



Review and Comments from the Association of Non-Medical Help Providers of the:
 Evaluation of Disabled Students' Allowances. Department for Education. Research
 report. Published January 2019

The Association welcomes the opportunity to comment on this important review of the student experience of Disabled Students' Allowances. Additionally the Association appreciates the importance for the Department for Education in undertaking this in depth study assessing the extent to which DSAs are meeting their objectives in reducing barriers to learning that disabled students might experience because of their disability.

The subsidiary aim for the evaluation was to assess the impact of changes to DSAs funding in the 2015/16 and 2016/17 academic years, and of course this is of interest to the Association as the said changes have led to necessary alterations in practice for the providers of DSA services.

Summary of recommendations from the Association.

1. The Association welcomes that the research provides robust data supporting the positive impact of DSAs and recommends that the many successful elements of the DSA programme are protected and built upon.
2. The Association supports the author's recommendation that there should be much improved awareness raising and information of DSAs for students. Thought should be given to the multiple channels of promotion that could be used ahead of students starting at university and at the stage when students are making decisions about their university destination and course.
3. The Association would urge the DfE and the SLC to review the DSA application process to reduce the identified obstacles to successful application and to improve completion rates through to the final award stage.
4. The Association endorses the author's suggestion of a clearer 'road map' that sets out the process of accessing support which details who needs contacting and how, and how long they can expect to wait (page 60).
5. Students with mental health or multiple disabilities are identified as being less likely to access and benefit from DSAs across several measures. At a time when the number of students with mental health difficulties is rising sharply, the Association recommends that DfE gives keen attention to ensuring that vital Specialist Mentor NMH is understood and accessed by students.
6. Members of the Association recognise through their own provision, and as is identified in the research, that the changes made to the DSA in 2015/16 have been detrimental to the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the programme. The Association recommends that consultation and impact analysis activity are thoroughly undertaken ahead of any future changes to the DSA.

Results and comment on DSA and NMH provision

- **40% of students said that they couldn't have done their course without getting support from DSAs (Page12).**
 - This key finding gives strong endorsement of the effectiveness of DSAs support. At any one time 40% of students would represent tens of thousands of students who potentially without DSA support couldn't do their course. One could surmise that DSA is having a direct impact on student retention at university, and in that DSA expenditure per student is low relative to the overall cost of a university education, one could conclude that DSA is a highly efficient and economical way of providing learning support.
- **Three in five (59%) DSAs recipients who stated that they felt confident about passing their course said that they would not feel confident about passing their course without receiving DSAs (page 13 and page 92). 54% said they would not feel confident of passing without their HEP support (page 13).**
 - These results clearly highlight how both DSA and HEP support is contributing to disabled student's confidence about passing their course. Members of the Association recognise the part they play in the collective effort towards supporting students to pass their course, graduate, and to go on to contribute to the world of work and the UK economy.
- **68% of DSA recipients agreed that DSA support enabled them to participate more fully in their course (page 11 and 66).**
 - This finding reinforces one of the main objectives of DSA support; that of encouraging independence. Although on average the vast majority of students might receive one hour of DSA support per week, the 68% of students who report that DSAs enabled them to participate more fully in their course is very positive.
- **At an overall level, DSAs support is broadly meeting the needs of students. Over half (55%) of those in receipt of DSAs agreed that the DSAs support they receive meets all of their needs, although 28% disagreed (page 11).**
 - The Association and other DSA stakeholders should be reassured that over half of students reported that DSAs meet all their needs. However, 28% disagreed, and this group deserve further consideration. Are their needs mostly, partly, or not all met? What specific needs are not met by DSAs?
- **Students with mental health difficulties and other fluctuating conditions were especially positive about the impact of DSAs funded support on helping them to maintain the consistency of their academic work (page 93).**
 - The Association are encouraged by this positive finding but also note that this group of students are least likely to complete their application and/or access their DSA support.

Results and comment on DSA awareness and the DSA application process

- **Only 2 in 5 students (40%) had heard of DSAs before they started their course (page 9).**
- **24% of disabled students (not receiving DSA) said they had never heard of DSAs before the survey.**
- **Not enough students know about DSAs at the point of application for them to be a more widespread influence (page 97).**

