



DISABLED STUDENTS'
CAMPAIGN

**"I DON'T KNOW
HOW MUCH LONGER
THIS CAN CARRY ON"**

The critical lack of resources in
core services for disabled students

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper is a comment that was made to me by a student who came to find me in tears, because they had been told that they would be unable to access their DRC adviser for another three months.

Sadly, a large part of my role as disabled students' officer has not consisted of advocating for positive change at this University, or helping to build a vibrant community of disabled students. Instead it has involved a large amount of signposting, as well as having to explain to students in crisis why they are unable to access the support they desperately need. The burden of these endless Facebook messages has even resulted in a relapse of my own mental health issues, and as a result the need to take sick leave.

This is not an issue affecting only a minority of students, nor is it due to incompetency within the delivery of these vital services. The question is one of resources, and I fear we are at breaking point. The number of disabled students at the University is increasing each year, whereas the resourcing of core services for these students has remained relatively stagnant. There needs to be significant reform of the ways in which disabled students are supported if we are to come close to meeting our legal duty under the Equality Act 2010, and a genuine commitment to increasing resourcing for these services from across the collegiate University.

This problem has been building for a number of years, but we have reached a critical point at which it is vital we take immediate and substantial action. We simply cannot afford to ignore this any longer.

THE ISSUES

DISABILITY RESOURCE CENTRE

There are several issues with accessing the DRC that have arisen and been disclosed to me by multiple students. Between DRC and UCS, the DRC seems to be in a far worse state of affairs. These issues will be discussed below.

COMMUNICATION DELAYS

“I emailed the DRC to try to get them to follow these up, but I got no response.”

One of the most commonly raised, and most concerning, issues with the current condition of the Disability Resource Centre is their inability to reply to communications within a reasonable timeframe. Students may wait weeks for a reply, or have their communications missed altogether.

“I have had slow/no responses from DRC, they are overbooked and unable to help students who need urgent appointments.”

“I emailed the DRC weeks ago to send in a form to start the process of gaining an ADHD diagnosis and they've literally just blanked me.”

“ I contacted the DRC on 30th Sep to apply for DSA taxis, still haven't heard back from them. Managed to get taxis sorted through college instead. [Received November 29th] ”

“ I contacted the DRC on 22nd October about the student support document that was supposed to be sent off to all my teaching staff, tutor, supervisors and dos before I arrived and she's hasn't got back to the since and the support document still hasn't been sent out. [Received 20th November] ”

“ As a DSO I've had many people ask me what they did wrong, assuming that because there had been no DRC response, the problem was with their application. When actually, the staff don't have the capacity to support all the students who need it. I have personally helped many students try to contact the DRC, but I have now switched to advising students to get adjustments through their tutor and individual staff members rather than wait for DRC recommendations. Only the most confident, assertive and knowledgeable students are currently able to get their needs met. ”

“ To this day I've never seen my SSD, don't know what it says, whether I'm supposed to have it, who else has access to it, who I need to 'declare' my disability to. The processes seem very opaque and have not been communicated. Again, probably due to a firefighting culture in a over-stretched work environment. ”

“Emailed the DRC in week 1 to arrange getting permission to record lectures for one of my papers as one of the lecturers writes on a blackboard and has no slides/notes. My SSD says this is a reasonable adjustment I can get. Received no reply. Emailed again a week ago as the lecturers now done 5 of his 6 lectures. Still been ignored. My advisor has no appointments until January so I can't even go in to ask about it.”

“I actually finished the course before they got back to me as no one ever answered my emails in months - presumably as they are so chronically understaffed/funded.”

“I almost didn't get special arrangements for exams due to it taking months to get a reply to emails.”

“I was told to contact the DRC to get permission to use a laptop/extra time in exams, before the midpoint of Lent. At the start of Lent, I contacted them about arranging this. Many weeks later, and well after the deadline to apply for exam support had passed, they responded to me telling me that the deadline had passed and requiring my college to intervene to ensure I still got exam arrangements in place.”

