Disability Advisory Service Annual Report 2021/22

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1   Disability Advisory Service (DAS) records continue to rise, with 7,008 students known to the Service in 2021/22. This represents 26.5% of the total Oxford student population and is up 2.2% from 6,273 in 2020/21.

1.2   A full-time disability advisor has roughly 796 students on their caseload and there were more than 4,500 Student Support Plans (SSP) in place by the end of the 2021/22 academic year.

1.3   Significant drivers for DAS registration include access to examination adjustments, educational recordings, and diagnostic assessments for specific learning difficulties (SpLD) such as dyslexia and dyspraxia. There has also been a particularly notable increase in requests for educational assessments due to specific attentional deficits in the last two years.

1.4   DAS is actively developing its service model to ensure timely and efficient dissemination of SSPs and implementation of support arrangements in the context of ongoing high demand. However, Oxford continues to record higher than sector-average disability disclosure rates, which the [Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)](#) reported as being 15.8% in 2021/22. Our high disability declaration rates provide strong support for the University continuing to embed inclusive teaching and assessment practices that proactively remove disability-related study barriers and reduce the need for students to register with DAS.

2. Student Engagement and Outreach

2.1   The current DAS service model offers a highly individualised service to every student who declares a disability or makes an enquiry. All disabled students are invited to speak with a designated disability advisor who can make recommendations for reasonable adjustments to teaching, learning and assessment. Disability advisors are available via email, online Teams video or audio calls, and in-person appointments. However, whilst the Service is able to respond flexibly to students' preferred method of engagement, response timeframes can become pressured during periods of peak demand when it can take two weeks to process some requests and replies.

2.2   Beyond its core student work, DAS undertakes a range of outreach activities with prospective applicants, offer holders and matriculated students to encourage early registration so they can gain full benefit from any relevant support. This includes an active presence at all undergraduate Open Days, termly e-bulletins to all students who have a record with the Service, and a popular online 'transition event' (including a Webinar and Canvas course) for new disabled students prior to enrolment each September.

2.3   DAS's capacity to maintain or develop its profile of outreach work is limited within the current service model due to high levels of demand and casework volumes. Nevertheless, DAS continues to work closely with other key stakeholders in central services to ensure messaging (e.g., in web content, application materials and Student Self Service) promotes awareness of DAS and disability disclosure wherever appropriate.

3. Service Developments and Institutional Work

3.1   Some important areas of service development and institutional work were progressed in 2021/22, most notably the production of the University's first [Educational Recordings Policy](). The policy recognises that publishing recordings to supplement in-person teaching represents a significant step forward in making teaching more inclusive for disabled students. Academic departments are encouraged to take this into consideration when deciding what recordings to make available, alongside the suitability of recordings for specific subjects, topics and approaches to teaching.

3.2   DAS has continued to run a popular 'Disability Professionals' Forum', attended (online and in-person) by nearly 100 college and department disability coordinators and leads each term. The Forum provides a space for staff to be briefed on important service updates, training, and for networking and sharing good practice.

3.3   More ground work was also prepared for the review of DAS's overarching service model, to improve the efficiency and quality of service provision overall. In particular the Service began a review of its Student Support Plans (SSP). The first strand of work involves identifying and implementing changes to the format of the SSP and the processes followed to create it so that DAS can more effectively tailor its provision based on each

student's level of need. The second strand of work aims to review the full range of adjustments that are recommended in the SSP to ensure that they are specific, clear, and relevant for the particular disability impact and study context (including level, discipline, and mode). In 2021/22 a benchmarking survey was conducted to establish SSP practice at other UK Universities, and a revised list of reasonable adjustments was drafted that incorporates feedback collected from a range of stakeholders. The bulk of further work is expected to complete in 2022/23 (see section 12).

4. Registrations and demographic data

4.1   DAS holds records for all the students who have declared a disability in Student Self Service as well as those who register directly with the Service independent of any wider University disclosure. DAS student records rise each year and reached 7,008 in 2021/22, a 2.2% increase on the previous year. Demand for access to educational recordings and examination adjustments may be driving registrations.

Chart 1. Number of students with a DAS record
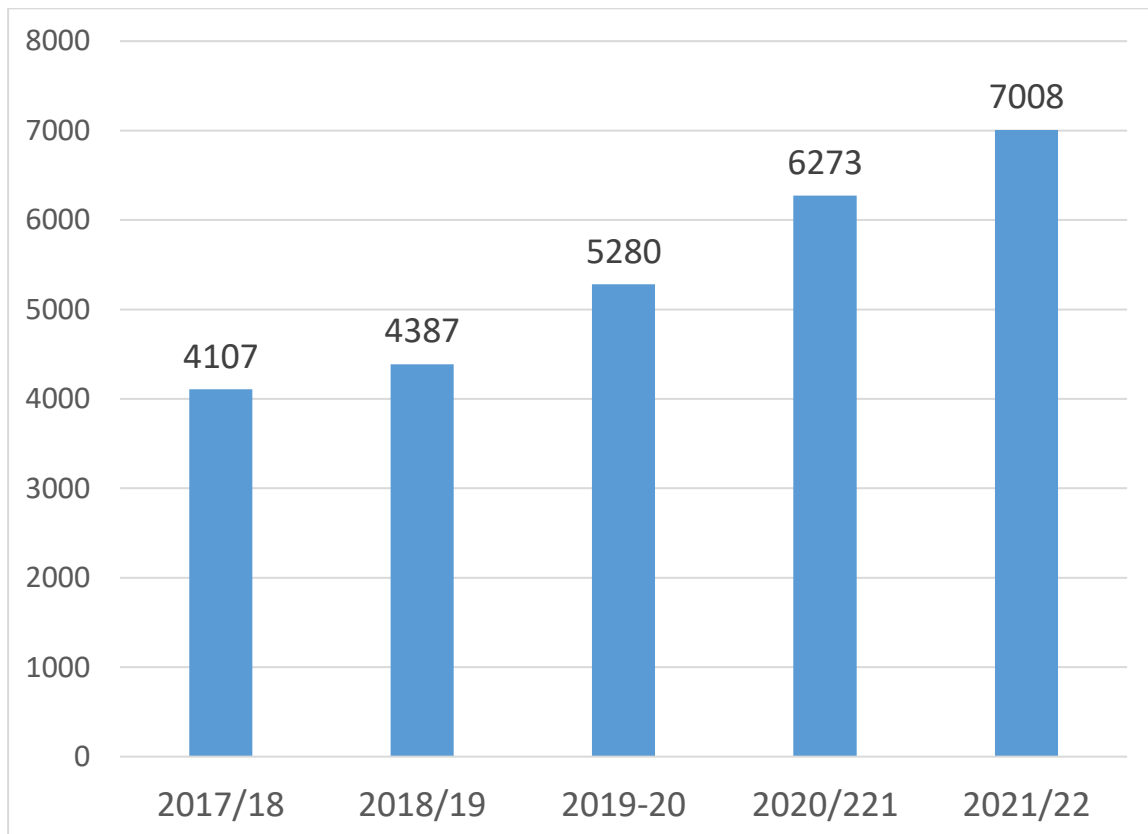
4.2   Demand for DAS provision remains above student population growth and the national sector average, which the [Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)](#) reported as being 15.8% in 2021/22. Further increases in demand and student growth (in line with the [University's Strategic Plan](#)) will have continued implications for DAS's service provision.

