

A City Students' Union report to understand and improve the Disabled Student Experience at City, University of London 2020

Introduction

In the 2019-2020 academic year, City Students' Union undertook research to understand and improve the disabled student experience at City, University of London. The research was enabled through City, University of London's Access and Participation Plan funding and the aims and methods were agreed in collaboration with University colleagues.

To support the research, in May 2020, City Students' Union set up an Access and Participation Plan (APP) Disabled Students Project Working Group.

The aims of the group were to:

- a) Understand the barriers to disclosing a disability
- b) Understand the benefits students perceive and experience from disclosing a disability
- c) Feedback on the process and policies at City, with specific focus on:
 - I. Lecture capture
 - II. Moving to online learning due to Covid-19

The Working Group took the following action:

- a. Conduct a survey targeted at Disabled Students
- b. Interview students who completed the survey
- c. Report findings from the survey and interviews
- d. Use the findings to inform planning for 2020/21

Based on the above, the report recommended the following:

Assessment

- On a course-by-course basis, Schools should investigate the possibility of a more varied set of assessment types.
- Schools should ensure that students are able to access past examples of assessment, and that these can be provided in alternative formats if necessary.

Community/Network

- For the Union to create an accessible and supportive community/ network that strengthens the voice of disabled students' voice and power as a group at the University
- The community/network should provide the opportunity for its members to engage in the following kinds of activities: Socialising, workshops, guidance on City policy, mutual support groups (Forums), Peer-to-peer mentoring, peer support groups, informal meetings, support network, awareness days, Day time social events, Social events, a group chat.

Course Materials

- For all Schools to review materials such as course handbooks to make sure that they are accessible and easy to understand.
Create departmental guidelines on the use of PowerPoint, handouts and online materials.

Lecture Capture

- For the University to increase the coverage of Lecture Capture and/ or establish as part of the culture the expectation that some support for each lecture will be

available online before and after the lecture.

Moodle

All courses should ensure they are using Moodle; the University should ensure the all academics are trained to use its features to their greatest effectiveness. Disabled students should be given support to ensure they can make use of assistive technologies and software and maximise their use of Moodle and electronic handouts.

Seminars, lectures and tutorials

- Academics should make the structure of learning sessions accessible and clear to students, perhaps in visual form (on a slide, or in a handout, or on the board); recap from time to time (and at the end), and mark transition points clearly.
- Academics should make it clear to students how they will be expected to engage with lectures and the methods by which they would be expected to learn. It should be made explicit whether students are expected to take notes, listen, or refer to textbooks or work from handouts or other supplementary materials.
- Any teaching session should be accessible to varied learning styles, meaning students should be given work in writing, reading, speaking, and listening forms, as well as be offered the chance to study in large group, small group, and individual exercises, as well as in long and short attention-span modes. Some disabled students reported finding it very difficult to make any contribution to a seminar (either with students or with the lecturer), whilst others will wish to compensate for their anxiety about their written work by engaging fully in class discussion.

Research

The Disabled Student Survey was open between 25 May and 7 June 2020 and consisted of 9 questions including personal detail questions. The questionnaire was circulated by a dedicated email to all students and reminders were sent during the survey period

Information about the survey was posted on the Union's social media platforms. The survey was promoted twice in the Union's weekly all-student newsletter. The final response rate was disappointing: just over 50 students completed all questions. A total of 99 students initiated the survey, of whom a number answered no to having disability, specific learning difference or long-term health condition, and therefore were restricted from answering the majority of the questions. The Access and Participation Plan (APP) Disabled Students Project Working Group had set a target of 150 students to complete the survey. Because the response rate was low, the results could not be considered to be representative of all disabled students at City. However, the results did provide a 'snapshot' into the experience of disabled students at City.

Once the survey period was completed, fifteen 30-minute interviews were conducted with surveyed students via Microsoft Teams between 15-19 June 2020. Interviews were set up to further understand the student experience and gain more detailed feedback on specific questions within the research. Interviewees were chosen from survey respondents who provided their details and indicated an interest in being interviewed at the end of the survey.

