³.

Similar to previous surveys, there was a bias towards undergraduates and those with mental health conditions [10]. Only one-quarter of the survey respondents were postgraduates, despite postgraduates making up 42% of all students registered with the Disability Resource Centre (DRC) [2]. Over 50% of all survey respondents had a mental health condition, which was nearly double the percentage registered with the DRC⁴ [2].

Chart 4: Responses by disability



³ The number of responses per college has not been reported to protect respondent anonymity

⁴ Due to the grouping of data, some students with mental health conditions may be grouped under “multiple conditions” in DSC data.

Findings

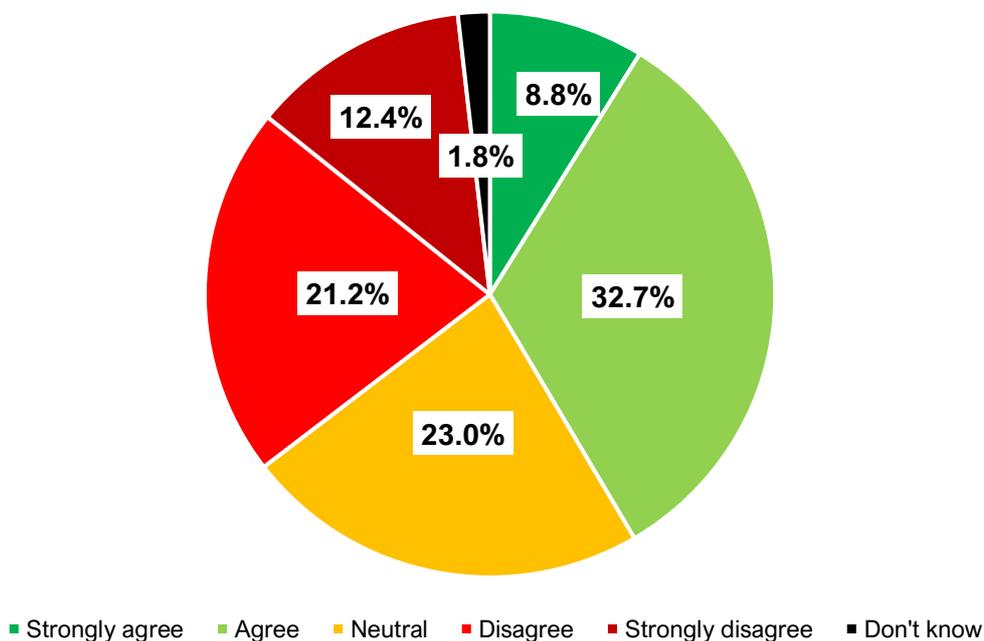
Summary

Definition: Disabled Access

A college has disabled access if it is easily accessible to disabled people. This is not restricted to wheelchair access. It includes access for other disabled people, such as the d/Deaf, blind, autistic and those with mental-health conditions. Accessibility requirements include level access, hearing loops and quiet spaces in college.

Students report mixed experiences of disabled access at Cambridge Colleges. Over a third of all respondents disagreed that “disabled access at my college is good”, while 41.5% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

Chart 5: Disabled access at my college is good



Most disagreement was caused by poor wheelchair-accessibility. The comments provided referred to a lack of ramps, many stairs, convoluted wheelchair-access routes and few of the college facilities being wheelchair accessible.

The responses here could potentially be more reflective of wheelchair accessibility rather than broader disabled access, as wheelchair accessibility adjustments are often easier to notice. In addition, the two terms are often used interchangeably in conversation.

Example quotes

- √ “Without my college’s assistance, I couldn’t have completed my degree”
- √ “The college try their hardest to accommodate: arranging taxis/having a car, arranging a room that best suits your situation...”
- √ “They have always been very accommodating of my needs during exam season, happily paid for an update to my diagnosis, and my [Director of Studies (DoS)] has understood on numerous occasions why I was behind on work”
- √ “I am so grateful I go to a university that cares so much and goes out of its way to help”
- × “No wheelchair access like... to anywhere”
- × “The lift in first-year accommodation was not working for a considerable amount of time – my friend on crutches struggled.”
- × “I don’t feel that people with disabilities have convenient access to everything that my college can offer”
- × “Because of the old nature of the college not all the areas are equally accessible, for example some of the paths are worn stone and not easily traversable”

Wheelchair Accessibility

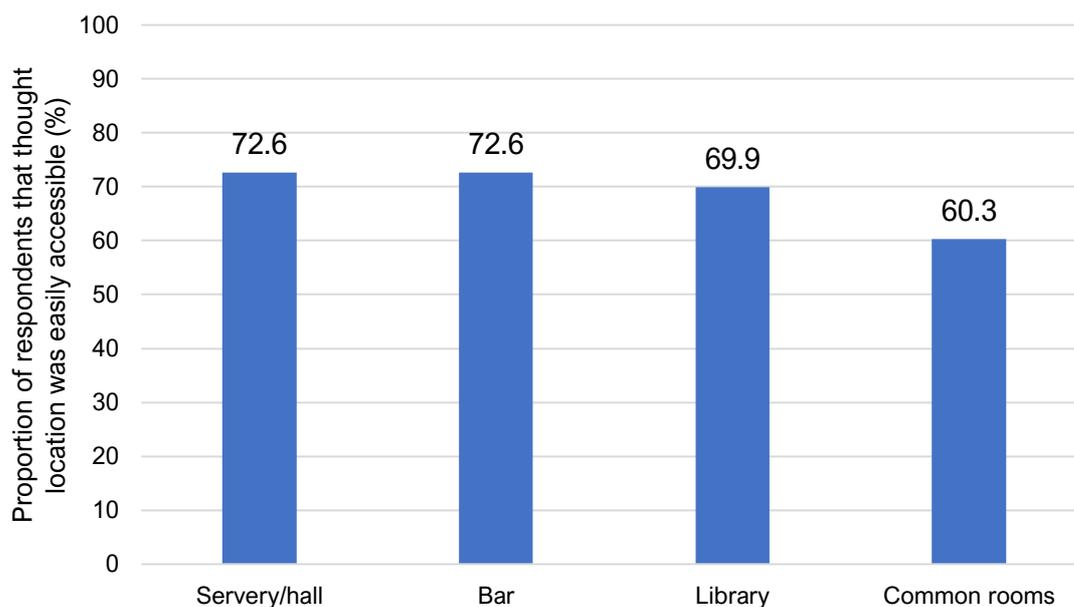
Wheelchair accessibility is worse than college data suggests.

Most key facilities are wheelchair accessible according to college data [12]. At colleges for which data could be located⁵, 100% of library first floors, 96.8% of serveries/halls, 93.1% of bars and 82.8% of common rooms were advertised as wheelchair accessible.

These numbers grossly overstate practical wheelchair accessibility. When students were asked to discount highly inconvenient, frequently broken or frequently obscured access routes, less than three-quarters of key facilities were reported to be wheelchair accessible. This gap was seemingly not driven by the college distribution of respondents.

The biggest gap between advertised accessibility and reported accessibility was amongst libraries – a difference of 30.1 percentage points. As the survey did not specify “first floor”, it is unclear whether this gap was driven by the inaccessibility of most library upper floors.

Chart 6: Wheelchair Accessibility



There are four main reasons for this poorer practical accessibility:

1. Some wheelchair access routes are obscured, for example by vehicles, building works or by staff closing doors.

⁵ Data could not be found on Hughes Hall, common room accessibility at Girton and bar accessibility at Darwin

2. Some wheelchair access routes are highly inconvenient. For example, routes are a lot longer or outside-only.
3. Some wheelchair access routes have to be previously organised. For example, temporary ramps have to be set up by the porters in advance.
4. Wheelchair accessibility can ignore heavy non-automatic doors that are not easy to open in a wheelchair.

