

Project 5: Extended Period of Leave ('Double Time')

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	
	Disability/Mental Health student	✓
Topic <i>The broad educational point that impacts student performance/ attainment gaps</i>	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	✓
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
	Other?	
Specific research question	What is the perceived value of 'Double Time' to disabled students with mental health conditions?	
Student co-researchers	Kerensa Gaunt, undergraduate student	

2. Executive summary: Please provide a summary of the small research project – aims, methods, findings (max 250 words)
<p>The project investigated student perceptions of whether availability of Extension to Period of Study (EPS), known colloquially at Cambridge as 'Double Time', affects continuation rates, attainment and well-being in disabled students with mental health conditions who are studying at the University of Cambridge. Qualitative data was obtained via written interviews with APP PAR co-researchers, and via open questions in an online survey that was circulated to students registered with the university Disability Resource Centre. The project found that the perceived effect of EPS availability on disabled students was overwhelmingly positive, but that many students considered the current implementation of both intermission and EPS to have a partially negative effect. We therefore recommend that awareness of EPS as an option is raised among staff (via training) and students (via online resources and via staff), and that small changes be made to the implementation of intermission and EPS to better support student well-being.</p>

3. Rationale: Please provide the background context which provided the impetus for the choice of research question
<p>The main researcher of this sub-project has been the student union representative for part time undergraduate students for two years (2018-2020), and has therefore had much experience advising students who experience barriers to participation in Cambridge, particularly due to chronic health (including mental illness).</p> <p>Co-researchers noted that students with long-term health problems were usually offered either full time study (100% rate) or intermission (0% rate), and neither staff nor students were usually aware of 'Double Time': a student-facing term for the Alternative Mode of Assessment 'Extension to Period of Study', where students may continue their studies at a reduced rate, for example 50%.</p>

While intermission is often appropriate for those with short-term barriers to study, such as an acute illness or family concerns that are expected to resolve, it is not always appropriate for those with long-term barriers. Chronic health problems, notably, are not expected to 'get better', and usual advice is not to 'recover', but to gain a sense of stability and learn to manage the condition alongside studies. Accessing EPS, therefore, could be better for individual disabled students' well-being than switching between 100% and 0% rate of study

A review was conducted into the guiding policy literature across the sector on extensions to periods of study and opportunities to shift to part time (see below), this included exploring the practices at competing universities.

However, the distinctive systems, practices and structures of this university necessitate context-specific research into the practicalities, constraints and opportunities of Extended Period of Study in the Cambridge context.

Early in the project it was determined that the following sub-questions needed to be answered:

- Whether or not there is an awareness of EPS among Disabled students at Cambridge?
- Whether disabled students perceive that EPS would benefit or impede their academic progress?
- How and why EPS might impact on academic progress or attainment?

4. Existing evidence

Relevant Research

An initial review into the literature indicates that there is a real dearth in research into this area (*i.e.* the impact, importance and issues relating to extended periods of study for disabled students in Higher Education). However, similar topics provide evidence for the necessity and value of this focus. The Open University conducted research investigating the challenges, experiences and opportunities of part time study in the UK emphasising the importance of researching this topic given the "extent to which the experience of part-time higher education contributes to social mobility and widening participation" (The Higher Education Academy 2015, p.5). Their research received 1567 responses to a 25 Question online survey and they also conducted 22 semi-structured one-to-one interviews. They received important insight into understanding what difference part time study makes to people's lives and emphasised that issues around the impact of disability and long term health conditions figured strongly in the survey responses (22% reported learning choices being affected by persistent health issues: especially "coping with mental health problems, being on medication, managing hospital appointments, being housebound or facing deteriorating mobility issues were all reported"). They explain that their research corroborates the findings from a Welsh study (Butcher & Rose-Adams, 2015) emphasising the relevance of more flexible study periods to students with long term conditions: "***for students in such circumstances, part-time higher education is a lifeline and should be even more accessible, rather than its availability being under threat***" (The Higher Education Academy 2015, p.5).

Context Across the Sector

A scoping review was conducted to explore the policies and practices around extending periods of studies at competing universities. Below we include examples of practice at competing universities.