“I messaged the DRC in April for the first time, and needed accommodations for my exams. Fortunately, the college was able to sort internally as we were given warning from Michaelmas, but I only received a response from the DRC in September. I imagine if someone else required more from the DRC, this delay might've badly affected them.”

“I have learnt my lesson and now don't even bother emailing and just phone, but this isn't an option available to all.”

WAITING TIMES

“I have had slow/no responses from DRC, they are overbooked and unable to help students who need urgent appointments.”

Access to reasonable adjustments is often not only incredibly important to disabled students, but also an urgent need. Without adjustments in place, many disabled students are left unable to work at the same quality or speed as their peers. Indeed, some students are left unable to work at all, and many need to intermit until adjustments can be put in place.

“ I contacted the DRC right at the start of my third year (Michaelmas 2018) as I had struggled with a few problems during second year, waited for a while for an appointment, and then had a screening for Asperger's at the start of November, and was told I'd get an SSD (I also have generalised anxiety disorder and IBS) to help get the reasonable adjustments in place I needed for the rest of the year. I emailed my advisor multiple times throughout November and December as I was having problems with my DoS as I was struggling with my dissertation due to problems related to my disability. I didn't receive any response at all from my advisor until mid-January, and reasonable adjustments and things such as mentoring weren't put in place until later in Lent. I ended up having to intermit in Lent due to ongoing problems with my DoS and my dissertation and supervision work, and only now that I've returned from intermission have all the adjustments and support I need been put in place. I believe if I'd had better support when I first sought help at the beginning of Michaelmas 2018, that I wouldn't have ended up intermitting. ”

“ On waiting times! I emailed my DRC adviser to say that I was having a crisis and couldn't keep going with my degree last week - she said her next appointment was 20th November. [Received 8th Nov] ”

“ I emailed the SpLDs team (+college advisor) mid-Easter term in first year. It took until mid-Easter second year to actually have an SSD put together. Because I wasn't permitted adjustments without an SSD, my academic performance suffered greatly and I was encouraged to intermit at several points as my degree without adjustments was "unfeasible at this time". ”

The current waiting times to access the DRC are therefore incredibly harmful to the wellbeing and academic success of disabled students.

The issues are well summarised in an email which was sent last term to all Senior Tutors.

Dear Senior Tutors

The DRC has been receiving multiple emails and calls daily asking advisers to prioritise particular disabled student cases or to expedite SSD production for named students.

Unfortunately, given the fact that each disability advisor has a student caseload of 738, on average (mean), waiting times for appointments and for responses to enquiries are much longer than we would like them to be. The HEFCE official guidance on baseline provision for disability services in higher education recommended a ratio of disability adviser to disabled student of 1 to 200. We are therefore obviously already operating well beyond our capacity and I am afraid that a four week wait for an appointment with a disability adviser should be anticipated. Answering emails requesting appointments sooner than that is only taking further time out of our ability to respond to student and college enquiries and requests.

The DRC has repeatedly petitioned both the Colleges and the University for additional resources over the last few years, but I am afraid these requests (whilst securing some limited additional resource) have not been successful in reducing the disability adviser to student ratio, given that we see an increase in disabled student numbers of over 15% per year, on average (over the last 10 years).

The current number of students who have disclosed a disability is 3545 (nearly 17% of the total student population). There are also now 1254 students who have disclosed a mental health difficulty to the collegiate university compared to 35 students 11 years ago. These increases have put increasing pressure on our available resources.

Also, as the current waiting list for an SpLD screening appointment is over four months it has been decided, regrettably, in consultation with and agreement of the Senior Tutors' Committee to no longer offer a screening service for students who are seeking a diagnosis for SpLD or ADHD. Students in this situation will be advised to go directly for diagnostic assessment. The DRC will issue guidance on this process by the end of next week.

Please could you pass this message to your tutorial offices and to your tutorial teams (and those with responsibility for student welfare and support) and to any other staff members who need to be aware.