Examples of reported practical accessibility problems

- “Corpus has one wheelchair accessible entrance (Golden Gate), which is usually blocked by vehicles inside the college.” (**Corpus Christi**)
- “Last term, there was asbestos in the bar and coffee shop leading to their closure for several weeks. We had to use the bunker (underground bar) as an alternative social space, but this is not accessible.” (**King’s**)
- “The porters can put up a ramp so that the bar is accessible, but it isn’t always there. The library lift requires a key.” (**King’s**)
- “The accessible entrance to the college through the front is only available during the day” (**King’s**)
- “The only way to get into the hall currently is to go around the whole hall to the other side, adding around 500m to the journey” (**Pembroke**)
- “In the evenings, the library entrance moves to another door, which the porters sometimes lock part of, so it no longer becomes accessible for a wheelchair” (**Peterhouse**)
- “Constant building work blocked disabled access routes and not enough was done to mitigate” (**Sidney Sussex**)

- “Our MCR itself can only be reached via stairs or a convoluted route through the car park using a stair lift – and then only half of the MCR can be reached” **(St Catharine’s)**
- “The corridor between First Court and Second Court has a large wooden door on either end. When these are shut, the entrance goes from a wide, step free entrance to a small door within the larger door, starting about a foot from the ground. These are usually left open, but occasionally they are closed” **(St John’s)**
- “The library doors are very heavy and not automated” **(Wolfson)**

Basic freedoms, such as being able to wash your clothes or meet your friends in the bar for a drink, are being denied to physically disabled students. One respondent wrote, “I cannot access many communal spaces, such as the bar. The library is difficult to navigate due to heavy doors. I do not have access to proper laundry facilities as they are not wheelchair accessible”.

Nearly half of all colleges do not currently provide wheelchair access to all college facilities. At 15 Colleges, there is no wheelchair access to either the servery, bar, JCR or MCR common room, Porter’s lodge or laundry. As previously noted, 20.7% of common rooms⁶, 3.4% of bars⁷ and 3.2% of serveries/halls⁸ are currently not wheelchair accessible. In addition, 5 colleges⁹ have no wheelchair accessible laundry facilities and 5 colleges have no wheelchair access to the porter’s lodge¹⁰ [12].

It is unfair to force physically disabled students to pay college fees towards facilities that they cannot access.

Gonville & Caius says - although a bell and intercom outside porters lodge and if gates to main site Old Courts in Trinity Street - happy to open them to allow step free access

⁶ Colleges not currently wheelchair accessible: Homerton (*but currently being relocated*), King’s, Magdalene, Peterhouse, Sidney Sussex and Trinity

⁷ Colleges not currently wheelchair accessible: Emmanuel

⁸ Colleges not currently wheelchair accessible: Darwin (*but will be from late summer 2020*)

⁹ Colleges not currently wheelchair accessible: Christ’s, Downing, Robinson, St John’s and Wolfson

¹⁰ Colleges not currently wheelchair accessible: Corpus Christi, Emmanuel, Gonville and Caius, King’s and Magdalene

Recommendations

We suggest that Colleges could address some of these accessibility concerns by:

- **Educating staff on accessibility, i.e. not locking doors and not blocking wheelchair-accessible routes with vehicles**
- **Leaving temporary ramps up in key parts of the college**
- **Leaving heavy doors propped open or, where this is not possible, researching the introduction of automatic doors.**

Colleges must also develop long-term plans to improve wheelchair access to facilities.

Colleges must learn from past successful accessibility improvements, such as at Newnham, and share information on best practice.

Spotlight on Newnham College

Newnham College has successfully improved wheelchair accessibility on the main site. There are clear and easily navigable wheelchair access routes to the servery, the hall, the bar and the main buildings.

The Newnham JCR DSO writes, “As a wheelchair user myself, the college has been incredibly accommodating, making adaptations to doors and rooms I use all over the site, and providing me with excellent adapted accommodation”.



In October 2018, Newnham opened the Dorothy Garrod building, in which there is level access to all facilities and several disabled toilets. The Dorothy Garrod building also contains five rooms that can be made wheelchair accessible. The Newnham JCR DSO writes, “The new Dorothy Garrod building not only has accessible rooms with adapted, larger ensuite bathrooms, but also kitchens with lowered hobs and worksurfaces, which have allowed me to cook independently.”

Newnham proactively seeks to improve disabled access. Before even arriving at the college, one disabled respondent was asked what might present a problem to them. A student noted, “they have always listened and tried to work with me towards a solution (to all access problems)”.

Newnham’s positive and proactive attitude to accessibility was reflected in the survey responses. All nine respondents surveyed had average-to-positive experiences of disabled access at the college. One student wrote, “I couldn’t have picked a better university or college to attend”.

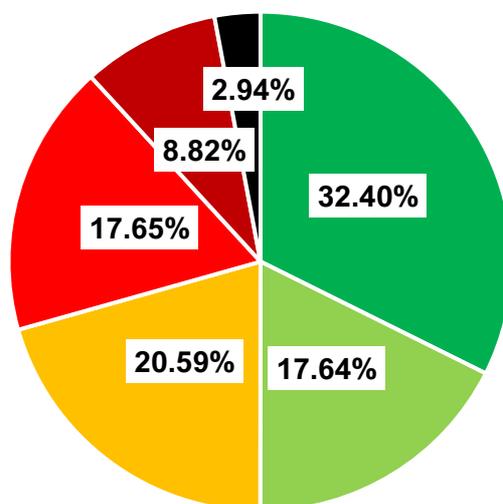
Accessible Accommodation

Examples of accessibility adjustments

- Wheelchair accessible room
- Sensory fire alarms
- Ensuite
- Room in quiet space in college
- Double bed

Students report mixed experiences of arranging accessible accommodation at Cambridge Colleges. While half of respondents easily acquired an accessible room, over a quarter of respondents faced difficulties.

Chart 7: It has been easy to get an accessible room in college.



■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know

Example quotes

- ✓ “It was easy to get an ensuite”
- ✓ “The accommodation officer gave me a room in line with what I had asked for (plus a lovely river view!)”
- ✓ “When I needed specific kitchen and bathroom requirements for my accommodation, my tutor was able to get me exempted from the ballot so I could get the best type of room for my needs.”
- × “I had trouble getting fully accessible accommodation throughout the academic year...”
- × “Even when rooms are suitable for students with disabilities, they are rarely made available to the student”

Accommodation experiences are highly dependent on the form of disability; those with less visible disabilities and with more complex needs are more likely to struggle to get accommodation adjustments. One student wrote, “There are accommodation options for disabled students, but sometimes individual or very specific needs are not

adequately accounted for”. When restricting to students with a musculoskeletal disorder or visual or hearing impairment, more than half of respondents strongly agreed that “it has been easy to get an accessible room in college”.

Students may be dissuaded from seeking adjustments by having to justify their need for room facilities, such as a wet room.

There is a lack of accessible accommodation at some colleges. One student was forced to live in a room not suitably adapted to their needs for a whole year, because there was not an available wheelchair-accessible room. The number of fully wheelchair accessible rooms varies across colleges from 1 (at Corpus Christi and Robinson) to 10 (at Homerton). Meanwhile, the number of students per fully wheelchair accessible room ranges from 75 students per room at Trinity Hall to 664 students per room at Robinson [1, 12]. Limited accessible rooms present a major problem when multiple disabled students with similar needs apply to the same college.

Highest number of students per fully wheelchair accessible room

1. Robinson (**664**)
2. Corpus Christi (**553**)
3. Wolfson (**506**)
4. St Catharine’s (**384**)
5. Pembroke (**380**)

Smallest number of students per fully wheelchair accessible room

1. Trinity Hall (**75**)
2. Clare Hall (**83**)
3. Lucy Cavendish (**88**)
4. Girton (**115**)
5. Churchill (**120**)

Source: Student numbers, Planning and Resource Allocation Office. Available at: <https://www.prao.admin.cam.ac.uk/data-analysis-planning/student-numbers>
Wheelchair accessible rooms, Disability Resource Centre. Available at: <https://www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk/access-around-university/access-colleges>

Note: Numerical data could not be found for Darwin, Gonville & Caius, Hughes Hall, Murray Edwards and Selwyn

Students also complain that accessible rooms are too expensive. Over a quarter of students surveyed disagreed that accessible rooms were reasonably priced. One student complained, “little or no financial compensation is provided for rooms outside disabled students’ budgets”.