Chart 2. Proportion of Oxford student population with a DAS record against sector average disclosure rates
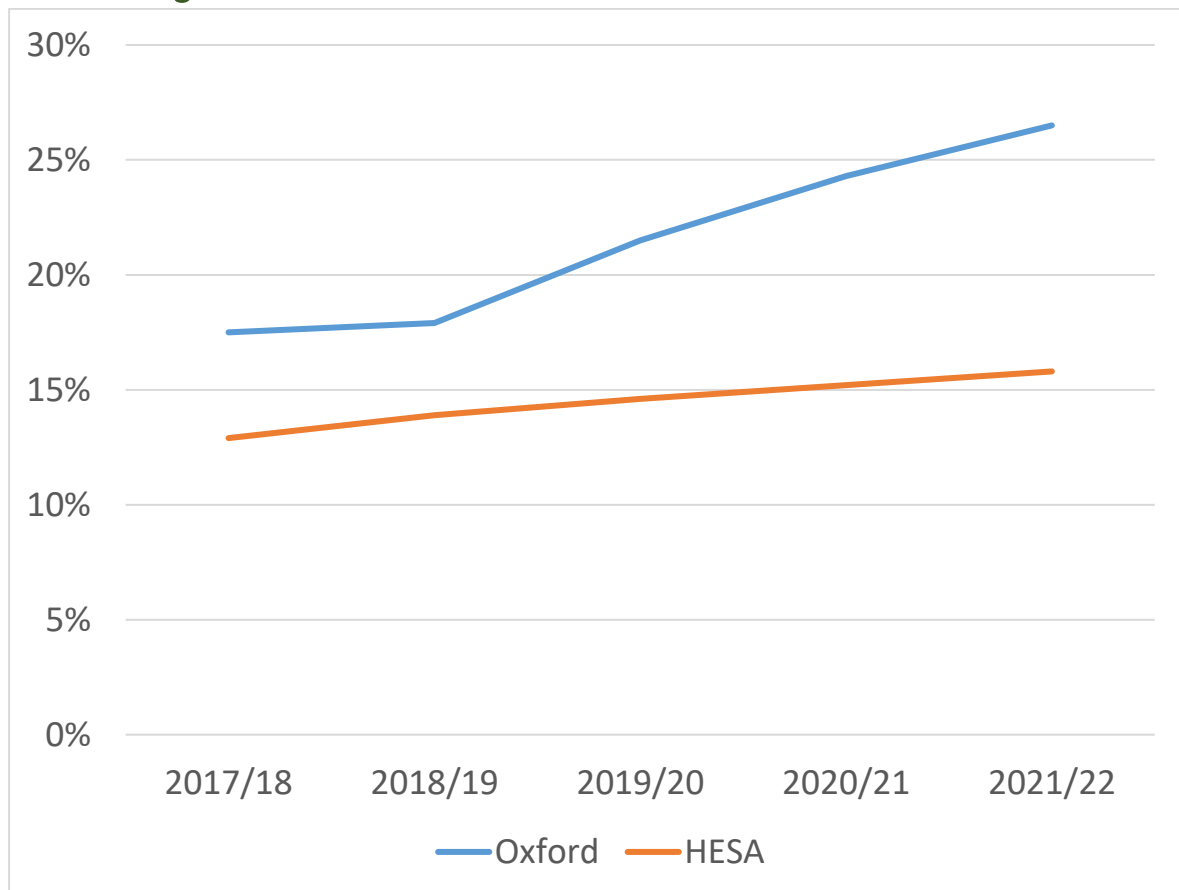
a) Disability type

4.3   There have been increases in declarations across all disability types, although DAS supports students with a broad range of complex needs who do not always fit neatly into categories for reporting purposes (e.g., those declaring multiple disabilities). 'No disability' can indicate a partial registration or that the student is in the process of obtaining disability evidence, and is not necessarily reflective of the level of individual casework undertaken.

