# Studying at Cambridge

**Name:** Aure Aflalo

**Course:** Natural Sciences; Biology PhD

**Current Year:** 6th

**Name:** Jasmin Thien

**Course:** Education, English, Drama and the Arts

**Current Year:** 4th

Jasmin and Aure are both international students pursuing post-graduate degrees at Cambridge. They detail their experience studying and living in Cambridge and share tips for future students with vision impairment.

## Navigating Cambridge

The University is made up of a number of schools and colleges situated across the city. Most are within walking distance but there is a shuttlebus service to help get around. Jasmin and Aure share their experience of navigating Cambridge -

**“The college sites are fragmented across the city, and they vary widely in age and layout with some more accessible than others. I find the newer colleges easier to navigate – some of the old spiral staircases are very steep, narrow and uneven, so can be problematic”** – Jasmin

**“The sites themselves I found quite accessible once you know where they are and how to get in – I always feel very safe once I am on-site. Some sites have lots of uniform buildings and it’s just a matter of learning the routes and remembering which you need. The town feels less accessible, with uneven pavement and poor street lighting. This made it important for me to get a cane which I hadn’t needed before.”** - Aure

## Settling in

Orientation and mobility training is key to learning a new city. Both students were supported with this, gaining confidence and independence.

**“When I arrived, I was provided human support to help with orientation, for example learning key venues and locations, and the routes in between them. This was really helpful as I got to learn shortcuts and places that would have been confusing on my own, for example those with gravel paths that are not very well defined.”** – Jasmin

Aure explains that despite planning and preparation, things can be different in practice, and that it is good to be open not only about the support that you would like, but also what isn’t right for you.

 **“I think it’s important to be confident to ask when you are not sure about something and explain how you need things to be done, because otherwise they won’t understand how to help you. People might have ideas about what might help or what others have found useful, but you have to think about what you individually want, and what you don’t need or want. It can be difficult to know what that is, so use previous experience as a start and make changes as you go along. If you think you need something, or a new way would be easier for you, just ask as they worst thing that can happen is they say no.”**

## Accommodation

As with the other university buildings, the sites available for accommodation range in location, age and layout. The accessibility and proximity to places you are most likely to spend your time are the most prominent criteria students use to choose where to stay. Adjustments are available for accommodation as well as the academic side of university, to help students feel comfortable.

**“The colleges help by allowing you to choose your room to make sure it is accessible for you and suits your needs. For me, I wanted north-facing windows, and for some of the furniture to be moved to accommodate extra equipment. They were always very happy to change things around for me, they have been fantastic.”** - Aure

## The course

Each course has different requirements and so different challenges for accessibility. Both students found getting advice from students in years above a useful approach for addressing accessibility barriers.

**“Before, I had always relied on a lab partner to help with the visual elements, but this didn’t really feel good enough for a PhD. I was completely willing to do everything myself, I just didn’t know how. I met a friend who also had a vision impairment that studied science, who suggested these glasses that allow me to see very small amounts of liquid. I completely rely on them now, I take them everywhere with me.”** – Aure

**“Support and experiences really differ between faculties and departments. It’s good to have services like the mentors so you have someone to ask questions and can learn from others.”** - Jasmin

## Support

Cambridge’s Disability Resource Centre are the main point of contact for students for support with their learning and in exams. Aure found they helped communicate her vision impairment and its impact to staff at the beginning of each term -

**“The most important thing they did for me was the ‘student support document’ – describing your disability and how it affects you in different situations such as lectures or labs, with examples of how staff can support you. It really helps having everything on record and circulated, because then when you approach someone to ask for help you don’t have to justify or explain so much, they know already.”**

Additionally, staff throughout the university help to make learning accessible and inclusive.

**“Lecturers have been so helpful, describing slides and images. The library support team got in touch with me straight away so I knew who to ask for help finding accessible texts, and I found the reading lists were very flexible, so it was easier to find accessible alternatives and get the information I needed.”** - Jasmin

## Engagement opportunities

There are a wide range of activities available for enrichment and extra-curricular interests. They help students meet people outside of their studies and broaden the experience of university.

**“Engagement opportunities have been fantastic. The student-run society’s like the drama group are really welcoming and supportive, making adaptions such as edging the stage with tactile wire so I know where the edge is. I was never made to feel my blindness was an issue.”** – Jasmin

## Why Cambridge?

The University of Cambridge receives thousands of applications every year from across the world. With strong traditions and prestige, it is regarded a special place to study.

**“The course stood out as it gave you the ability to try lots in the first year and then specialise, depending on what I felt suited me. When I came to visit, the people were really friendly. I really like studying here, I love the atmosphere.”** – Aure

**“I certainly do not regret going to Cambridge. I think if you go you expect it to be challenging. And I was able to find a unique course that combined all of my passions.”** - Jasmin