

Guide to Reasonable Adjustments and Student Support Documents

CUSU Disabled Students' Campaign

Introduction

As a disabled student - or a student with a long-term illness - you're often entitled to specific support arrangements to aid with your studies. This support is known as having **reasonable adjustments**, and it's a legal requirement for the University to put them in place for you.

This guide has come about in response to well-documented concerns from Cambridge students about their reasonable adjustments **not being implemented**.

We have seen situations where supervisors don't receive details of the support that particular students need, and have therefore been unable to adapt their teaching appropriately. There are some supervisors who have refused to implement the requested adjustments, or only choose to implement them according to their own interpretations of what the Student Support Document states.

We have heard of physically impaired students who have had to manually deliver their SSD to the libraries they use. In some of the most worrying cases, we have seen supervisors fail to implement a student's reasonable adjustments, but then directly criticise symptoms of the student's disabilities in their CamCORS reports - citing them as evidence of the student being disengaged with their studies.

CUSU's 2016 Big Cambridge Survey found that **less than half** of disabled students who responded felt that academic staff had always taken the necessary steps to make reasonable adjustments for them.

As the Disabled Students' Campaign, we recognise that there are deep structural issues affecting the proper implementation of academic support for disabled students at Cambridge, and we're working on changing them.

New supervisors receive **only a couple of hours of training**, and this usually only covers the basics of what a supervision is. None of this mandatory training addresses, for example:

- how to teach disabled students,
- how to ensure their particular needs are met,
- how to sensitively handle information,
- where and when to seek further support and advice.

This can lead to even very well-meaning supervisors **falling short of the requirements**, and failing to make adjustments for disabled students. As we said - less than half of the disabled students we surveyed reported that adequate reasonable adjustments had always been put in place for them.

It's clear that **more needs to be done** to empower students to **know and understand their rights**. This guide will take you through how reasonable adjustments work at Cambridge, how you can go about getting them, and crucially, **what to do if things go wrong**.

If at any point you'd like support with anything mentioned in this guide, please contact the Students' Unions' Advice Service, provided by CUSU and the GU. You're also welcome to get into contact with us for support - check out our website for resources and links to the online support groups we run: www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk.

CUSU Disabled Students' Campaign
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Reasonable Adjustments 101

What are reasonable adjustments?

Reasonable adjustments exist to remove any 'substantial disadvantage' a person experiences because of their disability or illness.

They take the form of changes to your living or learning environment, or to particular provisions, criteria or practices - so things like putting **automatic doors** at the entrance to your faculty building, providing **large print materials**, or allowing you to have **extra time** or **rest breaks** in exams.

Does this apply to me? Am I eligible?

In practice, the definition of 'disability' includes a wide range of conditions:

- **Mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and BPD**
- **Autism spectrum conditions**
- **Specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia or ADHD**
- **Physical impairments**
- **Long-standing conditions such as cancer, HIV, or diabetes**

It's important to remember that **you aren't required to self-define as disabled in order to access this support**. In fact, the DRC recognises the barriers to accessing support and openly encourages students with conditions such as mental health issues to access the service.

You might be entitled to this kind of help and support if you have an official diagnosis (or are able to get one). The support you are entitled to varies based on your personal needs, but the Disability Resource Centre will be able to advise on the kind of support you might be entitled to.

How do I access this support?

The way to access this support is via the Disability Resource Centre, which is often referred to simply as the 'DRC'. The DRC are the University service responsible for assessing students' individual needs and recommending reasonable adjustments - although that isn't the limit of their remit.

The first step is to make an appointment with an advisor (which can be done by telephone or via email). During this appointment the advisor will discuss with you your personal experiences and what kind of support you feel you would most benefit from in your studies.

After this discussion, your support requirements will be collated into either a Student Support Document (SSD) or a summary email, and forwarded on to the appropriate members of staff in your college so that your support can be implemented.

Get in touch with the DRC

www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk

Keynes House, 24a Trumpington Street, Cambridge, CB2 1QA

01223 332301 | disability@admin.cam.ac.uk

Get free, confidential, and impartial advice

www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk

Students' Unions' Advice Service, 17 Mill Lane, Cambridge, CB2 1RX

01223 746999 | advice@studentadvice.cam.ac.uk

What does 'reasonable' mean?

A large proportion of the concerns raised to us involve students feeling as if they have to **convince academic staff** to put their adjustments in place for them. Students can often **feel like they're being unreasonable** in asking for the support they're actually legally entitled to. That's why this section exists: they're called 'reasonable' adjustments, and yet so often they're portrayed as too much work to actually implement. **So how do we actually define reasonable?** What do you need to know?

Why's it called a 'reasonable adjustment'?

'Reasonable' refers to whether it can reasonably be considered appropriate for an organisation or institution - in this case the University or your College - to implement a change to support a disabled student. This can vary on things like the size and income of the institution in question, because the cost of implementing these changes falls on them.

In the majority of cases at Cambridge, most of the adjustments that medical professionals recommend **are deemed to be reasonable**. Some of the most expensive adjustments are still considered appropriate - for example, adding in automatic doors, or even installing lifts.

Remember, reasonable adjustments **exist to ensure equality of access** - if you aren't actually able to get into your faculty building, read your exam paper, or take good notes in your lectures, then you aren't able to access your studies!