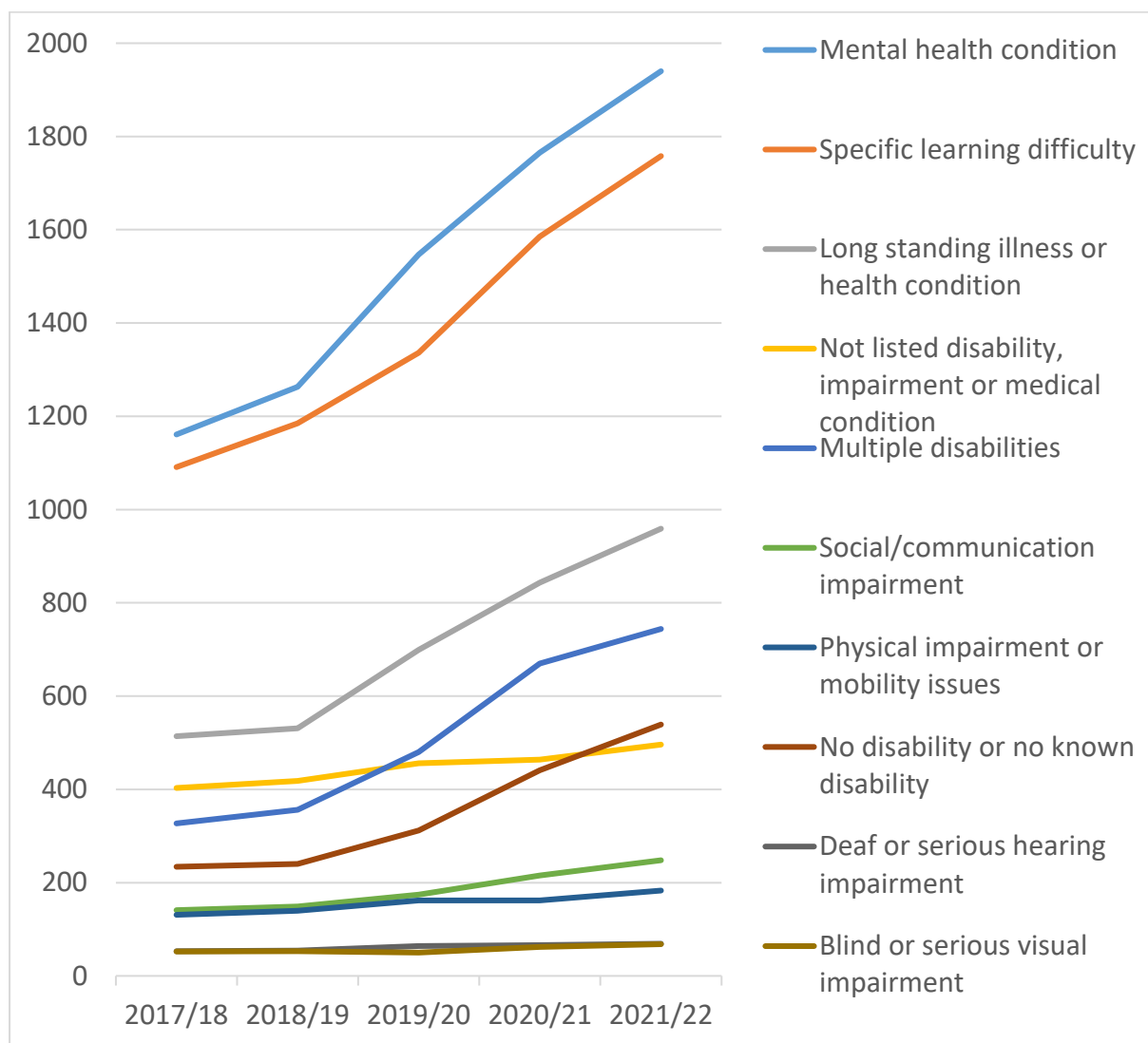Table 1. Oxford student declaration rates by disability type 2021/22

Disability	Student registered with DAS	%age of DAS registrations	Student disclosures on SITs	%age of SITS disclosures
Mental health condition	1,940	28%	1,270	5%
Blind or serious visual impairment	68	1%	53	0%
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	69	1%	52	0%
Long standing illness or health condition	959	14%	708	3%
Multiple disabilities	744	11%	560	2%
No disability or no known disability	539	8%	22,020	83%
Not listed disability, impairment or medical condition	496	7%	336	1%
Physical impairment or mobility issues	183	3%	116	0%
Social/communication impairment	248	4%	200	1%
Specific learning difficulty	1,758	25%	1,140	4%
Developmental condition	4	0%		0%
Grand Total	**7,008**	**100%**	**26,455**	**100%**

*N.B. **DAS Students** reported by disability in DAS CRM. **All Students** reported by disability in SITS.*

4.4   Students with long-term mental health conditions remain the highest proportion of DAS users, accounting for 28% of all students with a known disability and 5% of the total student population.

4.5   Students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) are the second largest group, making up 25% of all DAS registrations and 4% of all students at Oxford. SpLD is an umbrella term that includes dyslexia and dyspraxia, as well as attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder.

Chart 3. Disability type trends

Legend:
- Mental health condition
- Specific learning difficulty
- Long standing illness or health condition
- Not listed disability, impairment or medical condition
- Multiple disabilities
- Social/communication impairment
- Physical impairment or mobility issues
- No disability or no known disability
- Deaf or serious hearing impairment
- Blind or serious visual impairment

X-axis: 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22

b) Level of study

4.6   Disability declarations have been rising across the board, but overall DAS registrations are broadly representative of students studying at all levels. Undergraduate DAS registrations are slightly higher than for graduates undertaking taught or research degrees, and this might be attributable to the nature of teaching and assessment which often confers an increased likelihood for reasonable adjustments to be required.

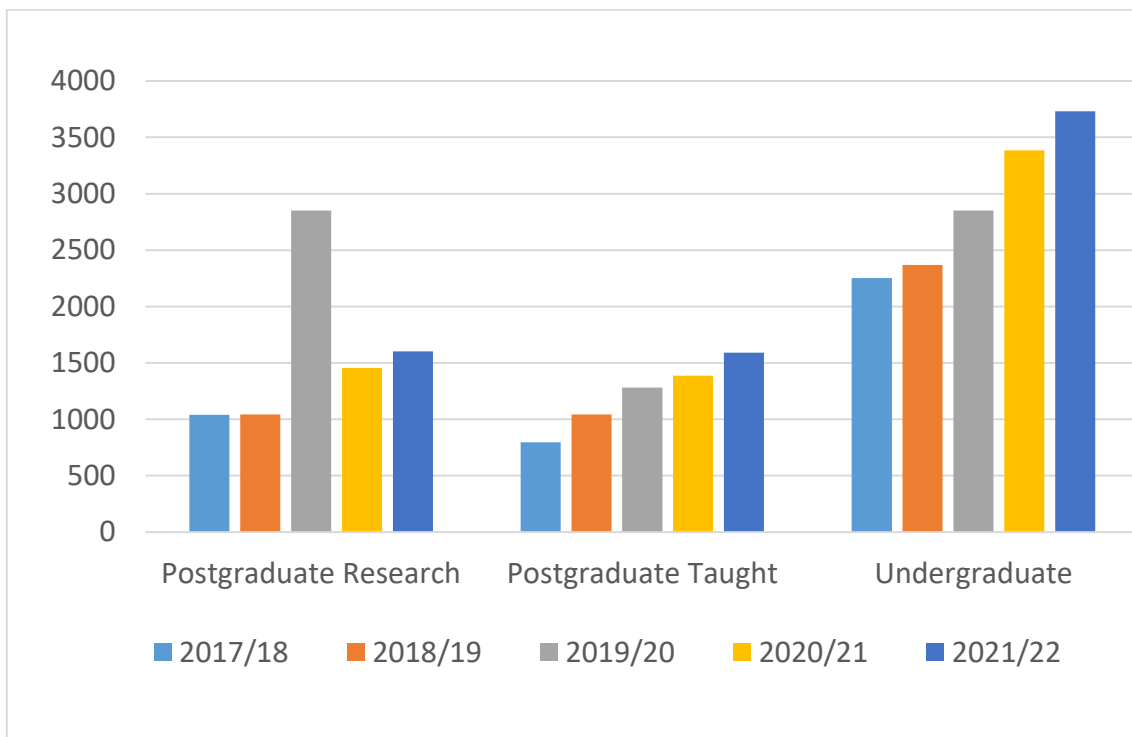## Chart 4. Annual DAS registrations by level of study