We remain committed to the support of disabled students and of the staff in Colleges and the University who are also supporting disabled students, but we are only capable of doing so within the parameters of the resources which are made available to us.

Best wishes

*John Harding
Head of the Disability Resource Centre
A Director of the National Association of Disability Practitioners*

Here are some statistics on waiting times that I have collected from the DRC:

Waiting times for SpLD appointments are currently 8 weeks (so not possible to see a student in the same term they contact us). In terms of replying to standard emails, our response time is currently around a month to 6 weeks.

We would triage emails to pick up more urgent enquiries more quickly (i.e. within one or two weeks)

These waiting times are obviously substantial, and place disabled students at great risk of being forced to intermit, or else cope with significant academic disadvantage.

Here is one example of communication between a student and the DRC, highlighting the significant delays. The original email to which this responds was sent in early November.

Dear X

Thank you for your e-mail. I am very sorry for the delay in replying.

1. I am forwarding your query to our Specific Learning Difficulties adviser Helen Duncan. Helen will reply as soon as possible, but this may take a number of working days due to workload at this time of year. If you would like to contact Helen directly, you can do so at hd286@admin.cam.ac.uk.

2. In regards to an appointment with Helen, the earliest slot we have available is on Monday 3rd February 2020. I have therefore booked you in to this slot. Please confirm the suitability of this

Students have also communicated to me the significant delays they have faced.

“Last year I was referred to the DRC but had to wait a whole term to get study skills happening.”

“I had my SSD circulated to my college and faculty, but only some of my adjustments were put into place. I emailed the DRC to try to get them to follow these up, but I got no response. I ended up having to contact all of my lecturers and each of the libraries I use individually to get each of them to implement my adjustments.”

“It took a year [after] my initial appointment for my SSD to be completed and sent to me.”

“As a fresher, I still haven't received a Student Support Document despite it being four weeks in to term now. I was told this was due to the fact that they are currently very behind on writing up people's reports. This has definitely made my first term more stressful, as my supervisors currently have no understanding of my long-term physical health condition.”

“I waited most of Lent for an SSD to be written and distributed.”

“*Waited about 7 months for a braille embosser to be provided by the DRC. Meant that I had to manually braille out all my revision notes and such by hand.*”

“*I couldn't get an appointment to update my SSD. I ended up days away from intermission.*”

“*Understaffing [at the DRC] due to [DRC staff] illness meant I couldn't get any of these neurodiversity developments updated on my SSD.*”

AWARENESS OF PROBLEMS

One of the issues with the DRC is that some students and staff members are aware of the current problems at the DRC, and that has led to further negative consequences with some disabled students who need support not accessing the service.

“*It's not super dramatic, but because I know how underfunded the DRC is, I didn't feel like it was for me, because "I wasn't bad enough" and didn't think it was fair for me to draw on resources. This ends up re emphasising the internal issues that many have with mental health issues of not being ill enough.*”

“I didn't do my exams last year due to a mental health condition. this year, my tutor referred me to the DRC to ensure that I have everything in place during term and for exams. Another staff member from my college however told me that due to cuts I probably won't be on their agenda as they don't prioritise mental health. She said to put in a request anyways but to expect to be seen only next term.”

“I've never approached them before as I've never felt it was my place to/really felt 'chronically' ill as such, but now I'm getting to the point where DRC support would be beneficial especially in getting diagnoses, and I've been put off seeking help from the DRC, because of the wait times and because of anecdotal experience from friends dealing with these issues at the moment. I also had a friend (who's got experience with getting help from the DRC) advise me to circumvent the DRC if possible because, the wait times are so bad that it will be a hindrance rather than a help. I dunno if it's just me but I expect there are others like me who would want to get help from them but are put off/discouraged by the funding and wait time situation, and are sort of struggling along as a result.”

This group is particularly concerning, as they are not even on our radar, and could be missing essential support which can only be provided by the DRC.

THE IMPACT

DISABLED STUDENTS

“The survival of the DRC isn't optional; it's the only option for a lot of Cambridge students to survive.”