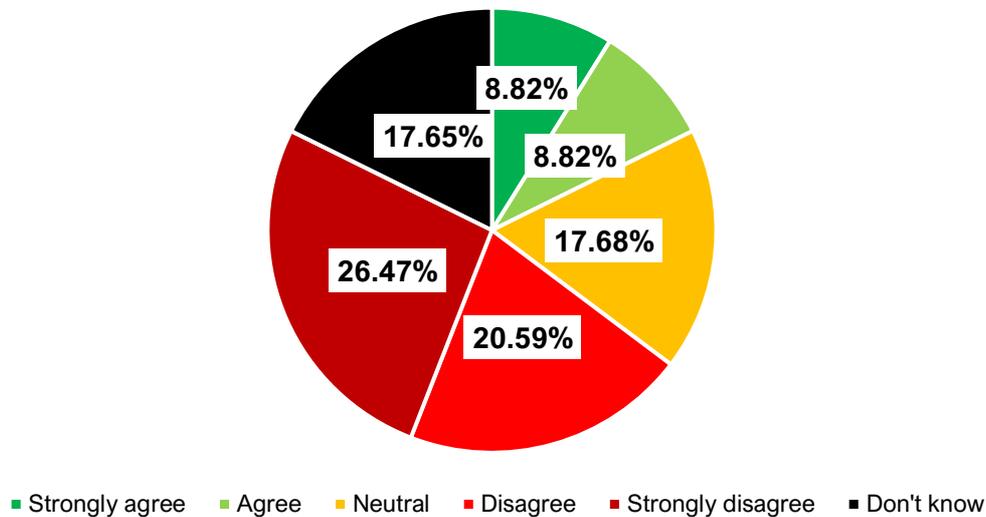
Since 2015, it has been a college’s responsibility to cover the cost of reasonable adjustments. For example, if a student with IBD requires an ensuite, the college is legally required to subsidise that student’s rent to match a similar room with a shared bathroom. The data suggests that not enough colleges and students are aware of this obligation.

Disabled students can be socially isolated by the location of accessible rooms. One fresher wrote that instead of being placed with first years they were forced to live with second and third years. College houses, where many 2nd and 3rd years live, often have steps to the front door – making them inaccessible.

Ballot systems can also isolate students if disabled students have to pick rooms before their able-bodied friends. One student noted that they would not have been able to live near their friends if they had not also been disabled: “We were able to select rooms near each other due to our similar access needs”.

In total, nearly half of all respondents disagreed that they could choose an accessible room close to their friends.

Chart 8: I can choose an accessible room close to my friends



Buddy systems can alleviate social isolation problems. At Selwyn, disabled students select rooms before the general ballot. The college runs a buddy system, which allows disabled students to enter the ballot with up to two friends. A Selwyn JCR committee member said this scheme had been “pretty successful”.

Recommendations

We suggest that Colleges can address some of these accessibility concerns by:

- **Standardising the room adjustment process. Instead of having to email staff to organise adjustments, there should be fixed room adjustment forms for disabled students. This could encourage more disabled students to apply for reasonable adjustments.**
- **It should be made clear that students will not be charged higher rent for reasonable adjustments.**
- **Educating staff on the varied needs of disabled students.**
- **Introducing long term plans to increase the number of accessible rooms.**

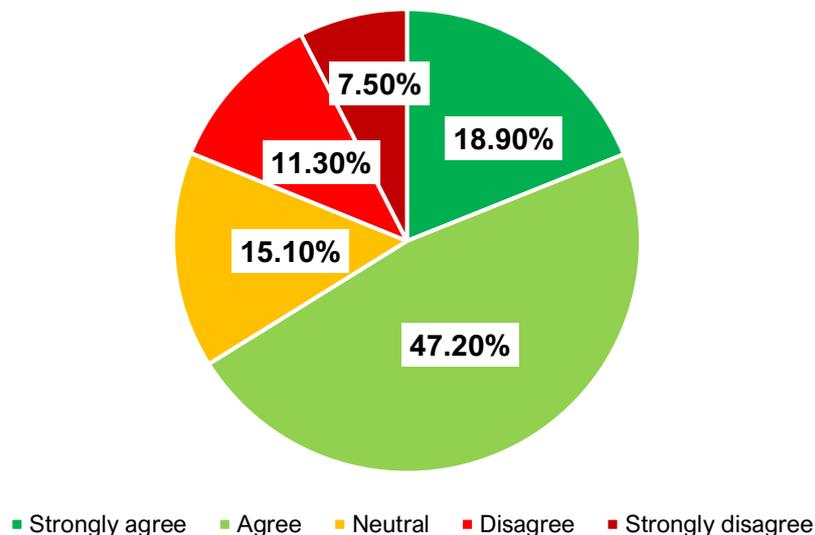
If your college is not able to offer you accessible accommodation, the University should offer you a suitable room at another college.

If you apply to a college that will not have a room that meets your accessibility requirements, you should be given the opportunity to change college to one that does.

We would implore Colleges to introduce buddy schemes to ease social isolation problems.

College staff

Chart 9: I have been well-supported by college staff



Most disabled students feel well-supported by college staff. Some staff members go “above and beyond” to help students; responses refer to staff providing help without question, fighting on behalf of students for adjustments, and phoning students to check up on their well-being.

Yet, there still remain college staff who actively dismiss disabled students. Just under a fifth of all responses reported negative experiences of college staff, which included staff making ableist remarks and insulting disabled students.

Example quotes

- √ “I have been so supported by tutors, porters etc., who clearly had no thoughts of the inconvenience, impact on college reputation etc., but just went above and beyond to support me with whatever I needed to succeed”
- √ “When I ask and need support, I get it quickly and without question”
- √ “My tutor is a saint, who has been so supportive and kind. She would spend time researching and fighting on my behalf to ensure I didn’t have to worry about anything”
- √ “The nurse has been amazing and even rang me while at home to check up on me”
- √ “I feel both my DoSs and the senior tutor have gone above and beyond what I would expect, representing me and pushing so that I am given all the support I can be from my faculty and through exams”
- “It’s well known that one’s experience is dependent on the people involved. I got lucky. I feel for those who didn’t.”
- × “Tutors and staff members are very dismissive of mental health conditions as a whole”
- × “I’ve had to switch tutor due to ableist comments from them and lack of support with issues relating to my disability”
- × “I feel ostracised by my DoS sometimes as it feels like she thinks I am not trying hard enough”
- × “Everyone knows of at least one DoS or supervisor that thinks everyone should be able to cope, that there’s no excuse for failing and is woefully unaware of the struggles of normal people and students.”

Respondents to this study wanted college staff to be more proactive. Disabled students often have to actively reach out to tutors for support – who are sometimes people they have never met. Placing the responsibility on the student can deter students from accessing support until it is a crisis. Survey responses include:

- “In short, help is there, but it isn’t enough. You have to be the one to make sure you get it”
- “Colleges should be more proactive about telling students what is available to them”
- “The way the help is provided is fundamentally flawed. It is dependent inherently on the person that is going through everything to be able to reach out and ask for help.”

Recommendations

It is imperative that Colleges put systems in place to protect students, such as:

- **Educating *all* college staff on disabilities, particularly invisible disabilities**
- **Allowing students to change tutor or DoS without question**
- **If multiple complaints are upheld against the same staff member, removing that staff member from student-facing activities.**

We suggest college tutors organise regular appointments with their students to check up on their well-being.

If a student’s tutor changes, they should be invited to a welcome event to meet them.

Invisible Disabilities

Students with less visible disabilities report problems with staff understanding. Disabilities are sometimes treated as excuses by staff,

instead of major impediments. Students reported being labelled lazy, stupid and rude by staff as a result of their disability. Poor staff understanding has left some students in tears.

Example quotes

- × “Staff demonstrate a poor understanding of invisible health conditions from making blunders in conversations to grilling me to the point of making me cry”
- × “I was unable to stand for the entire time before the fellows sat down at a formal, so I sat after about 5 minutes of waiting. I was asked by two staff members to stand – both of whom questioned why I couldn’t stand. The second staff member told me that I was disrespectful and that I needed to sit at the other end of the table, so that I wouldn’t be seen by the warden and the fellows.”
- × “One supervisor suggested my memory was so bad that I must have had a stroke. I feel that many supervisors don’t see my condition as a disability, but just think I am stupid and making excuses”.

Recommendations

We implore Colleges to educate *all* staff on invisible disabilities.

Autism and other sensory conditions

Busy college spaces can be overwhelming for students with autism and other sensory conditions. One respondent wrote, “The main thoroughfares are always busy and loud, same with the dining hall, making it hell for me to walk through or even eat. I sometimes skip eating for a day because I’m afraid of how busy the hall is”.

Recommendations

More colleges should introduce quiet rooms. Quiet rooms are spaces that only allow limited conversation and noise. They offer a

safe space for students feeling overwhelmed. At Clare, there is a designated quiet room (the Hepple Room).