Chart showing annual DAS registrations by level of study (Postgraduate Research, Postgraduate Taught, Undergraduate) for years 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21, 2021/22.

Chart 5. 2021/22DAS registrations against student population by level of study

Chart showing 2021/22 DAS registrations against student population by level of study (Postgraduate Research, Postgraduate Taught, Undergraduate) with series DAS %, All Students %, DAS % of all students.
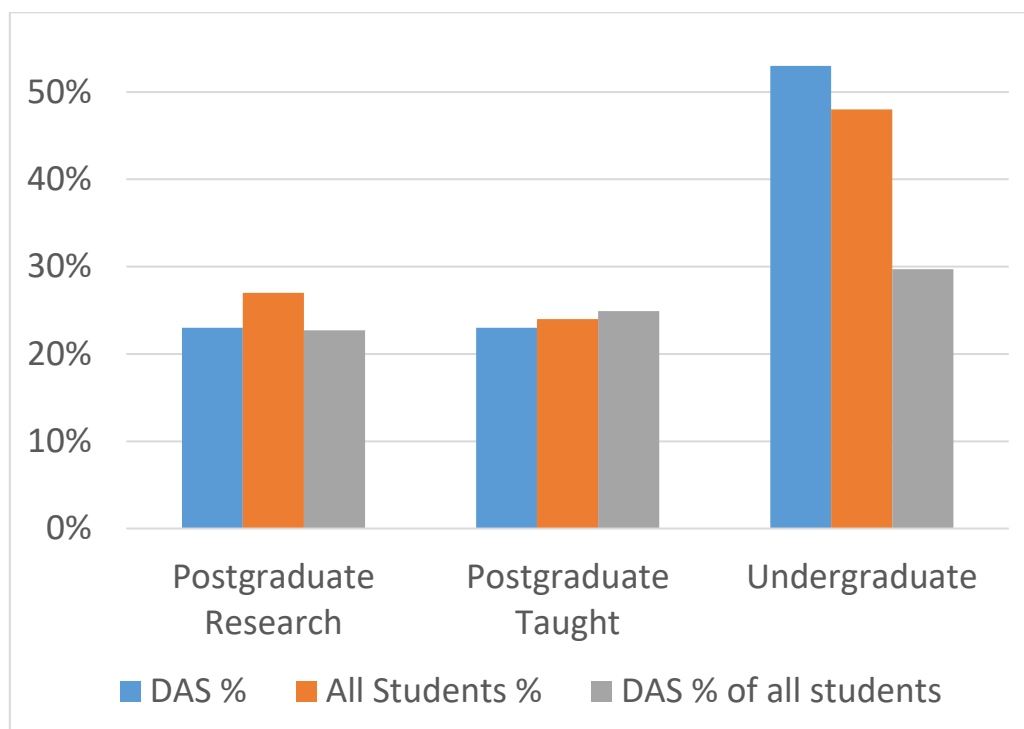
c) Students registered by division

4.7 Declaration rates rose across all academic divisions in 2021/22, with Humanities and Social Sciences containing the largest numbers of disabled students.

Chart 6. DAS registrations by division
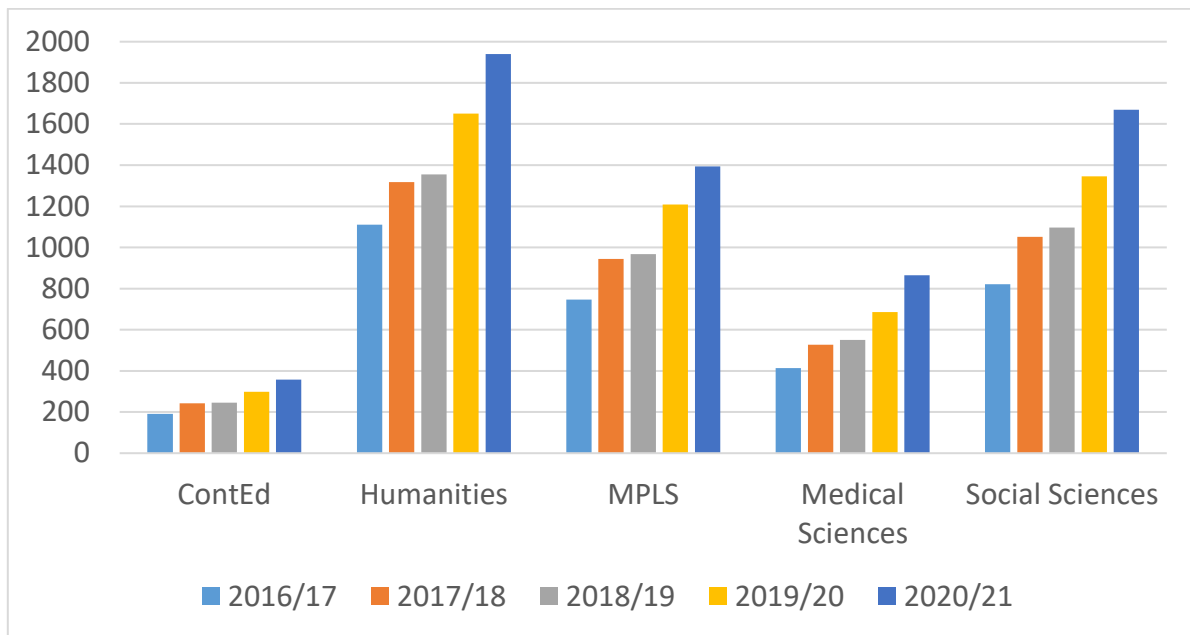
4.8 It remains the case that, except in the Humanities, undergraduates are most likely to declare a disability.