- ❑ **Durham University:** Durham considers applications for part-time study from students “whose personal circumstances preclude them from undertaking full-time study (such as in cases of ill-health, for example)” ([Durham University Website](#)).
- ❑ **University of Edinburgh:** A student must seek permission from their Head of School to switch to part time (full details on Pages 7 and 8 of [this document](#)).
- ❑ **University of Exeter:** Part time is offered as an option in the ‘[Flexible study](#)’ offered at enrolment.
- ❑ **University of Oxford:** Rather than intermission, students are allowed to suspend their studies ([around 1000 do every year](#)) and they have a [large campaign](#) specifically related to suspension, reintegration, retention, wellbeing and performance . The Vice Chancellor of Oxford has shown specific concern for the [treatment and wellbeing of students](#) who suspend their studies.

Relevant Policy

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has specific advice and guidance relating to enabling student achievement. This guidance places particular emphasis on “Clear, accessible and inclusive policies and procedures to enable students and staff to identify when support mechanisms may be required for academic and personal progression” (QAA, 2018/2019, p.3) as well as “Clear, consistent and accessible communication about opportunities and support available to students from pre-entry through to completion and beyond” (QAA, 2018/2019, p.3).

The guidance specifically highlights the value of regularly checking that policies impact students, especially those with protected characteristics (such as disability). Each policy is clearly linked to appropriate procedures to facilitate seamless identification of, and access to, any academic or other student support needs. The impact of current and proposed policies and procedures on students with protected characteristics is consistently assessed to identify and mitigate barriers to student development and achievement". (QAA, 2018/2019, p.3)

5. Generation of evidence

Digital form filled in by students registered at DRC (short, quantitative)

- Digital form to reduce confidentiality concerns
- Answers given on a scale rather than free text for ease of analysis
- Respondents who completed this section: 73
 - Varies from 71 to 73 depending on question

Digital form filled in by co-researchers (interview style, qualitative)

- Digital form to allow co-researchers to reflect on their answers without time pressure
- Status as a student rep and as a co-researcher allowed for a level of trust and honesty in responses that staff-led surveys would not be able to achieve

6. Small project research findings

Quantitative data (short survey)

Respondents were given brief information about **Extension to Period of Study ('Double Time')**. 51% had been previously (very) aware of 'DT', and **47% (very) unaware of 'DT'**. Considering that disabled students are the most relevant group for this mode of study, and that those engaged with disability

provision are more likely to know about the options available to them, it is likely that general student awareness of 'DT' is significantly lower than in this small sample, which **could currently reduce the likelihood of informed decision making in the wider student body.**

Respondents, having been briefly informed about EPS ('DT'), **broadly perceived there to be no unfair advantage for those studying 'DT'**: 86% 'no', 14% 'maybe', 0% 'yes'

Respondents broadly perceived there to be a **positive effect on disabled students' wellbeing if 'DT' were an option**: 88% (strongly) positive, 1% (strongly) negative

57% had considered intermission due to chronic health problems, and 43% had not. Since many chronic health problems require long-term stability in order to learn to cope with the condition, it is disappointing that while over half of respondents had considered intermission (that is, switching between 100% and 0% rate of study), it is likely that many had not been aware of the possibility of for example 50% rate of study via EPS, which may have been more appropriate for them in learning to manage their condition long term. Despite the small sample size here, this data indicates that **it is likely that some students have considered intermission despite this not necessarily being the appropriate choice for their specific health needs.**

Were 'DT' an option, 56% of respondents considered themselves unlikely or less unlikely to consider intermission due to chronic health problems (32% neutral, 12% likely or more likely). If this trend is representative for the wider body of disabled students, **this suggests that wider knowledge of 'DT' would be relevant for perhaps half of potential intermissions due to chronic health.** Notably, this would not necessarily affect those intermitting for other reasons, such as acute illness or bereavement, which may have the possibility of 'recovery' to 100% capacity and where intermission is likely appropriate.