Colleges should introduce queue-jump systems for disabled students in hall. Queue-jump systems would minimise disabled students time in noisy and crowded areas.

Mental health conditions

There is insufficient counselling available at both the college and University level.

Problems with the University Counselling Service (UCS) are well documented. Students have long complained about long waiting times and a limited number of appointments.

In 2017, Varsity exposed long waiting times and reduced counselling hours at the UCS caused by staff shortages; in Lent 2016, the waiting time for an appointment was 5 weeks [13]. In the same month, a student was quoted as saying, “I was told after just one appointment that I had improved markedly, which I had not, and they said I did not need any further counselling. I left with just some leaflets on mindfulness and anxiety but no long-term support” [14].

Insufficient University funding has caused these problems to persist. The UCS Annual Report 2018-2019 found that student complaints still refer to long waiting times, a limited number of sessions and long gaps between sessions [15].

The UCS is the only viable option for some students. GPs can be reticent to refer students to NHS services due to the long waiting times in Cambridge. Some Colleges are also yet to introduce college-based counsellors.

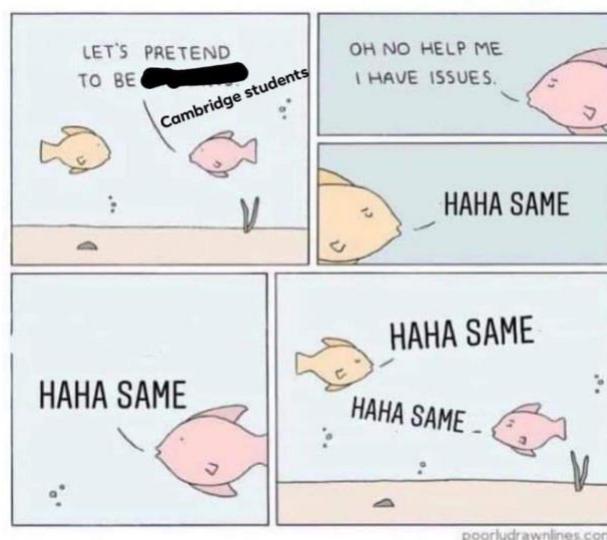
Selwyn still does not have a college-based counsellor, despite the active campaigning of the JCR committee. Instead, students must access mental health support through the Dawson Fund¹¹. Committee members argue that the Dawson Fund is not well publicised, and that the mandatory referral through a tutor dissuades applicants.

¹¹ The Grange Fund finances private mental health services.

Respondents also complained about limited slot availability, the short length of slots and the lack of slots outside lecture time for college-based counsellors.

There also needs to be a cultural change at the University. Mental health breakdowns are normalised in Cambridge culture. As one student writes, “Something about the University makes you feel that it is okay and normal to have mental breakdowns... It’s not. This is not normal”.

Cambridge social media accounts, such as Camfess, often post content that makes fun of the physical and mental stress of Cambridge degrees.



Example Camfess post (July 2019)

When you started the term with good intentions, but as well as failing to keep on top of your work, your mental, physical, and spiritual health is also disintegrating at record speed



Example Camfess post (November 2019)

Recommendations

The University and colleges must increase funding for mental health services.

The University must further investigate the cause of high student stress – and its implications for the physical and mental wellbeing of students.

As a community, we must work together to destigmatise mental health conditions. We must openly talk about mental health issues and encourage all to seek the appropriate support.

Academic Impact

Disabled students are underperforming in examinations due to insufficient and inappropriate exam allowances.

College staff can dismiss legitimate examination concerns as exam anxiety, preventing students from getting help. One student was told by their tutor that “it was normal for students in their first year to be worried about exams” and that they “had nothing to be concerned about”.

Examination allowances can fail to adequately address student concerns. Sidsel Størmer, a second-year student at Newnham, reports that they asked to do oral examinations due to a visual impairment. The University denied her request and forced her instead to record her essays on a tape recorder. Even after informing the college that this format was not working, the exam structure was not changed. A DSC advisor argued that this was a “trial year” and “did not really matter” – despite all results being recorded on a student’s transcript. Sidsel writes, “I felt like my concerns weren’t listened to or taken seriously” by her tutor at the time. Sidsel ended up under-performing in the examinations due to the long time required to record essays. The college has since addressed her examination concerns but has not apologised or compensated her for what happened.

Examinations allowances are also not being properly enforced. One student said that their college forgot that they had an exam and had not organised an invigilator. At another college, a student reported that

students with examination allowances were grouped in the same room. This could invalidate examination allowances; a student with regular access breaks could disturb those with autism or anxiety-related disorders.

Slow responses to exam allowance requests also leave students insufficient time to prepare for assessment. One student wrote, “I asked for help and didn’t get any extra help academically until two days before the exam – and even then it was two hours which was not enough”.

Going forwards, students raise concerns about the style of teaching in the new academic year. Students report that there have rarely been captions and transcripts for online lectures this term, which makes them inaccessible.

Recommendations

The University and colleges must respond quicker to examination allowance requests.

Online lectures must be made accessible, including by ensuring recording equipment is working and that transcripts are available.

Pastoral staff should be trained on the examination difficulties faced by disabled students.

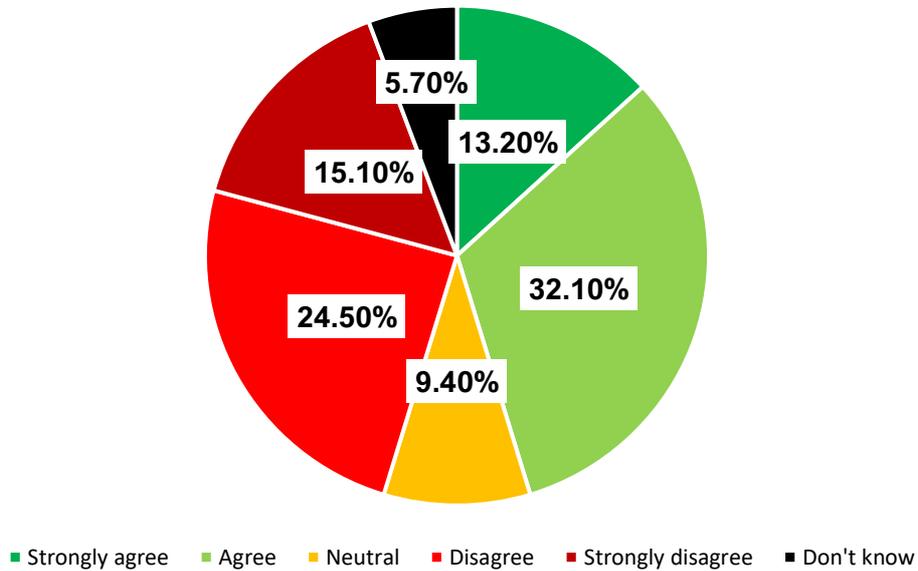
Social Impact

Disabilities can be socially isolating. Disabled students may face misunderstanding from peers, struggle to attend events due to accessibility concerns, and miss social functions due to illness.

In the UK, the proportion of disabled persons feeling lonely often or always is four times greater than for non-disabled persons [15].

This finding is replicated at Cambridge. Just under 40% of students reported feeling socially isolated as a result of their disability.

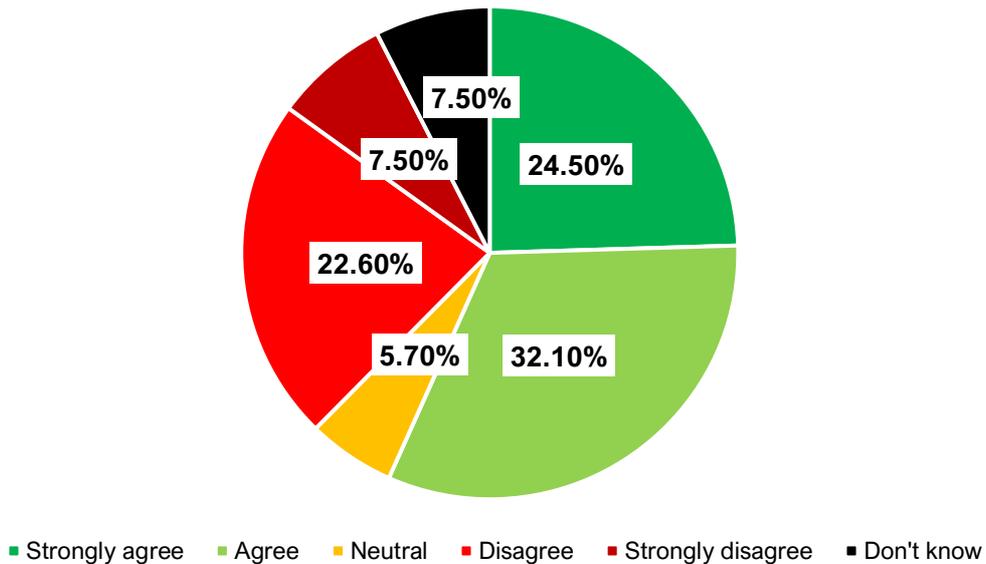
Chart 10: I feel socially isolated as a result of my disability



Accessibility at Cambridge events

Over half of disabled students reported not attending events due to their disability.