Unless you can prove the adjustment is unreasonable, you have to implement it

University policy essentially states this, advising that if a member of academic staff feels that an adjustment is unreasonable, the matter will be reviewed by a University committee. **Otherwise, adjustments should be implemented.**

'It is the normal expectation that 'reasonable adjustments' to teaching recommended by the DRC through the SSD will be put in place [...] If, as a result of further discussion, the Faculty/Department is of the view that the recommended adjustments are not 'reasonable adjustments' then they should request that the matter be reviewed by the Education Committee.' (*Section 11, Code of Practice: Reasonable Adjustments for Disabled Students*)

It's legal to positively discriminate against disabled people

Despite the fact that a lot of discussion is had about not wanting to confer an '**unreasonable advantage**' to disabled students when putting in place adjustments for them, it's actually **completely legal to do so.**

With most characteristics the Equality Act covers, this is not allowed: but this deliberate allowance exists in recognition of the fact that disabled people need additional support to live on an equal basis as non-disabled people.

In fact, **it is probably better to risk this 'unreasonable advantage'** than to risk a disabled student not having access to the support they are deemed to need by medical professional.

Student Support Documents

So what's a Student Support Document?

The Student Support Document or SSD is a summary of recommendations on supporting and teaching a disabled student, e.g. in supervisions, lectures, practicals, and libraries. These recommendations are personalised to the student, their college, and their subject. These documents are specific to Cambridge, and are the University's main way of communicating support requirements to academic staff.

Not every student gets an SSD

Not every student the DRC sees will be given a Student Support Document. SSDs are usually given to students who require adjustments in multiple areas. When a student's recommendations are quite straightforward, they're often compiled into a summary email and sent out to the DoS.

How do SSDs get distributed?

The completed document is sent, with your consent, to your college, who are responsible for sending the recommendations around to relevant staff in your college or faculty. You will also be sent a copy.

FAQs - What do I do if...?

- **I'm worried about confidentiality**
- **I don't want diagnoses on my SSD**

When you disclose your disability to the DRC, you will be shown the Centre's confidentiality policy, and asked to complete and sign the confidentiality agreement. You can agree to give full or restricted disclosure, and choose who the information on your SSD is disclosed to.

If you're worried that there has been a breach of confidentiality, you should talk to your DoS and, if relevant, your course convenor. You might wish to go down the route of making a complaint - if so, the Students' Unions' Advice Service would be able to support you in this.

Some students have concerns about their diagnoses being present on their SSD. This can happen in the case of graduate students, as they are worried the document could be sent in full to their supervisor. If you're worried, talk to your disability advisor - you can ask for diagnoses to be removed.

The reason that diagnoses are usually included is to provide evidence for the reasonable adjustments. This is to anticipate any challenges to the recommendations, and to avoid any delays in their implementation, so you can have support in place as soon as possible.

- **My circumstances have changed and I want to update my SSD.**

People's needs change, and it's important that your SSD reflects your situation so that you're getting the appropriate support. Just contact your disability advisor at the DRC to ask them to update the SSD for you. They'll run the updated version by you in order to get your consent, before redistributing it through the appropriate channels.

- I'm worried my SSD hasn't been received or read.
- A member of staff isn't implementing my adjustments.
- I'm doing a large part of the work to make sure my needs are met.

Situations sometimes arise where your reasonable adjustments haven't been put in place. This could happen for several reasons, but can be because your SSD hasn't been forwarded to the right people, or hasn't been read or properly followed. Where this happens, students can feel that the responsibility falls on them to chase things up, but this isn't the case.

If the agreed system for sharing Student Support Documents is working as intended, **you shouldn't need to personally inform anyone about your disability or personal needs**, or self-advocate to have your support implemented.

University policy states that **your college is ultimately responsible for ensuring that your support requirements are put in place** on both a college and departmental level. Your DoS and tutor are the members of staff responsible for this on behalf of the college, and they're the people you should talk to in order to chase up any issues:

'The College, acting through the Tutor or Director of Studies, is also responsible for supporting the student by keeping a watching brief and monitoring that the reasonable adjustments to both departmental and College provision have been made.' (*Section 9, Code of Practice: Reasonable Adjustments for Disabled Students*)

Policy also states that **it is expected that reasonable adjustments will be put in place**, unless a good reason can be given as to why they aren't appropriate:

'It is the normal expectation that 'reasonable adjustments' to teaching recommended by the DRC through the SSD will be put in place [...] If, as a result of further discussion, the Faculty/Department is of the view that the recommended adjustments are not 'reasonable adjustments' then they should request that the matter be reviewed by the Education Committee.' (*Section 11, Code of Practice: Reasonable Adjustments for Disabled Students*)

- **Despite my adjustments, I'm struggling.**
- **I'd like to review the support I get.**

The University's policy on reasonable adjustments provides an outline of what to do in situations where a student's adjustments aren't doing enough to alleviate the disadvantage they experience because of their disability.

If you're in this situation, **your DoS or tutor are the people to speak to** in order to review your support. It may be the case that it hasn't been properly implemented, or it could be the case that the Disability Resource Centre need to be involved.

'Implementation of adjustments and their effectiveness will be monitored by the College Tutor (or Director of Studies) in discussion with the student.' (*Section 11, Code of Practice: Reasonable Adjustments for Disabled Students*)

Resources

CUSU Disabled Students' Campaign

facebook.com/CUSUdisabledstudents

twitter.com/CUSU_Disabled

www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk

Contact the Disabled Students' Officer:

disabled@cusu.cam.ac.uk

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