Were 'DT' an option, 70% of respondents considered themselves likely or more likely to be able to finish their degree (27% neutral, 3% unlikely or less likely). The trend from this small sample indicates that **increased awareness of EPS ('DT') could have a positive effect on the completion rates of many disabled students.** Notably almost a third of respondents were 'neutral', suggesting that awareness of 'DT' would not have any significant effect on some students, and only 2% (1 respondent) considered that it would be negative for their degree completion. **This suggests that increased awareness of 'DT' may have relatively low risk and high potential benefit** within the wider student body, allowing students to make informed decisions about their health and education.

Similarly, 73% of respondents felt that studying 'DT' could have a (strongly) positive effect on their own ability to fulfill their academic potential (21% neutral, 7% negative). Though not necessarily representative of the wider student body, this data suggests strong trends that merit further research and consideration.

Qualitative data (interview style)

Content note: disability discrimination, intermission with abusive family, destitution, sex work

Interviewees described offering EPS ('DT') as **enabling students with disabilities to continue with and finish their degree** in a way that only offering intermission ('disregarding terms') does not. In particular, interviewees mentioned disabled students who were not offered EPS and who intermitted for several years or did not return to their studies, who could have likely continued to study had EPS been offered to them.

Some interviewees described the **EPS application process** as **prohibitively long** (6+ months, sometimes ending in unnecessary intermission), as not transparent for the applicant.

Interviewees described **awareness of EPS as non-existent**, or as found out about only once it was too late. It was described as 'hidden', and as not mentioned on relevant DRC, faculty or college websites.

All interview participants had considered both EPS and intermission, or would have considered both had they known about EPS. 2 participants mentioned **offering only intermission as particularly inappropriate for disabled students who do not have a safe home environment to return to**. One participant mentioned disabled intermitting students as particularly vulnerable to sex work, due to their lack of eligibility for financial support.

The interviewees with personal experience of EPS described the alternative to EPS as

- "I would have been forced to withdraw [from my studies]"
- "[EPS] stopped me from being forced to return to an abusive family, or risking destitution if I refused to go back to live with them during intermission"
- "Undertaking this degree without EPS would have been impossible for me without severely affecting my mental and physical health"

Additional comments include:

- "The [university] environment can actually become **really disabling throughout your degree** if you have a health condition"
- "It seems not only that the university doesn't advertise Double Time, but rather that they **actively suppress and discourage the use of this mode of study**. This seems nothing short of discriminatory towards disabled students who are unable to study full time".

7. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes.

Current practice (offering either full time or intermission) does not enable all disabled students to continue and complete their studies. **Perceived outcomes for continuation, completion and well-being are improved for these students when EPS ('DT') is offered in addition to full time or intermission, with perceived risk of unfair advantage or of negative effects on students low.** However the implementation of EPS must still be improved to avoid disadvantaging disabled students.

Current practice during intermission is for the student to leave their college, usually for 1 year. Even if this period of intermission is necessary, its implementation can reduce well-being in some students, specifically those without a safe home environment to return to, and can in some cases lead to reliance on sex work due to ineligibility for financial support. **It must therefore be ensured not only that EPS has been offered, but that intermission, if offered, is implemented in a way that does not have a negative impact on their well-being.**

8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

That the EPS ('Double Time') application process be urgently reviewed, in order to: substantially reduce waiting time; involve student representation in the reviewing process; to provide guidance to staff and students about the process and as EPS as an alternative to intermission

A number of related actions will help implement this:

- That the review process aim to substantially reduce the application waiting time, to reflect the urgency of the decision for the disabled student
- That there be student representation, for example the student union's Disabled Students' Officer, involved in the review of the EPS application process
- That all staff and students should be made aware of EPS as an option, for example in introductory course meetings, college welfare and tutorial training, disability awareness sessions
- That information relating to EPS should be made freely and clearly available on college, faculty and university websites
- That staff offering intermission should also discuss with the student whether EPS might be appropriate for them
- That staff offering intermission should discuss with the student and the college to find options for intermission that are not detrimental to well-being, for example not returning the student to an abusive family or leaving the student without any accommodation or financial support