Chart 11: I have missed out on attending events due to my disability



The poor accessibility of some events prevents disabled students from attending. Reported accessibility problems include:

- A lack of published ingredients lists for food
- Unclear signage for toilet access or disabled toilets
- A lack of comfortable seating
- No access breaks
- No step-free access
- All areas of the event being loud and crowded.

Event organisers can fail to address less obvious accessibility concerns; adjustments tend to focus on step-free and wheelchair access. A survey of May Ball committee members found that while all May Balls surveyed had wheelchair access to most areas, fewer provided hearing loops and quiet rooms.

One student wrote, “I feel people have disabled access as a second thought, or don’t consider it until I ask”.

Societies that have signed the CUSU DSC Accessibility pledge were reported as still not providing accessibility information.

Recommendations

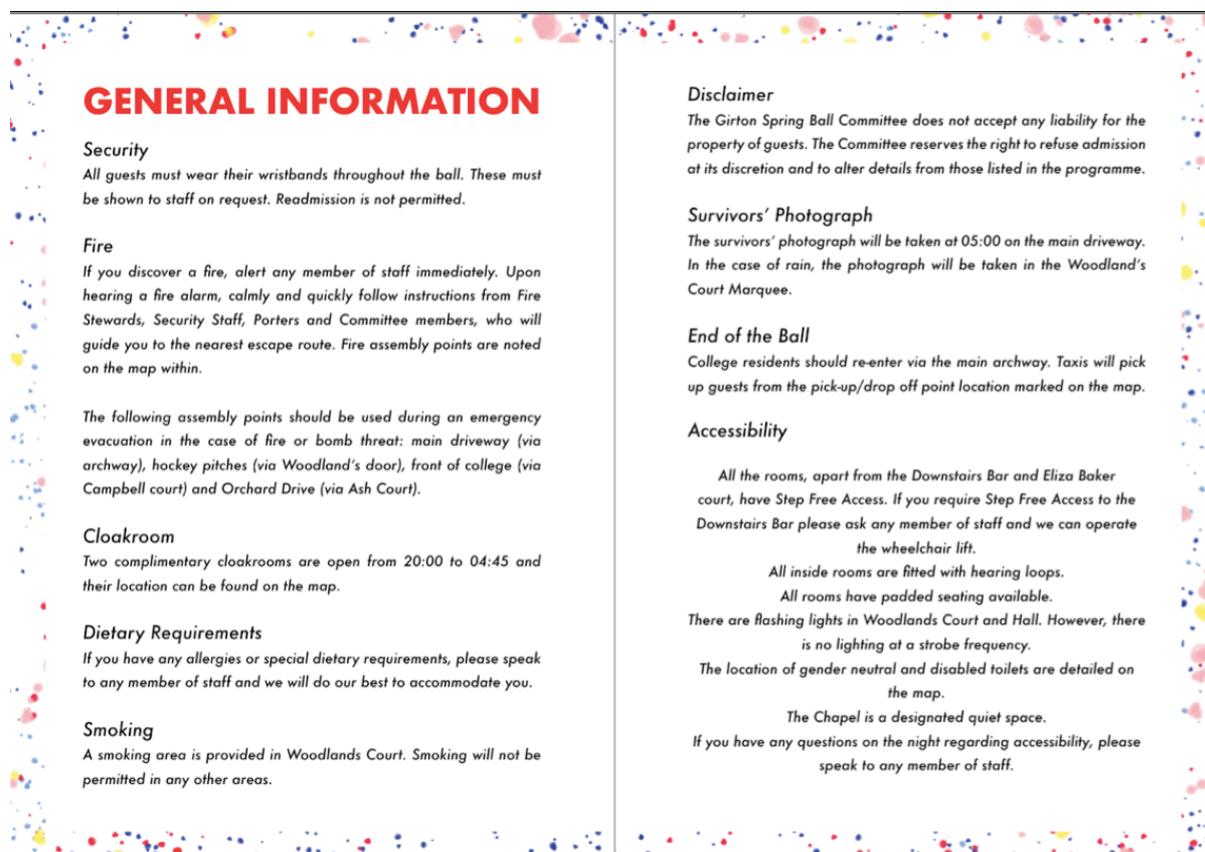
Events must publish clear access arrangements in advance.

Event organisers must follow successful examples of accessibility arrangements, such as at Girton Spring Ball 2020.

Girton Spring Ball 2020

Girton Spring Ball 2020 had wheelchair access to every area apart from the Eliza Baker Court. Disabled toilets and gender-neutral toilets were marked on the event map. There were also hearing loops in each room, padded seating in each room and a designated quiet room.

Access arrangements were clearly detailed in the event program.



Girton Spring Ball 2020 Program

Future Developments

The future looks brighter for disabled students at Cambridge; colleges are reported to be prioritising accessibility in future developments. Of the JCR/MCR committee members aware of future developments, 70% agreed that the college was prioritising disabled access in the construction of new buildings.

Examples of future developments

- Churchill is introducing new installations, such as ramps, to make previously inaccessible areas accessible. The college is also improving markings and signage.

- The new Riverside Café at Clare will be wheelchair accessible. The college is committed to improving disability access as part of the Campaign for Old Court.
- At Downing, the college is building a new student centre to replace the JCR, which will be wheelchair accessible.
- At Jesus, a lift is currently being built to make the servery/hall wheelchair accessible.
- At St Catharine's, there is a project to redevelop the hall and adjoining areas to improve disabled access. The primary reason for the development was said to be accessibility. There are new accessible rooms planned at St Chad's.

There still remain colleges that are hesitant to improve accessibility due to the potential damage to architecture and the college aesthetic.

At Corpus Christi, the JCR committee has been fighting for five years to introduce a handrail outside the main arch on Trumpington Street. The main entrance currently has steep, uneven steps, which are difficult to traverse for those with mobility problems. The only accessible entrance (Golden Gate) is frequently blocked by vehicles inside the college and must be opened by the Porters.

The JCR's campaign to introduce a handrail has been repeatedly blocked by the college. One JCR member writes, "There is popular support in much of the college, but progress has been slowed by a core of Fellows, who object to the potential architectural damage it could do". The introduction of the handrail could damage the steps on Trumpington Street.

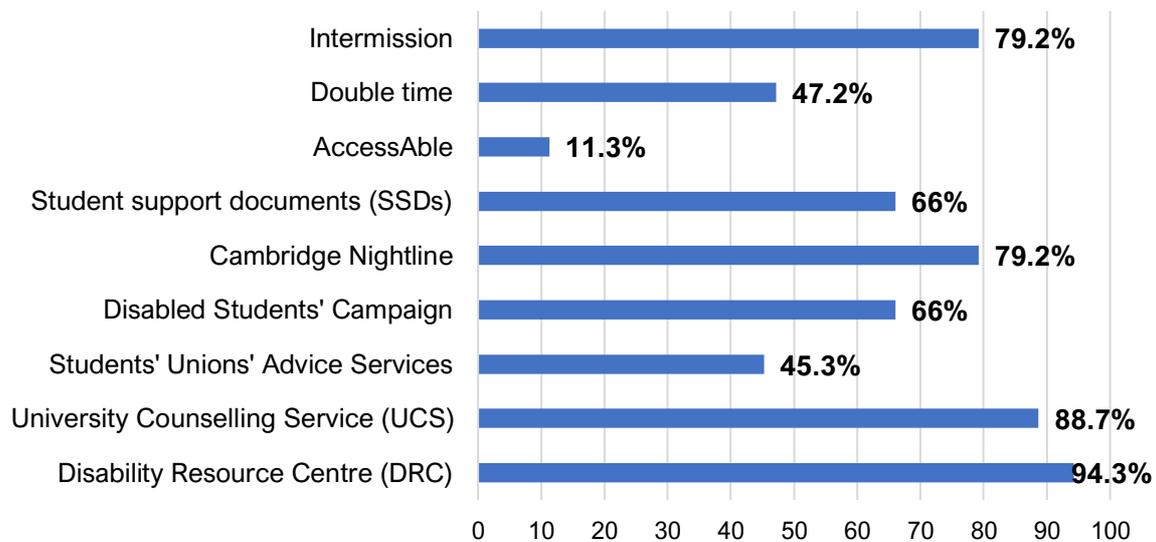
Questions remain around a trade-off between accessibility improvements for architecture damage, but the practical needs of students must be at the core of college decision making.