Key Findings - Survey

The survey focussed on two key areas: accessing supporting services and the academic experience. Key findings can be found below.

Accessing supporting services

This section was used to understand the background of the respondent and their experience of support services on offer at City, University of London.

In this section we found: (69%) of respondents considered themselves affected by a disability, specific learning difference or long-term health condition; of the 10 options to choose from, (41%) of respondents said they would describe their disability as Mental-Health related and the most frequently accessed services by respondents were Mental Health and Counselling, Disability Support (Learning Success), Extenuating Circumstances, Academic Learning Support, and Neurodiversity Support team.

Respondents were asked if they strongly agreed, agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with six questions relating to City's Support Services. The responses to the statements were very positive. Respondents most strongly agreed that "I found my initial meeting with disability support useful" (40%). Respondents most agreed (44%), but also most disagreed (19%) that "I found it easy to find out about the different support services on offer at City". However, most disagreed (19%) that "I found it easy to find out about the different support services on offer at City".

Your Academic Experience

This section focused on City students' academic experience with regard but not limited to: Lecture capture and exams, Moodle (Virtual Learning Environments)

In this section we found 95% of 58 respondents agreed that their disability, specific learning difference, or long-term health condition had had either a major, medium, or little impact on their studies. 53% of 58 respondents said they had considered withdrawing from their studies due to their disability, learning difference, or condition.

Students were asked to rank seven areas/ resources on a scale of 1-10 (1 most difficult, 10 least difficult) for the difficulty they experienced for each as a result of their disability. Following lectures, completing exams, and contributing to class discussions scored the highest.

With regard to adjustments, 16% of respondents received extra equipment or resources and 12% recorded classes via lecture capture or were referred to another service each. 12.8% used an unlisted adjustment, 12% used none at all, and 12% had problems which were not resolved. This amounts to 36% of responses either not using any of the listed means or receiving no adjustment to resolve their problems whatsoever. When considering also that only a single respondent's subject content was modified as an adjustment and 0% of respondents received course material in a different format, this data is suggestive of a significant gap in disability support provision on the part of the university.

On Moodle, responses suggest that Moodle and other Virtual Learning Environments were not considered generally difficult for use amongst disabled students, elements of VLEs may still be improved upon for usability because respondents described having most difficulty with navigating the platform and its functions e.g. Live online discussion/online chat, the user interface and chat forums.

Feedback on Lecture Capture and the experience of disabled students was a key research goal set by the APP Project funding panel. To understand the experience five questions were included in the survey. A number of negative comments about Lecture Capture were

provided. A common theme is that in some areas of the University, Lecture Capture is non-existent, not used enough, or inconsistent in quality.

36 of 52 respondents (6%) answered that they had experienced some form of Lecture Capture. 10 respondents (19%) had never experienced it. Most concerning was that “Never” was the third highest response and that “some of my lectures” was the highest response. This was suggestive that there remains a significant gap in coverage in lecture capture between courses which commit to it and supply it regularly and consistently and courses which supply it irregularly or never supply it at all.

Perhaps surprisingly, only 16% of respondents used lecture capture “as a support tool for my disability, specific learning difference or long-term health condition”.

Also noted in the survey was that only 46% of respondents had indicated that they experienced lecture capture either irregularly (“some of my lectures”) or not at all (“never”), it is not surprising that a significant negative response was had, with 56% of respondents ranking their satisfaction from 0-4, and 20% marking their satisfaction at zero. That the two highest-scoring categories were 0 and 10 underlined the radical difference between courses which commit to and regularly supply lecture capture and those which do not.

When looking at the student experience of exams and adjustments, 35 of 51 respondents (**68.6%**) had received adjustment. 14 respondents (**27.5%**) had not and overall the experience and feedback from respondents was positive.

Feedback regarding course management was less positive. Students were asked to rank five areas (Quality of course documentation, pace of course, quality of feedback received, timeliness of timetable, and ease of use of timetable) from 0-5 with 0 being very poor, 1 being poor, 2-3 being adequate, 4 being fair and 5 being Good.