Chart 7. 2021/22 proportion of DAS registrations by division and level of study
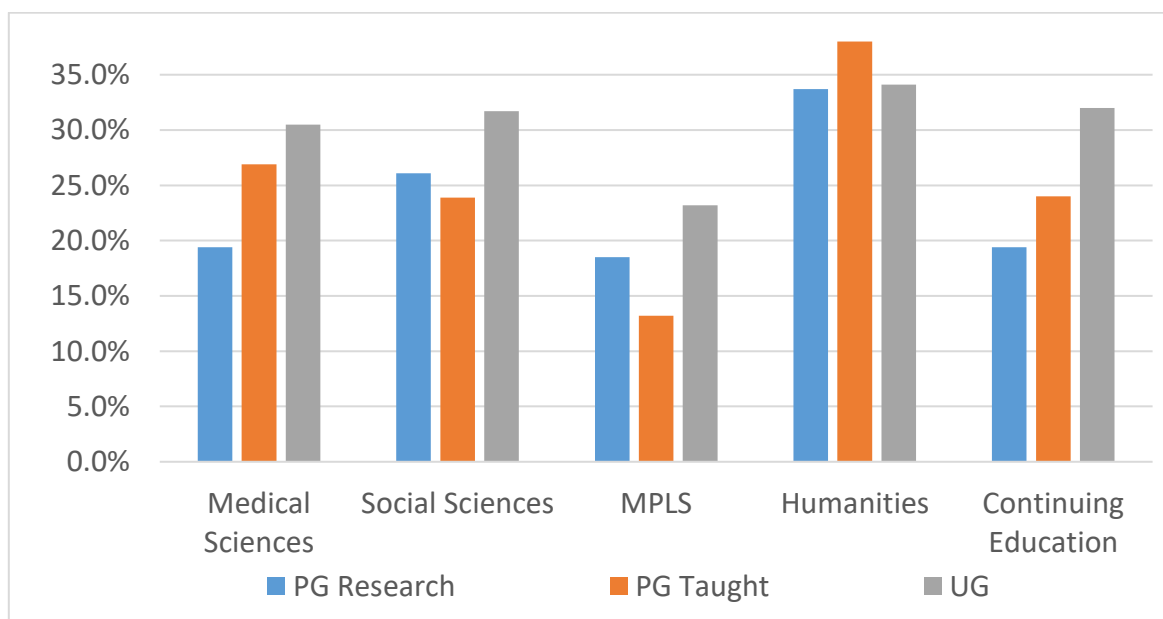
d) Ethnicity

4.9   White students are slightly over-represented amongst DAS users (68%) compared with the wider student population (62%). Students who declare their ethnicity as 'Asian' at registration (including those from China, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) remain relatively under-represented amongst DAS users

Chart 8. DAS registrations by ethnicity in 2021/22
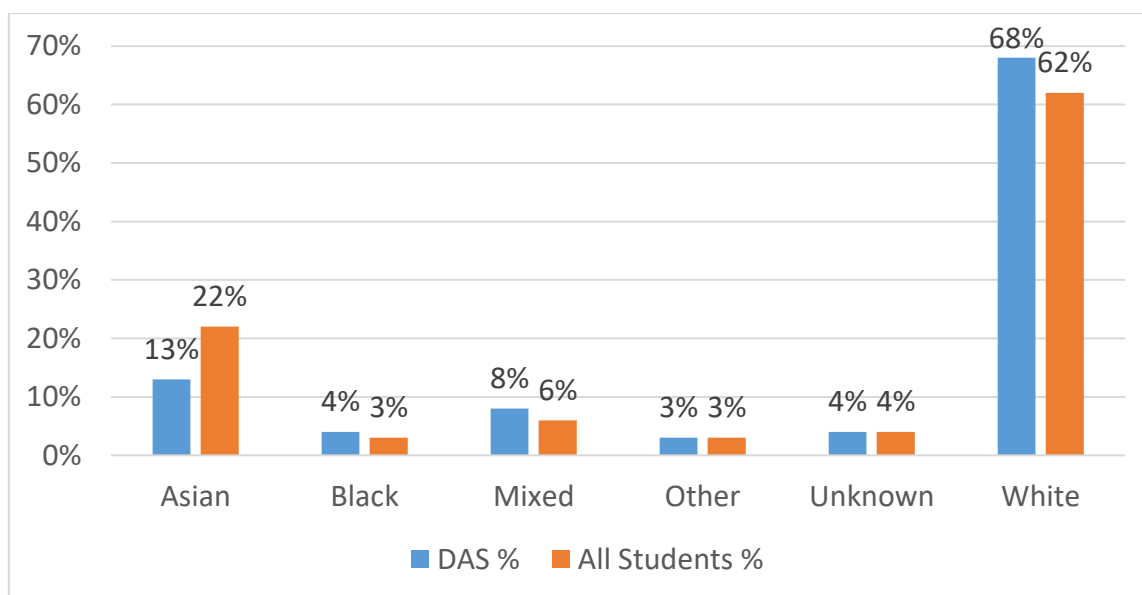
e) Gender

4.10   Female students are over-represented in DAS records, although compared to the national picture (57% Female, 43% Male according to HESA).