Disabled Students' Knowledge of Existing Services

Disabled students' knowledge about existing services is mixed. Most students are aware of the Disability Resource Centre (DRC) and

University Counselling Service (UCS); the proportion of respondents that had heard about these services is 94.3% and 88.7% respectively. Knowledge of the Students Unions' Advice Services and double time¹² is a lot poorer; less than half of all disabled students had heard about these. This replicates the findings of previous CUSU work [10].

Chart 12: Proportion of respondents that had heard about (%)



Even if students have heard about these facilities, they did not necessarily know about all the services offered. Nearly two-fifths of students disagreed that they had a good understanding of the services offered by the UCS, DRC and SUAS.

Students felt that the available services were poorly advertised. One student wrote, "I've spent 3 years at Cambridge now - the fact that I am still not aware of half the services on the above list really conveys how bad the system is for communicating matters of access, mental health and disability to students". Several students said that they had only learnt about these services by Googling them.

¹² Double time allows students to complete study over a longer period of time. More information about double time can be found in the DSC's guide: https://www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk/double-time/?fbclid=IwAR1A58rNQzLa2JWa4miyvJSEV704oJu_y8JhgN9uiVR0IzaNw43DuluzvKQ.

Recommendations

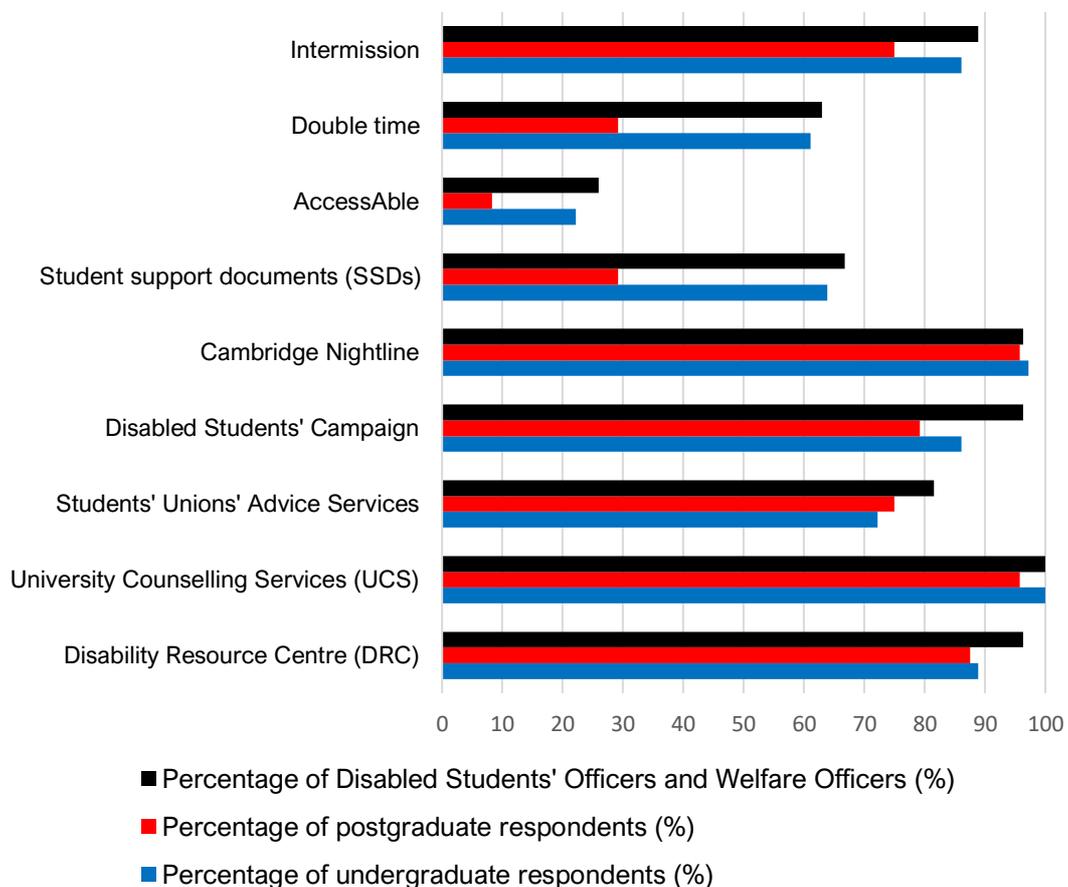
Every fresher should receive information from the college on the services offered by the UCS, DRC and SUAS – including information on how to access them.

Students should be kept updated each term on the latest services, for example the titles of the group counselling sessions at the UCS.

Training of JCR/MCR Officers Knowledge of existing services

JCR and MCR committee members reported a good understanding of the UCS, DRC and Cambridge Nightline; the proportion of respondents that had heard about each of these services was above 87.5%.

Chart 13: Proportion of respondents that had heard about (%)



There is poor understanding of AccessAble, double time and student support documents.

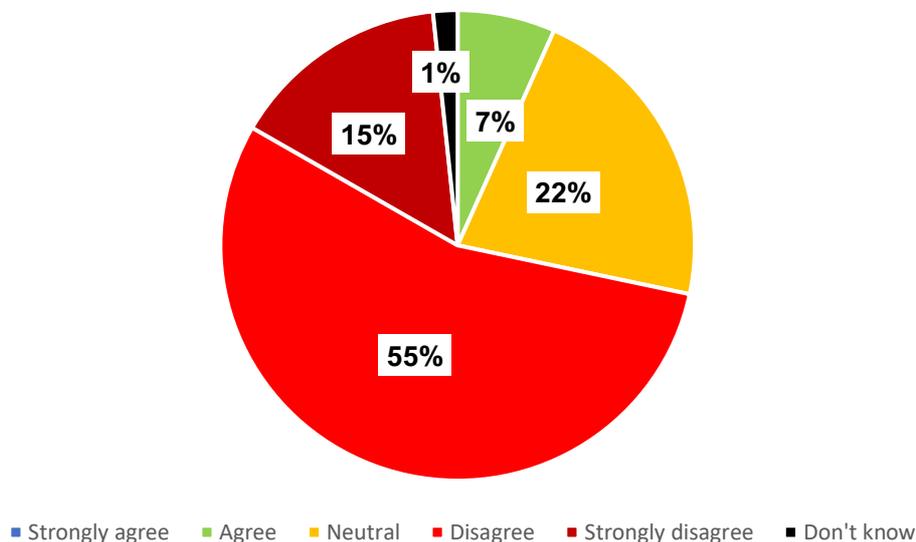
Understanding is markedly worse for postgraduate students. For student support documents, over double the proportion of undergraduates knew about the service compared to postgraduates. This is particularly concerning given that many postgraduate students serve as supervisors and therefore may teach students with SSDs.

As expected, DSOs and welfare officers have a lot better understanding of the available services.

Training on how to support students

JCR and MCR committee members are receiving inadequate training on how to support students. 70% of survey respondents disagreed that they had received adequate training on student support.