‘Quality of documentation’, was scored 5 by 11 respondents. 15 respondents scored ‘Timeliness of table’ a 4. ‘Ease of use of timetable’ was scored 3 by 16 respondents and was also rated 0 the most (5 times). ‘Quality of feedback’ was the area of least satisfaction and received 14 scores of 1 and lower. ‘Quality of course documentation’ was the area of highest satisfaction and received 24 scores of 4 and higher.

Issues with timetables are recurrent across the whole student body, with frequent complaints about long gaps between teaching hours, inadequate time between teaching hours to travel from class to class, and teaching hours which are inconsiderate of student commuting needs, such as teaching hours scheduled for only a single hour in a day, necessitating a long commute for negligible contact. Results in this survey confirm that disabled students are in accord with the student body at large in this area.

Similarly, disabled students’ dissatisfaction with feedback quality and satisfaction with quality of documentation tracks the same feeling in the whole student body as well.

In the final question, students were asked ‘how could staff for your course improve the student experience for students with disabilities?’ Respondents’ comments grouped into the following themes.

- Increased understanding of disability amongst staff
- Improved communication of the support available to students
- Better use of Lecture Capture
- Improved teaching
- Additional resources for help

- Positive staff support
- Adapting course content for students with disabilities
- Pace of lecture and seminar
- Improved Learning Resources

The last section of the survey was used to find out how connected students feel to life at City. When asked whether 'I feel part of a community at City', 22 respondents either strongly agreed or agreed and 22 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. 8 respondents neither agreed or disagreed with the statement. This result suggests a highly divisive or exclusive sense of community at City, with students feeling either included or excluded with little middle ground. Further, 25 respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that a specific disabled student community should exist at City. 7 respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed. 20 respondents neither agreed or disagreed.

Key Findings - Interviews

Following the close of the survey, 15 interviews were conducted with consenting students. Students were asked 16 questions based on the questions in the survey, areas not covered by the survey, and the terms of reference of the work. The final question set was divided into the following areas: overall experience, community/network, experience of discrimination. Students were able to ask questions to their interviewers as well.

Overall, interviewees were positive about the study experience at City and also positive about their overall experience, but several respondents did acknowledge they would like to see more socially-drive activity.

Students were asked what the main challenges of being a student with disabilities/disabled student at City were. The six responses received can be grouped into 6 themes: Accessing DSA/Support (5 Responses), Completing work (5 Responses), Mental health and wellbeing (4 Responses), Lecture Capture and resources (4 Responses), Lecturer conduct (3 Responses), and Mobility and campus accessibility (2 Responses). One interviewee commented "Key challenges: Navigating the 3-way split between support services. The Union are aware that the University are aware of the difficulty students have in accessing the 3-way split service and are currently undertaking a project to make it more accessible for students

Over half the interviewees described their experience of community as positive, 6 (nearly a quarter) of interviewees described their experience of community as a negative one. The majority of interviewees said they would like the Union to provide the opportunity for students with disabilities to communicate with one another. Two key themes emerged as to why this opportunity should be provided, for experience/sharing support and for socialising. However, two interviewees asked for there to be caution shown when providing this opportunity.

Interviewees were asked to rate how well they thought disability was understood at City from 1-5, 1 being very poor and 5 being excellent and overall rated it positively. And when asked "if there were any positive experiences of support you would like to tell us about", respondents were most positive about Student support services, Mentor/Tutor, Assessment support, Lecturers/course and the Students' Union. City support services were responded to very positively. This result correlates with findings in the survey where students strongly agreed with the statement "I found my initial meeting with disability support useful".

To end the interview, Interviewees were asked “If you could change one thing at City for Disabled Students, what would it be?” responses to this question were mixed but can be grouped under three categories: to improve disability support, better information and communication and more championing of disability and the community of disabled students.

The Union will use the recommendations above to shape support and activity going forward with clear links to the 2019-2022 strategy and University’s APP work and devise a plan for a Disabled Students Network to launch in term 1, 2021.