Chart 9. DAS registrations by legal sex

5.Student Support Plans

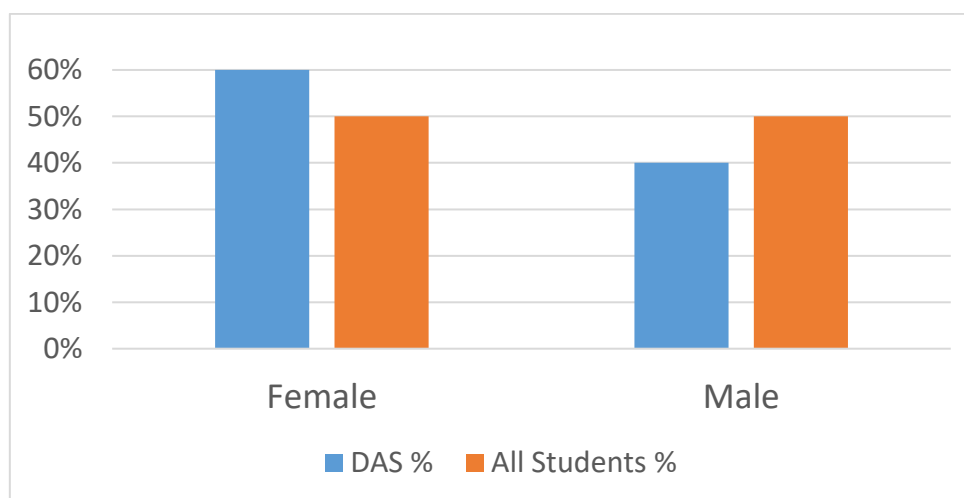5.1   Student Support Plans (SSP) provide a formal mechanism for communicating to the wider collegiate University that a student has provided evidence of a disability and what institutional adjustments are necessary. The SSP is a summary document that outlines the impact of a student's disability on a range of study activities and alerts staff in colleges and departments to other areas that they might need to consider to ensure disability-related study barriers can be proactively removed.

5.2   At the end of 2021/22 there were 4,535 individual SSPs in place, of which 1,389 were created during the 2021/22 academic year. This constitutes 64.7% of DAS users and 17% of the total Oxford student population.

Chart 10. Number of Student Support Plans (SSP) in place
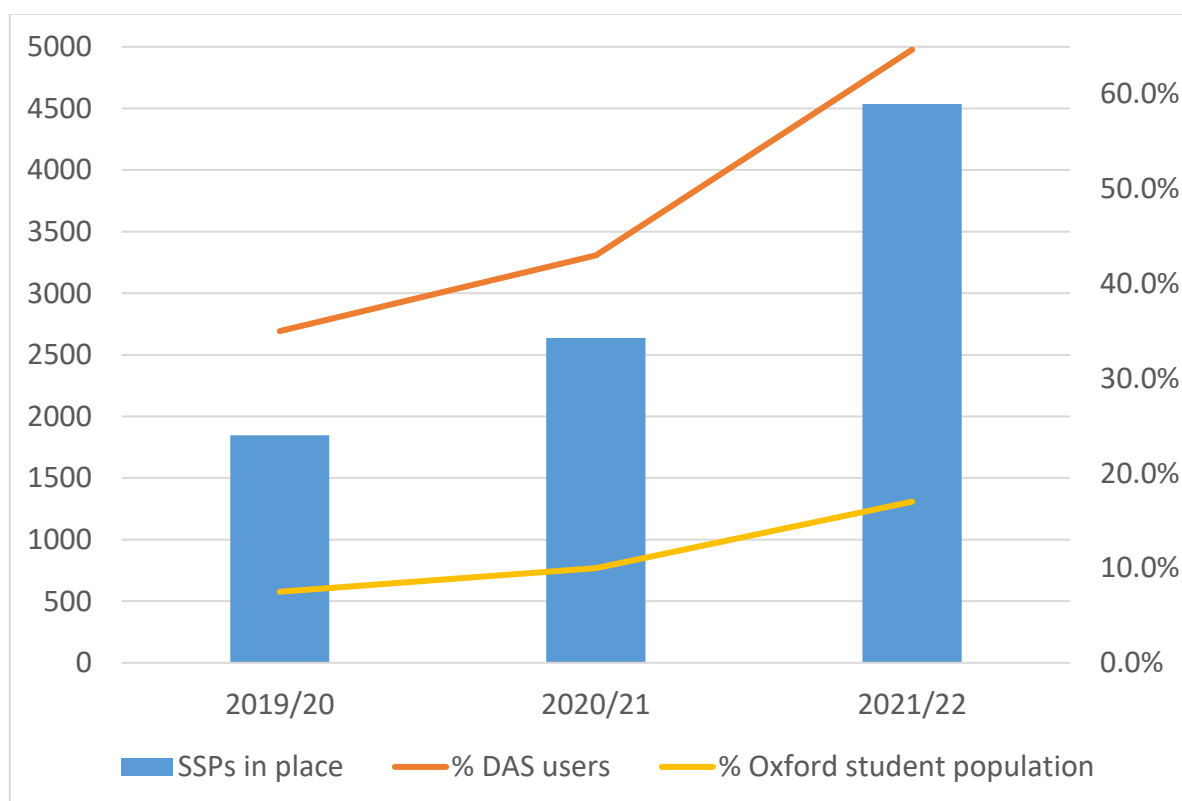
5.3   DAS works proactively with offer holders to implement SSPs as early as possible before they enrol or during their first term, but various factors make this difficult to achieve, including growing pressures on staff time and difficulties some students have with timely engagement (e.g. due to study, work or personal pressures, or the nature of their disability). However, it should be noted that there can be some value in waiting until a student has

arrived and had some on-course experience before assessing what reasonable adjustments will be required in the Oxford context.

5.4   Not every disabled student wants to register with DAS or to have an SSP, but the proportion of SSPs in circulation has been steadily growing. More widely available inclusive teaching practices (such as the provision of educational recordings) may reduce the need for students to register with DAS for the purposes of accessing commonly required teaching adjustments that can benefit all students.

6. Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)

6.1   Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) are government funds that can be used to contribute to the costs of disability-related study aids and support strategies. International (matriculated) students are ineligible for DSAs so the University provides equivalent support through an internal funding mechanism. This includes non-medical help (see section 7) and access to assistive technology and ergonomic furniture.

6.2   The proportion of students in receipt of DSA from their UK funding body marginally decreased in 2021/22. The number of international students accessing the University's equivalent fund was also down slightly, and might reflect the greater range of freely available assistive software and IT tools that do not require disability funding.