Chart 14: I have received adequate training on how to support students

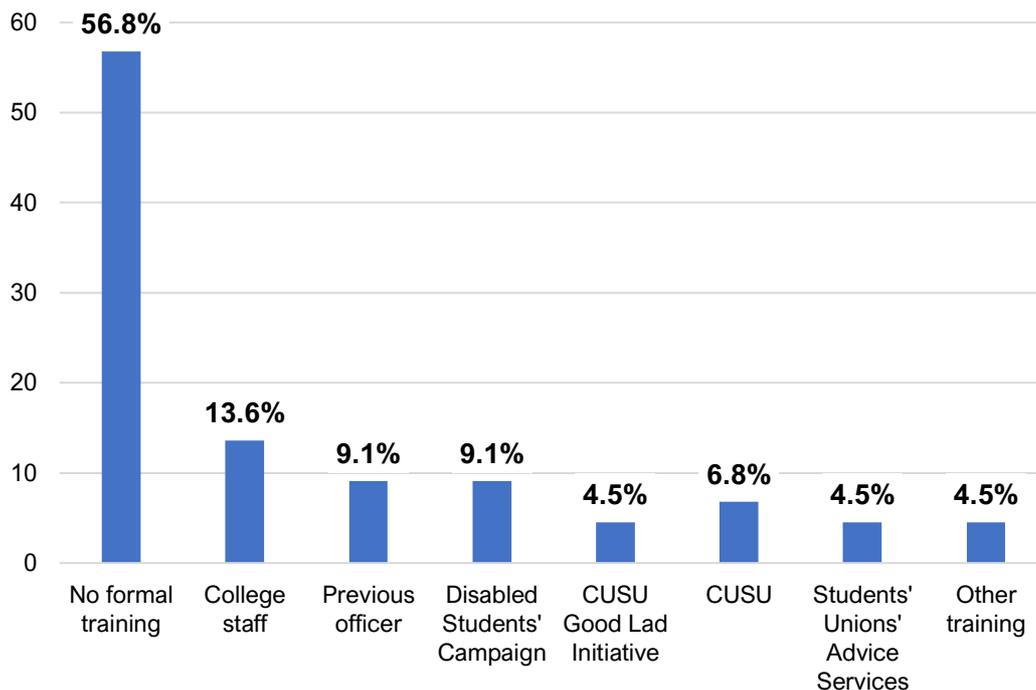


Respondents reported that they had to proactively seek out training opportunities rather than training being readily provided. One respondent wrote, “I had to independently enquire to the DRC about more training and was pointed to a SUAS intro to mental health session”.

Respondents noted that a lot of the existing schemes focused on mental health problems instead of general disability support.

Students who had received support had primarily received it from college staff, previous officers and the CUSU Disabled Students' Campaign.

Chart 15: Training to support students (%)



The CUSU Disabled Students' Officer has provided disability training for committee members in the past. With the resignation of Jess O'Brien in March, there has been a gap in training provision. Existing training also failed to coincide with student elections; the problem is that elections run throughout the academic year and not at a set time.

The incoming Disabled Students' Officer, Rensa Gaunt, is looking into offering more accessible online training alongside in-person training. Rensa comments, "I'll be aiming to run them multiple times per term to suit demand and also have online recorded training as an option that is possibly more accessible".

The new SU will introduce a permanent member of staff to deliver training to JCR and MCR officers.

Recommendations

The CUSU Disabled Students' Campaign should introduce online training, which would allow officers to access training immediately upon election.

Training should be advertised more widely to encourage sign-up.

Postgraduate Support

Postgraduates receive less disability support than undergraduates.

Few MCR committees have a disabled students' officer (DSO)¹³. Of the 30 MCRs, only 3¹⁴ had a DSO. In comparison, every JCR had a DSO.

This is not driven by a smaller number of disabled students at the graduate level. In 2018/19, 42% of all students registered with the DRC were postgraduates [2].

MCRs reported that the lack of DSO position was caused by poor student engagement. Some MCRs struggled to fill even critical positions on the committee, such as the President, Vice President and Secretary.

Postgraduates also report having little organised contact time with pastoral college staff. One student wrote, "As a postgrad, my new academic and pastoral contacts have never made contact. They weren't at the meet and greet event".

This limited disability support is reflected in student satisfaction. In the student satisfaction, nearly half of postgraduates reported a negative experience of disabled access in college compared to a fifth of undergraduates.

¹³ In committees without a DSO, disabled students' issues are usually handled by Welfare Officers or Equalities Officers

¹⁴ Emmanuel, Homerton and Lucy Cavendish

Recommendations

More MCR committees should introduce a disabled students' officer.

Postgraduate pastoral tutors must organise more meetings with their students.

Recommendations University

- 1. If your college is not able to offer you accessible accommodation, the University should offer you a suitable room at another college.**
- 2. If you apply to a college that will not have a room that meets your accessibility requirements, you should be given the opportunity to change college to one that does.**
- 3. The University must increase funding for mental health support services.**
- 4. Online lectures must be made accessible, including by providing transcripts and ensuring recording equipment is working.**
- 5. The University must respond quicker to examination allowance requests.**
- 6. The University must further investigate the cause of high student stress – and its implications for the physical and mental wellbeing of students.**
- 7. As a community, we must work together to destigmatise mental health conditions.**

Colleges

- 1. All college staff should undertake disability equality training. The University offers free disability equality training to all University and college staff. Details can be found at this link: <https://www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk/thinking-about-disability/training?fbclid=IwAR3XMjHFNigCV7Wbs8K3i5aOXbxvEimICZ-sVyfyNmX8e4wAn0GM7tvqkfU>.**
- 2. College staff should be told not to obscure access routes, i.e. by locking doors or blocking routes with vehicles.**
- 3. Temporary ramps should be left up in key parts of the college.**
- 4. Heavy doors should be propped open and colleges should research the introduction of automatic doors.**
- 5. Colleges must develop long-term plans to improve wheelchair access to facilities and to increase the number of accessible rooms.**
- 6. Colleges should introduce room adjustment forms instead of making students email staff.**
- 7. Students must be informed that they will not be charged higher rent for reasonable adjustments.**
- 8. Colleges should introduce buddy systems to tackle social isolation problems.**
- 9. Students should be allowed to change tutor or DoS without question.**
- 10. If multiple complaints are upheld against the same staff member that staff member should be removed from student-facing activities.**
- 11. College tutors should organise regular appointments with their students.**

12. If your tutor changes, you should be invited to a welcome event to meet them.
13. Colleges should introduce quiet rooms. Quiet rooms are spaces that only allow limited conversation and noise.
14. Colleges should introduce queue-jump systems for disabled students.
15. Colleges should increase funding for mental health services.
16. Every fresher should receive information from the college on the services offered by the UCS, DRC and SUAS – including information on how to access them.
17. The college should keep students updated each term on the latest services, i.e. the names of classes at the UCS.

JCR and MCR committees

1. More MCR committees should introduce a disabled students' officer.

CUSU

1. The CUSU Disabled Students' Campaign should introduce online training.
2. Training should be advertised more widely to encourage sign-up.

Event organisers

1. Events should publish clear access arrangements in advance.

Queries

Any report queries should be directed to investigations@varsity.co.uk.

If you have any queries regarding disabled access, you can contact the Disability Resource Centre at disability@admin.cam.ac.uk. You can also contact the Disabled Students' Campaign on [Facebook](#) or by emailing the [chair](#) or [incoming DSO](#)

Responses¹⁵

- “In September, we expect to begin a major construction project which will provide, amongst other things, a new JCR bar which will be fully accessible” **[Emmanuel College Spokesperson]**
- “We are currently undertaking construction works to ensure that the college bar is fully accessible for wheelchair users. In spite of the complexities of altering our historic listed buildings, we remain committed to making the College as accessible as possible, both by improving wheelchair access to our facilities and by increasing our provision of wheelchair-accessible accommodation” **[King’s College Spokesperson]**
- “To access our Old Courts in Trinity Street, there is a step free level entrance through the main gate. When the doors of the main gate are closed (commonly during the busy tourist season), access is primarily through the Porters’ Lodge, which involves a single step at the entrance and exit. To facilitate access, a bell and intercom are located outside the Lodge door at wheelchair height, which can be used to contact the Porters who will open the main gain for step free access. Our Porters are always happy to assist to ensure any visitor to Gonville & Caius College has access and is made as welcome and comfortable as possible” **[Gonville & Caius Spokesperson]**

¹⁵ These are all the recorded responses to comment requests as of 22/06/2020 18:54. MCR responses are not printed.

- “The MCR (and MCR bar) does have a small step (2”) at the threshold with a little wooden ramp. The main College bar, however, is in the basement opposite the JCR with lift access and we have always thought that it was easily accessible.

Night-time access to the Library for wheelchair users has been more of an issue, but we hope to have solved it before the start of Michaelmas. The plan is to make the ramp up to the door used at night more wheelchair-friendly and the Porters will be asked not to lock any part of the door until they lock the Library itself. We also plan to install automatic opening doors to make access easier, both for wheelchair users and for those with arms full of books!

