

Project 10: Intermission and Extended Period of Study (EPS)

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 relationship between intermission and extended period of study, and which is more appropriate to support the academic performance of disabled students with mental health conditions?	
Student co-researchers	Jess O'Brien, undergraduate student, Law	

2. Executive summary
<p>Intermission is a common practice for students with mental illnesses who are no longer able to manage their workload. This research explores the extent to which this practice may be overused or misapplied. Extension to Period of Study (hereafter EPS) might be considered as a more appropriate, less damaging, and more long term solution for a significant number of students who currently intermit. It is clear that the practice was not the correct solution for all students who have intermitted, and in many cases students feel it could have been prevented. Some students may intermit as an informal method of accessing EPS. This seems to be a particular issue for students whose disability does not cease to affect them after 1 year, and thus is still a factor upon their return from intermission. Most students who might consider accessing EPS were unaware of it as an option before this research. The University may want to consider alternative solutions to intermission, up to including EPS, and finding mechanisms to make these more widely used and available to students.</p>

3. Rationale:
<p>As Disabled Students' Officer, I have regularly had to tackle the issues surrounding both Extension to Period of Study and the process of intermission. For example, when training disabled students' officers – some of the most informed students in the University relating to disability – almost none of them were aware of the existence of AMAs, including EPS. This includes students who after the training realised this might have been more appropriate for them than intermission or other current adjustments.</p> <p>As DSO I have also had to deal regularly with students attempting to access AMAs, and the process has been difficult. Additionally, at intermission socials I have had to support many students who are concerned about returning from intermission as they do not feel any better, even after multiple years of intermission, because they have a chronic condition which they should have not intermitted for in the first place, as this is not a solution.</p>

In my own case, I intermitted due to hypersomnia meaning I was sleeping 14 hours + a day. The solution was to intermit, despite my doctors predicting that the problem would persist beyond my period of intermission. The solution should have been to put adjustments in place to decrease my daily workload, not simply to take a year out when it was not clear that my condition would be better on my return. Luckily experimental medication alleviated my symptoms, but the University nor I knew this at the time of my intermission.

It was therefore clear to me that research should be conducted into whether intermission was an appropriate or useful practice in the majority of cases it is currently used for.

4. Existing evidence

[CUSU Intermission Survey DRAFT \[2020\]](#)

CUSU has recently surveyed Cambridge students on the topic of Intermission. The survey was distributed through CUSU mailing lists, the CUSU student bulletin which is sent to all students, and CUSU Campaign Facebook groups, including the Intermission Support Group. This data has not yet been published, although the preliminary findings have been shared with the CUSU Executive.

However, as the lead student researcher on this project has access to the CUSU survey results as the current CUSU Disabled Student Sabbatical Officer, they have decided to include the data in this project report, in parallel with the ethics approved data collected for the APP PAR project.

The CUSU survey results were filtered to focus on the 83 responses from students who had disclosed that they had:

- a. Intermitted, or 'Seriously Considered' Intermittent; and
- b. Disclosed a mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder

NOTE: the student co-researcher understands that the use of this CUSU Intermissions survey data has not been approved by the ethics committee that reviewed the APP PAR Project (CHESREC) and therefore cannot be published externally.

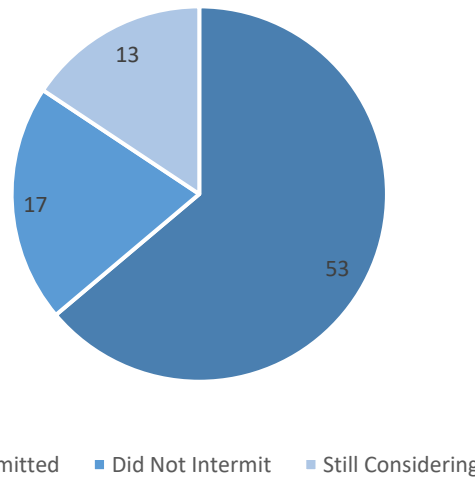
5. Generation of evidence

Other student co-researchers in the APP PAR team were asked to take part in an online interview, in the format of a Google Form. There were 5 complete responses. Only the data relevant to intermission was used for this research, the rest was used by a colleague for their parallel project on EPS/Double Time (see Project 5).

6. Small project research findings

The following section discusses findings from the data collected in the CUSU Intermissions Survey, independently to the APP PAR Project.

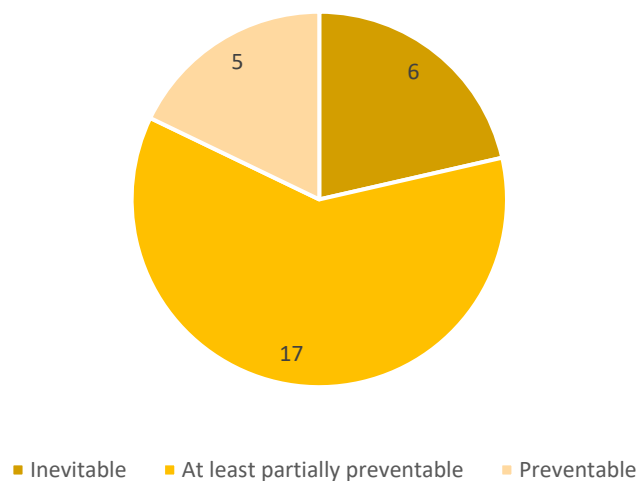
Number of Students Who Eventually Intermitted, of those who 'Seriously Considered'