Table 2. Numbers of students claiming Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA)

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Students claiming DSA to fund support	1,096	1,266	1,548	1,972	1,911
International students with non-DSA funded support	304	332	594	1,544	1,304

6.3   The externally imposed regulatory framework for UK students does not apply to international students, allowing DAS greater flexibility in how it delivers this equivalent support funding and significantly accelerates the speed with which support can be delivered. However, there is an increased burden on DAS staff who undertake more of the work that is otherwise outsourced to assessment centres for UK students. This involves longer appointments, more

in-depth assessment work, report writing, generation of equipment quotes, etc, and impacts on wider response times.

7. Non-medical helper (NMH) provision

7.1   The term non-medical helper (NMH) refers to specialist and non-specialist human support workers. These services are sensitive to individual student need and therefore subject to unpredictable demand and supply variation.

7.2   It is becoming increasingly difficult for universities to recruit to a range of NMH roles, particularly for in-person provision, due to employment terms and conditions (including rates of pay) which are constrained by an external regulatory framework.

Non-specialist NMH support

7.3   Non-specialist NMH roles include notetakers, library support workers, laboratory assistants, autism study support workers, sighted-guides, caption editors, and examination scribes. These posts are typically filled by graduate students who are employed by DAS via the University's Temporary Staffing Service.

7.4   Universities are expected to provide and fund most non-specialist NMH or make appropriate alternative provision, for example, lecture recordings in place of notetakers, or access to assistive technology in examinations instead of a scribe.

Table 3. Non-specialist NMH provision

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Number of students supported	59	53	61	67	68
Proportion of overall DAS users	1.4%	1.2%	1.2%	1%	1%
Number of support hours delivered	-	2664	2628	1,701 (+ 3,660 caption editing hours)	2,295 (+ 2,367 caption editing hours)

7.5   The significant reduction in support hours delivered in 2020/21 reflects the rapid move to online teaching and greater availability of digital study materials during the Covid-19 pandemic.

7.6   In parallel, the sudden increase in the volume of educational recordings led to DAS establishing a new caption editing service in Hilary term 2021 due to concerns about the accuracy and utility of many of the machine-generated captions at that time. This new form of non-specialist NMH was a response to the University's educational planning requirements driven by the constraints of the covid-19 pandemic, with particular reference the [Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations](). Since the caption editing service's inception the quality of machine-generated captions has improved significantly. The University has also introduced a new [Educational Recording Policy]() with [associated guidance]() which promote greater awareness of other, more cost efficient, ways of improving the accessibility of lecture recordings, reducing the need for this service in 2021/22 compared with the previous academic year.

Specialist NMH support

7.7   Specialist NMH includes mentoring support for students with mental health disabilities or autism spectrum conditions, and one-to-one study skills tuition for students with SpLDs (specific learning difficulties). Some universities fully outsource both types of support. At Oxford mentoring is delivered partly in-house and partly out sourced, whilst SpLD tuition is delivered primarily in-house.

Table 4. Specialist NMH provision

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Students receiving in-house mentoring	**359**	**414**	**434**	**439**	**416**	**346**
Mentoring hours delivered	-	-	4445	5071	5220	3883
Average mentoring hours per student	-	-	*10.2*	*11.6*	*12.5*	*11.2*

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Students receiving in-house SpLD tuition	-	**259**	**260**	**261**	**362**	**462**
SpLD tuition hours delivered	-	-	1308	1660	2713	3196
Average SpLD tuition hours per student	-	-	*5*	*6.4*	*7.5*	*6.9*

7.8   The numbers of students receiving in-house specialist mentoring has reduced due to staffing and recruitment challenges associated with the current funding model and external regulatory framework. Since Hilary term 2020 DAS has partially outsourced some of its mentoring work to external third-party providers to ensure students who need support do not have to wait if there is no capacity to provide a timely in-house service. The University directly funded 306 hours of external mentoring for 53 international students in 2021/22, but there will be other UK students who have received DSA funded external mentoring that the University is not aware of.

7.9   Conversely, there has been a significant increase in the number of students accessing in-house SpLD study skills tuition over the last two years. To date DAS has been able to meet the demand by increasing its pool of freelance tutors.

8. Assessments

a) DSA Study Needs Assessments

8.1   The Oxford University Assessment Centre (OUAC) is accredited by the Department for Education (DfE) to provide the study needs assessments required to access Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funding. Assessment costs are reclaimed from the relevant funding body (e.g., Student Finance England). The Centre is open to any UK student who is eligible for DSA funding so it can be accessed by students from other universities as well as from Oxford.

8.2   Overall OUAC's study needs assessment numbers were steadily dropping before the pandemic. The move to online provision enabled OUAC to

undertake more assessments in 2020/21 because it became more accessible to students who would have otherwise needed to attend a centre more local to their home residence during the vacation periods. However, numbers were down again to 439 in 2021/22 (compared to 558 the previous year) and this might be due to increased competition from other newly established centres (locally and nationally).

Table 5. Study needs assessments

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
UK Oxford students	248	248	317	249	338	353
Oxford-funded international students	33	11	9	3	3	5
Students from other UK universities	298	297	174	212	217	81
Total	**579**	**556**	**500**	**464**	**558**	**439**

8.3   The number of Oxford-funded international students assessed by OUAC remains low following a change in process in 2017. In most instances Disability Advisors can now directly recommend study aids which reduces the need for the University to administer (and fund) an additional assessment with OUAC, and expedites the provision of support for this group of students.

8.4   More broadly OUAC continues to operate in a climate of uncertainty as the Department for Education (DfE) tenders for a new model of study needs assessment provision. This could ultimately mean the closure of many centres across the country and puts the future of OUAC in jeopardy. OUAC has been an important source of specialist knowledge for Student Welfare and Support Services (SWSS) since it opened in 2014. It has also been an important source of income generation, with a c.£78k surplus in 2021/22 (compared with £139k in the previous year).

b) Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) Diagnostic Assessments

8.5   The University requires students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) such as dyslexia and dyspraxia to provide evidence that that aligns with criteria agreed by the Department for Education (DfE) and the SpLD Assessment Standards Committee (SASC)[1]. Since there is no NHS pathway to obtaining an

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[1] https://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/media/1863/spld-diagnostic-assessment_march-2021-ssin.pdf

SpLD diagnosis in adulthood, the University contributes up to £400 for an assessment where it has established evidence of sufficient indicators and clear benefit to the student in facilitating reasonable adjustments to teaching and assessment.