- The Association considers this a revealing and worrying statistic. If the majority of disabled students are not aware of DSA before they start their course then many may clearly be disadvantaged from the outset of their course. DSAs may provide vital support for students in the early days and as they adjust and make the transition to HEIs.
- There would appear to be considerable improvements to be made in terms of raising awareness of the DSA for students ahead of them arriving at university, and also once they are at university, ensuring that there is advice and guidance around applying for and accessing the DSA.
- **Awareness and knowledge of DSAs has declined from 62% (2015/16 or before) to 56% (2016/17 onwards) amongst DSA recipients. And this group felt less well informed (62% declining to 53%) (page 9).**
 - This fall in awareness and knowledge of DSA, when set alongside the positive effect of DSA support when it is received, is a concerning trend. The Association would encourage the Department for Education to consider addressing this decline through more proactive promotion of the DSA to students both more widely and earlier.
- **Those with a mental health condition or a long-term health condition were more likely to feel uninformed about DSAs than students with other types of disability (page 23).**
 - The Association, along with other student mental health organisations and the HEPs, are acutely aware of the growing numbers of students disclosing, and presenting with mental health difficulties. Undoubtedly, these students are the very ones who should be informed of DSAs and given clear guidance as to what they are, how to apply, and how to access support if they wish.
- **Two-fifths (40%) of students considered applying for DSAs but ultimately chose not to because they did not want to go through the application process (page 26).**
- **This suggests that the take up of DSAs may not be optimal and that some students who could be eligible for support are not applying because the application process deters them (page 27).**
- **23% of students were dissatisfied with the application process with a further 26% neither satisfied or dissatisfied (page 34).**
 - The survey report highlights very clearly the shortcomings of the DSA application process. With the application process actually deterring students and a low satisfaction rate of 51% it would appear that various improvements could be made to the process.
 - Student Finance England have recently stated that the average DSA application time is 14 weeks, and as is acknowledged there are multiple steps to complete the process. The Association would recommend that SFE address the reasons given by students that are highlighted in the DfE research:
 - Having to find evidence
 - The length of the form/time it took to complete
 - Lack of clear guidance to complete the form
 - Unclear language.

- **One of two key issues identified in the report summary was the need to improve awareness and information about the support on offer through DSAs at the point that students were considering applying to go into higher education (page 95).**
 - The Association would welcome far greater consideration of this issue.

Results and comment on the impact of changes to DSAs funding in the 2015/16 and 2016/17 and 2017/18 academic years.

- **In almost all measures satisfaction has declined between 2015/16 or before compared with 2016/17 onwards.**
- **The percentage of students that agree that DSAs met all their needs has fallen between 2015/16 to 2017/18 (59% to 49%) (page 68).**
- **The percentage of students that agree that DSAs enable them to participate more fully in their course than otherwise has fallen between 2015/16 to 2017/18 (72% to 64%) (page 66).**
- **Students who received their DSAs in 2015/16 or earlier were more likely to be satisfied with the funding they were entitled to (74%), compared to students to who received DSAs in 2016/17 onwards (67%) (page 44).**
- **The influence of DSAs on decisions to go into higher education therefore appears to have fallen over time, with the onset of the changes introduced from 2016/17 onwards (page 12).**
 - The report authors and the Association note that these results are statistically significant.
 - Across a number of measures the research results show that student perception of the efficiency and effectiveness of DSAs has declined between 2015/16 and 2017/18.
 - The Association and other stakeholders might reflect on the effect of the DSA changes and the rigor of the impact analysis that was undertaken at that time.

Results and comment on DSA assessment process and the needs assessment recommendations.

- **81% were satisfied with their overall experience of the assessment (page 10).**
- **Overall agreement that students felt listened to by the assessor was high (91%) (page 41).**
- **Overall agreement that the assessor understood their study support needs was also high (88%) (page 41).**
- **Overall, most students (87%) were satisfied with the recommendations made in the assessment centre report (page 43).**
- **Although most (67%) were satisfied with their HEP's response to the recommendations made, a fifth of students (19%) were dissatisfied (page 44).**
 - The high satisfaction rates around the assessment and assessor recommendations backs up non-medical help provider's experience of this part of the DSA process.
- **70% of students were satisfied with the amount of non-medical help they were entitled to (page 10).**
 - The Association members are very likely to work closely with assessors wherever there is any query or adjustment required to the recommended support.

- **Almost a quarter (23%) of students were dissatisfied with the range of providers or equipment they could choose from (page 46).**
 - This finding may require further investigation to establish exactly what aspects of equipment or support choice led to dissatisfaction.

Results and comment on types of support provided, and access to that support.

- **Over half (57%) of students in receipt of DSAs said they received non-medical help (page 47).**
- **Around six in ten (61%) students used all of the support offered to them, just over a third (34%) stated they did not (page 50).**
 - The study identifies that the majority of students do take up all of the support offered to them and set alongside the positive impact that students report that the DSAs have, this a strong endorsement of the DSA scheme.
 - The Association notes that the main reason identified when students did not take up all of the DSAs offered was that they could cope without it, not that it didn't work, or that it was inaccessible.

Results and comment on HEP support.

- **Students who received support from DSAs were also more likely to have received support from their HEP and be satisfied with this (page 11).**
- **The majority (85%) of disabled students reported that at least one form of learning support was offered by their HEP (page 60).**
- **Satisfaction with various aspects of support from HEPs is slightly lower than with DSA support (page 12 and 74).**
 - It is interesting that students appear to get most benefit when both DSA and HEP support is in place. The Association members include both independent and HEP providers of DSA NMH, and it is likely that the most effective support for disabled students results from close collaboration and communication between HEPs and DSA providers.
 - The Association feel that the above point is supported in the report summary that states: **'There is also a link between receipt and positive experience of DSAs, and higher satisfaction with HEP support'** and **'This highlights that support from both sources is integral to ensuring that disabled students succeed in higher education (page 83)'**.