We take accessibility very seriously, and have recently put in a ramp and converted the ground floor of one of our buildings to provide an additional accessible teaching room as well as first year set, gyp and laundry suitable for a wheelchair user - we already have sets suitable for wheelchair users in other parts of the College.” **[Peterhouse College Spokesperson]**

- “Selwyn has recently increased its nursing and pastoral support in recent years, with an investment running into hundreds of thousands of pounds. A key part of this is the Dawson Fund on mental health which guarantees speedy access to specialised support, and which we regard as the most effective way of assisting students - with countless cases where we have been able to supply expert help immediately when it matters.” **[Selwyn College Spokesperson]**
- “Improving access to our facilities is an immediate priority for St Catharine’s College, as we recognised in our strategic plan entitled [‘Our College, Our Future’](#) in 2019. Existing provision of accessible rooms and facilities, which includes an accessible laundry, will be enhanced in the near future through investment in carefully planned building projects. Additionally, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss access to the MCR with our postgraduate students, including other options for its location.” **[St Catharine’s College Spokesperson]**
- “Cambridge SU will have extended capacity to support student volunteers and a new staff role to help with training them to

understand their role, signpost services, and be better campaigners, but Colleges must not rely on J/MCR Welfare and Liberation Officers to do the work supporting students that properly funded mental health and disability support services should be doing” **[CUSU]**

- “As disabled students ourselves, we are painfully aware that college and campaign officers are often poorly or not at all trained in how to support other students, especially those with disabilities or mental health issues. We are developing new online training for college and campaign officers as well as interested students who would like to know more about disability and mental health within the university, which will be available at any time, during staff absences and regardless of election timing, and which we hope will complement the face-to-face training given by our sabbatical officer. We would urge all college officers and interested students to keep up to date with the Disabled Students’ Campaign via our [Facebook page](#) and soon-to-be-revived [mailing list](#), so that our training and resources get to all the people who need them.”
[CUSU Disabled Students’ Campaign]
- “The University’s online exams protocols were drafted following consultation with Faculties, Departments, Colleges and student representatives. The Disability Resource Centre was also asked for advice on how best to cater for students with particular access requirements. We have tried to take all access requirements into account and any student who felt particularly disadvantaged by arrangements was encouraged to raise this with their College.”
[Disability Resource Centre Spokesperson]

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[3] Robinson Student Survey 2019/2020

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[14] Varsity, Author: Rebecca Heath, Cambridge must improve its mental health support (Nov 2017). Available at: <https://www.varsity.co.uk/comment/14095>

[15] University Counselling Service, Annual Report 2018-2019. Available at: <https://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/general/UCSAnnualReport1819.pdf/view>

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Appendix A: JCR/MCR survey

Q1. Do you want your response to be anonymous?

- Yes
- No

Q2. Which college are you at?

- Christ's College
- Churchill College
- Clare College
- Clare Hall
- Corpus Christi College
- Darwin College
- Downing College
- Emmanuel College
- Fitzwilliam College
- Girton College
- Gonville & Caius College
- Homerton College
- Hughes Hall
- Jesus College
- King's College
- Lucy Cavendish College
- Magdalene College
- Murray Edwards College
- Newnham College
- Pembroke College
- Peterhouse
- Queens' College
- Robinson College
- Selwyn College
- Sidney Sussex College
- St Catharine's College
- St Edmund's College
- St John's College
- Trinity College
- Trinity Hall
- Wolfson College

Q3. Are you an undergraduate student or a postgraduate student?

- Undergraduate student
- Postgraduate student

Q4. What is your position on the JCR/MCR committee?

Q5. Which of the following have you heard about? Tick all appropriate.

- Disability Resource Centre (DRC)
- University Counselling Services (UCS)
- Students' Unions' Advice Services
- Disabled Students' Campaign
- Cambridge Nightline
- Student support documents (SSDs)
- AccessAble
- Double time
- Intermission

Q6. Do you agree with the following statement? I have a good understanding of all the services offered by the DRC, UCS and Students' Unions' Advice Services.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q7. Do you agree with the following statement? I have received adequate training on how to support students.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q8. Where did you receive this training?

Q9. Do you agree with the following statement? Disabled access at my college is good.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q10. Please explain your answer to the previous question

Q11. Which of the following locations in your college have easy wheelchair access? Note: Please do not tick if the wheelchair route is highly inconvenient, frequently broken or frequently obscured

- Servery/hall
- Bar
- Library
- Student JCR/MCR
- Don't know

Q12. If you would like to expand on your answer to the previous question, please do so in the space below

Q13. Do you agree with the following statement? Most rooms at college have wheelchair access.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q14. Do you agree with the following statement? It is easy to find out about room accessibility when booking rooms in college for events.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

- Don't know

Q15. Do you agree with the following statement? College prioritises disabled access in the construction of new buildings and when redesigning student spaces.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q16. If you would like to expand on your answer to the previous question, please do so in the space below

Q17. Do you agree with the following statement? Disabled students receive good support from college.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q18. Please discuss the support arrangements for disabled students in your college

Q19. During the COVID19 pandemic, have you been made aware of excessive pressure being placed on students by college tutors and directors of studies?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q20. If you would like to expand on your answer to the previous question, please do so in the space below

Q21. Any other comments

Appendix B: Disabled students survey

Q1. Which college are you at?

- Christ's College
- Churchill College
- Clare College
- Clare Hall
- Corpus Christi College
- Darwin College
- Downing College
- Emmanuel College
- Fitzwilliam College
- Girton College
- Gonville & Caius College
- Homerton College
- Hughes Hall
- Jesus College
- King's College
- Lucy Cavendish College
- Magdalene College
- Murray Edwards College
- Newnham College
- Pembroke College
- Peterhouse
- Queens' College
- Robinson College
- Selwyn College
- Sidney Sussex College
- St Catharine's College
- St Edmund's College
- St John's College
- Trinity College
- Trinity Hall
- Wolfson College

Q2. Are you an undergraduate student or a postgraduate student?

- Undergraduate student
- Postgraduate student

Q3. How would you classify your disability? Please select all relevant conditions from the list

- ADHD
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Chronic pain
- Diabetes
- Dyspraxia
- Epilepsy
- Hearing impairment
- Inflammatory bowel disease or irritable bowel syndrome
- Learning disability, such as dyslexia or dyscalculia
- Limb loss
- Mental health condition
- Musculoskeletal disorder
- Visual impairment
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Q4. Do you agree with the following statement? Disabled access at my college is good.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q5. Please explain your answer to the previous question

Q6. If you have a mobility impairment, which of the following college facilities can you easily access?

- Bar
- Servery/hall
- Student JCR/MCR
- Library
- Not applicable

Q7. Have you had to liaise with college to improve disabled access?

- Yes
- Sort of
- No

Q8. If you answered “Yes” or “Sort of”, please expand on your answer in the space below

Q9. Is there anything your college could do to improve disabled access?

Q10. Do you agree with the following statement? I have been well-supported by college staff.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q11. Please explain your answer to the previous question

Q12. Do you agree with the following statement? In the past, I have had excessive pressure placed on me by my Director of Studies/tutors/supervisors.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q13. Do you agree with the following statement? It has been easy to get an accessible room in college.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

Q14. Do you agree with the following statement? Accessible rooms are reasonably priced.

- Strongly agree

- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

Q15. Do you agree with the following statement? I can choose an accessible room close to my friends.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

Q16. Do you agree with the following statement? I feel socially isolated as a result of my disability.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q17. Do you agree with the following statement? I have missed out on attending events due to my disability.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q18. Do you have any experiences of problems with disabled access at Cambridge events?

Q19. Do you agree with the following statement? I have a good support network at University.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q20. Do you agree with the following statement? I sometimes feel that no one understands what I am going through.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree

- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q21. Which of the following have you heard about? Tick all appropriate.

- Disability Resource Centre (DRC)
- University Counselling Services (UCS)
- Students' Unions' Advice Services
- Disabled Students' Campaign
- Cambridge Nightline
- Student support documents (SSDs)
- AccessAble
- Double time
- Intermission

Q22. Do you agree with the following statement? I have a good understanding of all the services offered by the DRC, UCS and Students' Unions' Advice Services.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q23. During the COVID19 pandemic, have you been made aware of excessive pressure being placed on students by college tutors and directors of studies?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

Q24. Any other comments

Q25. What is your CRSID?

Q26. Do you want your response to be anonymous?

- Yes
- No