8.6   Following a preliminary screening process, disability advisors may refer students for an assessment which can be organised in-house. Alternatively, students may arrange a private assessment independently and subsequently claim reimbursement up to £400.

8.7   If a student has an existing diagnostic report that only partially meets the University's SpLD assessment criteria, wherever possible DAS will undertake relevant top-up tests rather than organising a new full assessment. Since 2019 fewer top-up tests have been necessary because the University altered its SpLD diagnostic report criteria in line with new DfE regulations, which removed the requirement for assessments to be undertaken post-16 years of age. This has also accelerated the examination adjustment application process for a proportion of students.

Table 6. SpLD diagnostic assessments

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Full assessment	224	236	156	375	363
Top-up tests	39	32	4	12	4
Total	263	268	160	387	367
SpLD confirmed	97%	95%	92%	99%	97%

8.8   The initial increase in overall SpLD assessment numbers in 2020/21 was partly due to a backlog created by disruption during the pandemic; a six-month period when no assessments could take place nationally left a large number of students requiring an assessment once this work resumed from August 2020.

8.9   However, high SpLD assessment numbers have persisted and are largely attributable to an increase in students seeking an educational assessment due to concerns about attentional deficits. In in 2021/22 more than 37% of the assessments funded by DAS confirmed an SpLD profile of 'attentional deficits'[2].

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[2] Attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that can only be diagnosed by a suitably qualified medical practitioner or clinical psychologist. DAS does not fund medical assessments and NHS pathways for adult ADHD assessments are limited. An educational assessment may enable a student to access Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funding and institutional reasonable adjustments, but a medical diagnosis is necessary to access ADHD treatment such as prescription medication. Current disability data categories do not allow us to accurately report at a more granular level on the true number of ADHD diagnoses or SpLDs with attentional deficits.

This equates to 136 students and is up from 128 with attentional SpLDs in 2020/21, and only 28 students in 2018/19.

9. Examination Adjustments

9.1   Applications for examination adjustments for students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) are initiated by DAS, with an in-house diagnostic assessor reviewing and confirming the recommended arrangements from analysis of the individual's cognitive profile. Examination adjustment applications for students with other disabilities are started by the college with the Student Support Plan (SSP) used as supporting evidence. A new application is generated each time a student has a new diagnosis, a change in requirements, or if they transfer colleges or change course.

Table 7. New examination adjustment application for SpLD

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
332	332	344	361	495	473

Table 8. Total examination adjustment applications

Year	Examination adjustment applications submitted	% increase	Number of sittings with adjustments	% students with adjustments known to DAS
2021/22	1748	+11%	1545	91%
2020/21	1569	+26%*	1695	82%
2019/20	968	-22%	All exams took place online	84%
2018/19	1245	+6%	1364	74%

Compared with 2018/19 because exams in 2019/20 almost entirely took place remotely online.

9.2   Applications for examination adjustments are increasing overall and a growing proportion of these students are known to DAS. To date DAS have been considered an appropriate body to determine what assessment adjustments would be reasonable to accommodate the impact of a given disability. However, the increased volume of casework is challenging DAS's ability to produce timely and bespoke recommendations.

10. Service Evaluation

10.1　DAS conducts an annual student survey and in 2021/22 more than 5,000 students were invited to respond. Response rates were very low, with only 28 students completing the survey. It is not possible to make generalisations from the feedback of such a small group but 77% reported it was easy to access the service and speak to an advisor, and more than 64% found the DAS support arrangements helpful.

10.2　Oxford uses the [Student Barometer](#) to survey all full-time and part-time students (with some exclusions) each year. In 2021 the overall response rate was 10%, also down on previous years. Satisfaction with 'disability support' remained just under 93% satisfied, but satisfaction with DAS specifically was down to 73.6% (from 84.4% in 2020/21). This could reflect challenges to overall service response timeframes in the context of rising student numbers and high staff caseloads. However, the Student Barometer is limited as a measure of evaluation because some support provisions funded by Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) are delivered by third party agencies external to the University. Furthermore, the data may be skewed by students with no-declared disability responding to DAS-related questions, despite having potentially never accessed the service.

11. Staffing and Caseloads

11.1　DAS is staffed by: ten disability advisors (8.6FTE); seven administrative support staff (6.3FTE) including a Service Coordinator and two Oxford University Assessment Centre (OUAC) office staff; a deputy head of service who is also Head of OUAC; a Head of Service. Both the Deputy and Head of Service carry a small student caseload. In addition, two SpLD assessors and 12 SpLD tutors work for DAS, and a 0.5FTE mentor manager oversees the work of 19 specialist mentors.

Table 9. DAS staffing and student ratios

Year	Students	Advisor FTE carrying casework	Caseload per 1.0 FTE Advisor
2021-22	**7,008**	**8.8**	**796**
2020-21	6,273	8.4	747
2019-20	5,280	8.0	660
2018-19	4,387	8.0	548
2017-18	4,107	6.4	641

12. Forward View

12.1   In 2022/23 DAS will consult widely on a new service model that will address rising student registrations and operational pressures. It is envisaged that support pathways for students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) will be tailored towards a more streamlined and generalised approach for the majority of students who typically require broadly similar, core teaching and assessment adjustments. This will increase the Service's capacity to undertake more in-depth bespoke work with students who experience the highest degree of impact/impairment. The overall effect will be more timely and efficient services for all DAS users.

12.2   In conjunction, the Student Support Plan (SSP) review will identify and implement changes to the format, content, and processes followed to create it, enabling DAS to more effectively adapt its provision according to level of need.

12.3   Following a trial period in 2023/24 DAS will evaluate the new service and SSP models to determine whether they could be rolled out to other disability types.

12.4   Further planned work in 2022/23 includes the introduction of a new assistance dog policy for students following a period of consultation. DAS will also continue to actively contribute to relevant areas of work being undertaken by key partners in other central services, such as the review of the new Educational Recording Policy and the University's end-to-end assessment process review.

12.5   There is much to achieve but with a growing sense of momentum and more joined up cross-institutional working, Oxford continues to make important strides in respect of its firm commitment to providing an inclusive learning environment where disabled students thrive and flourish.