The DRC provides an invaluable service to disabled students, which has been repeatedly commented upon during my research.

“I wasn't fully aware of my neurodiversity until I visited the DRC; they also flagged issues with my reading which my school had never been able to. They were significantly impaired, but because I had passed exams it was never flagged. Realising I had irlens and being given a coloured slider was the first time in my life I'd been able to read without things moving, to say the least I was beyond confused, but the DRC also gave me coloured paper and this allowed me to take notes by hand for the first time in years, and made it so much easier for me to work (for ADHD reasons r.e. space).”

“I was unable to even go to see the drs or college nurse because I couldn't leave the house. I wasn't eating, sleeping, and became very unwell. Naturally, I also wasn't attending lectures, I still wasn't going to supervisions, and it was exam term. But, I managed to get an alternative appointment and was given a DRC mentor, who genuinely hand on heart has changed my entire life.”

However, as highlighted earlier in this report, the current state of the DRC is having a substantial impact on the wellbeing of disabled students. Not only are students unable to access invaluable support and advice, but in many cases are unable to obtain any reasonable adjustments without an SSD. More than one Senior Tutor has commented to me that they would be unwilling to make adjustments without such a recommendation from the DRC. This may force students to intermit, or in the worst cases massively underperform due to being disadvantaged in comparison to their peers.

“I have had multiple issues with my DSA application and a new needs assessment (it had been two years since my last one, and I now have an additional diagnosis) and the lack of support has meant I started term without it. As a result, I either don't have access to or haven't been informed how to access taxi funds and the physical strain of cycling has worsened my chronic pain. I have paid for aids out of my own money (desk chair, cushions), which has worsened my financial stress and depression.”

The nature of terms at the collegiate University also means that the aforementioned 8 week waiting period may realistically equate to half a student's teaching time in a given academic year. Not being able to access reasonable adjustments during that time would result in a very substantial academic disadvantage for a student. Where students are unable to access reasonable adjustments for a substantial period of time, despite having disclosed their disability to the collegiate University, we are failing to meet our duty under the Equality Act 2010, and are at serious risk of potential legal consequences in future if a student decided to litigate.

DRC STAFF

The current burden on the Disability Resource Centre has stretched it to breaking point. This affects not only the students who need to access the service, but also the staff who have found themselves forced to deal with an unsustainable and ever increasing workload.

This academic year, several members of staff working at the DRC have been forced to take sick leave as a result of work related stress. This is not only unacceptable, but as a consequence has resulted in an even more stressful work environment, and even greater workload for remaining staff.

As a University we should strive to create a workplace culture which is enriching and supportive, rather than actively detrimental to employees' health.

COLLEGES

“I have now switched to advising students to get adjustments through their tutor and individual staff members rather than wait for DRC recommendations.”

Another consequence of the DRC's current situation is that much of the burden of providing support and potentially providing reasonable adjustments on to staff within colleges, who are far less well equipped to deal with such issues.

This is financially and practically inefficient, as staff who are less qualified and skilled at making these assessments are being funded to make such decisions across 31 spaces due to necessity, instead of the far more efficient investment that could be made in the central DRC. College staff have their own knowledge sets and should be spending their time elsewhere. Significantly, it also means that students are likely to receive a lower quality of support due to a lack of the relevant expertise.

“I still haven't had my first meeting with my disability advisor despite having had two major health crises already, I've basically been using the college nurse to sort out things for me instead.”

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES

“Hi Jess, I was wondering if you could help me. My tutor and DoS have recommended I get tested for ADHD - but I know there's only a certain test recognised by the university. I emailed the DRC over a week ago and have had no response. Thanks in advance!”

These messages have unfortunately become all too common. Disabled students who are unable to access the DRC have also begun to contact their student representatives, particularly disabled students' officers (DSOs), in significant volumes. Whilst these representatives do amazing work in colleges signposting and supporting disabled students, they have become inundated with pleas for help that they are unable to help resolve, as it is simply a matter of waiting for DRC resources to become available. This has led DSOs to become a kind of proxy counselling service, reassuring students that they will be ok despite the lack of support from the University.