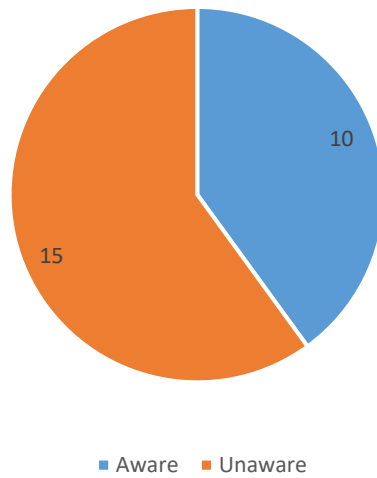
It is worth noting that one of the students who did not intermit, but declared that they had 'seriously considered' doing so, mentioned the following:

"I found out about Double Time [EPS] and decided that was more appropriate for me"

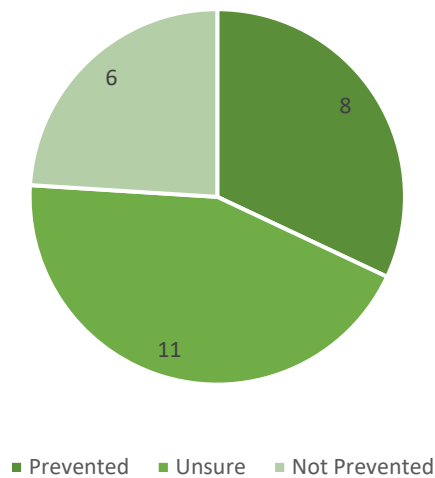
Whether Students who Intermitted Felt Their Intermission Was Preventable



Whether Students Who Have Intermitted Were Aware of EPS (before this survey)



Whether Students Who Did Not Know About EPS Thought It Would Have Prevented Their Intermission



The following section draws on data collected during the APP PAR Project

Interviews were conducted with 5 participants – 4 who currently study with EPS and 1 who declared that they would have done if they had been aware of it. All had experienced, or ‘seriously considered’ intermission.

In their interviews, 4 out of 5 participants discussed the links between EPS and intermission. Various issues were raised, some of the points made are outlined below:

- It was noted that many people who are disabled or ill for any length of time are told they may need to intermit, even if this is not a long term solution to their lack of capacity to complete work at the ‘Cambridge’ rate. For these students, EPS is a more reasonable option as their health will not be ‘fixed’ by taking a year out, and if a reasonable adjustment in the form of EPS was made they should not actually need to intermit.

- If it can be demonstrated that students who repeatedly intermit are at a significant academic disadvantage compared to non-disabled peers, then failure to properly advertise/easily provide access to EPS may count as a breach of the University's duty under the EA 2010
- The collegiate University appears to, in practice, consider intermission a panacea for any kind of illness or disability that limits a student's capacity to complete a certain amount of work each term
- Participants raised anecdotal evidence of students they have worked with in their representative capacities, who have been negatively impacted by intermission. Some notable issues included: unreliable or abusive family networks; removal from vital medical care located in Cambridge; removal from important support networks located in Cambridge; the risk of homelessness where they are left financially unsupported; the need to work during intermission even where students are not well enough to do so, or need to take on risky forms of employment, due to intermission
- Many students who should be studying with EPS have to withdraw, or repeatedly intermit, as unsurprisingly their chronic conditions do not 'get better' within a year
- The reality of students attempting 'DIY EPS', where they intermit and then continue to study (despite University stipulations to the contrary) in order to effectively split their workload over two years. Of course, this will be less effective than a properly resourced and supported EPS.

These responses were spread across all four interviewees, showing the prevalence of these issues.

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

There are some significant concerns raised by the two parallel research projects (the CUSU Intermissions project and the APP PAR project) which may help to explain the current attainment gaps which exist for disabled students who experience mental illness. These are discussed below.

- 1.) The University is clearly failing to effectively advertise the full range of adjustments that exist to support students who are struggling with their workload due to reasons of disability. Even if students do not fall behind so far that they feel forced to intermit, this may impact their overall attainment in their degree, as they are unable to study at the same rate as their non-disabled counterparts. The University should explore how it can increase awareness of EPS as an option to both tutors and students.
- 2.) The significant volume of students who believed that their intermission was at least partially preventable means that failures are being made in supporting said students. The University should consider what steps should be taken prior to encouraging students to intermit, to ensure that this is avoided where possible.
- 3.) The University at some level is clearly failing to distinguish between disabilities which are 'short' and long term. I.e. which disabilities will cease to impact on workload after a year, and which will not be resolved by a period of intermission and require further adjustments. The University could suggest having a plan in place before a student begins intermission for their return, to ensure that the period of intermission is actually helping the student, and that there will be adequate support upon their return.
- 4.) Potential measures should be taken to mitigate the negative impact of intermission for those students for whom the process is necessary.

8. RECOMMENDED ACTION

1. That the University explores how it can increase awareness amongst tutors and students of EPS as an option to Intermission

This should include:

- A consideration of what steps should be taken prior to encouraging students to intermit, to ensure that this is avoided where possible.
- A requirement that a plan is put in place before a student begins intermission for their return, to ensure that the period of intermission is actually helping the student, and that there will be adequate support upon their return.
- The development of measures to mitigate the negative impact of intermission for those students for whom the process is necessary.

2. That the University consider undertaking the further research into intermission and students' experiences of the process, building on from the CUSU Intermissions project.

This should include:

- An analysis of the impact of intermission on students' attainment, potentially as compared to EPS
- An analysis of Cambridge workload as a whole, and the extent to which it impacts disabled students, particularly those with MH issues
- A potential experiment – offering a trial of EPS level workload to a group of students with MH issues, and seeing if this alleviates their symptoms and/or increases their comparative performance as compared to their peers