“A large amount of my time as a rep for disabled students is spent trying to help other students follow up on their emails and calls to the DRC/ to their mentors or advisors. It is clear to me and to many other students that there simply isn't adequate staffing of the DRC, which is leading to failings in university provisions. I know that the staff are trying their very best with the resources available to them, however I am finding myself repeatedly having to reassure students whose emails have gone unanswered for weeks at a time that they will be able to access the support they need eventually.”

It is beyond me that, in a collegiate university with access to such disproportionate wealth and assets, understaffing and lack of finances should be the reason that help is unlawfully denied to students who have faced many other barriers in accessing support, and frankly it is embarrassing for the university as a world-class institution that this is allowed to continue. Whatever justification may be found for this situation is not and cannot be good enough for our disabled and vulnerable students.



As a DSO I've had many people ask me what they did wrong, assuming that because there had been no DRC response, the problem was with their application. When actually, the staff don't have the capacity to support all the students who need it. I have personally helped many students try to contact the DRC...



DSOs are also disabled students themselves, who go unpaid for this significant volume of work. I myself have become ill from the level of emotional labour I have been unnecessarily forced to provide. This is simply not a responsibility that these officers should be taking on - it is the responsibility of the University.

THE SOLUTION

“Overall the DRC staff are lovely people but obviously struggling with demand.”

The DRC is chronically understaffed, under resourced, and underfunded. Last year, the DRC put in a request for four additional members of staff, yet received funding for none. This is despite the 15% annual increase in disabled students, and the significant problems with the service as outlined in this report.

The DRC provide an incredible service, and despite my role as DSO I have received 0 complaints during my time about the quality of the service they provide, but endless concerns about the time it takes to provide the wonderful support they are capable of to students. Students know that the issue lies in funding.

“I think that this isn't for a lack of willingness to help, but rather that the advisers are or have been overwhelmed with the workload. In general, students are expected to be proactive even if they don't always know what they need or are entitled too, and that this is because the DRC is or has been understaffed and underfunded rather than any desire to make disabled young people “more independent”.”

“

When I started my MEd in 2018 I also encountered clerical problems with my DSC forms not being stamped correctly and SSD not being sent out to the relevant people - again I assume this is symptomatic of working in a pressurised environment.

”

The only solution is to increase funding for the DRC, and this is long overdue. In order to comply with the HEFCE guidance ratio, we would need to double the size of the current service - including administrative staff. In order to reach a ratio of 1:450 students - still more than double the recommended ratio - we would need to secure funding for 3 advisers and 3 administrative staff. This is the minimum we should be looking to provide in order to ensure we have a realistic chance of fulfilling our legal and moral duty to disabled students.

This should form part of a longer term strategy surrounding inclusive teaching and learning, which over time should lessen the burden on the DRC. However, as numbers of disabled students continue to increase, an increase in DRC funding must be a fundamental part of such a strategy. Improvements to the curriculum alone will not solve this problem.

POTENTIAL AVENUES

There are various potential avenues that might be explored to provide this funding. I will discuss three possibilities below.

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY FUNDING

This would be the simplest option. This would only require that the requested funding was made available to the DRC. However, this may require cuts in other areas.

COLLEGE LEVY

Colleges might be requested to contribute more to the funding of the DRC. This is a sensible choice, given that advisers are allocated by college. Therefore, colleges could pay for the cost of the proportion of the adviser and administrator that their students use. Alternatively, richer colleges may offer to subsidise the contributions of less wealthy colleges. This may in fact save colleges money in the long run, as they will waste fewer resources on inefficiently attempting to aid individual students who are waiting for DRC support without the necessary expertise and knowledge base.

ALUMNI FUNDING

This would be an avenue which would potentially generate new money for the University. However, it is doubtful whether alumni would be interested in funding such a core service, that should form part of the University's basic running costs and legal obligations.