



Changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)

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This note gives a brief overview of the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and outlines proposed changes to the grant; the changes will apply to all full-time, full-time distance learning, part-time and postgraduate students applying for a DSA for the first time on or after 1 September 2015. The DSA is available to eligible English domiciled students studying at UK higher education institutions.

On 6 June 2014 the NUS organised a day of action to protest about the changes.

On 12 September 2014 the government announced that it would be delaying some of the changes to the DSA.

The note sets out areas of concern and includes debate and comment on the proposals.

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1 Background

The Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) is a non-means tested, non-repayable grant provided through Student Finance England to help eligible higher education students pay the extra costs incurred as a direct result of a disability, long-term health condition, mental-health condition, or specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia or dyspraxia.

The allowance can be used to pay for a range of support such as: non-medical helpers; specialist equipment; general support and travel assistance.

The DSA is available to eligible English students studying at UK higher education institutions. Further information on eligibility requirements for DSAs is given in a booklet by Student Finance England called *Bridging the gap - a guide to Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) in higher education 2013/2014*.

1.1 Cost of DSAs

An article in *the Independent*¹ gave information on the annual cost of DSAs in 2011-12:

Total government funding for DSA varies from year to year, but the maximum funding per student is £5,161 for specialist equipment, £20,520 per year for the non-medical helper allowance (per year) and £1,724 per year for a general allowance.

In 2011-12, the bill for DSA came to £124 million, covering 53,000 undergraduates.

Information in the *Guardian*² stated that the cost of DSAs reduced in 2012-13:

However, [latest figures](#) from the Student Loans Company (2012-13) show spending on DSAs has reduced. In 2012-13, the number of students receiving DSAs rose to 54,900 while the total amount paid reduced by over £5m to £119.9m for that period. This occurred without cuts being implemented.

2 Changes to the DSA

On 7 April 2014 David Willetts the Minister for Universities and Science announced changes to the DSA in a ministerial statement, below is the announcement in full:

Higher Education (Student Support)

The Minister for Universities and Science (Mr David Willetts): Today I am announcing measures to modernise the disabled students' allowances which are available to higher education students from England.

Disabled students' allowances (DSAs) are non-repayable grants that assist with the additional costs that a disabled student incurs in relation to their study in higher education. DSAs currently provide a range of support. This includes the purchase of laptops and specialist equipment, provision of support workers and assistance with additional travel costs. The support is not means-tested and is available for eligible full-time and part-time students, studying at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

In 2011-12 DSAs provided over £125 million of additional support for over 53,000 full-time undergraduate higher education students, compared with £91.7 million awarded to 40,600 students in 2008-09.

¹ ["Universities minister criticised for 'deeply unfair' cuts to disability funding"](#) The Independent 8 April 2014

² ["Cuts to grant funding for disabled students will put their studies at risk"](#), *The Guardian* 24 April 2014

I announced earlier this year that maximum grants for full-time, part-time and postgraduate students with disabilities will be maintained at 2014-15 levels in 2015-16.

I am announcing a number of changes aimed at modernising the current system, subject to the equality impact assessment. This will ensure that the limited public funding available for DSAs is targeted in the best way and to achieve value for money, while ensuring those most in need get the help they require.

DSAs have been available since 1974, with the four separate allowances being introduced in 1990. The current arrangements do not recognise technological advances, increases in use of technology or the introduction of the Equality Act 2010. It has been almost 25 years since the DSA scheme was reviewed, unlike other areas of student support.

The proposals outlined below look to rebalance responsibilities between Government funding and institutional support. We will look to HEIs to play their role in supporting students with mild difficulties, as part of their duties to provide reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act. These are partly anticipatory duties and we expect HEIs to introduce changes which can further reduce reliance on DSAs and help mainstream support. We will be consulting with specialists in the sector to ensure that specific learning difficulties (SpLD) students understand the type of support they can expect to receive and who will provide it.

We recognise that students will continue to need support. However, we believe that HEIs are better placed to consider how to respond in many cases, including giving greater consideration to the delivery of their courses and how to provide support. The need for some individual non-medical help (NMH) may be removed through different ways of delivering courses and information. It is for HEIs to consider how they make both anticipatory reasonable adjustments and also reasonable adjustments at an individual level.

The key changes are set out below:

We will pay for higher specification or higher cost computers where a student needs one solely by virtue of their disability. We will no longer pay for standard specification computers or the warranties and insurance associated with them. We will no longer pay for higher specification and/or higher cost computers simply because of the way in which a course is delivered. We are changing our approach to the funding of a number of computer equipment, software and consumable items through DSAs that have become funded as "standard" to most students.

Students with specific learning difficulties will continue to receive support through DSAs where their support needs are considered to be more complex.

We will fund the most specialist non-medical help. HEIs are expected to consider how they deliver information to students and whether strategies can be put in place to reduce the need for support workers and encourage greater independence and autonomy for their students.

The additional costs of specialist accommodation will no longer be met by DSAs, other than in exceptional circumstances.

We are also clarifying a number of policy changes. We will define disability in relation to the definition provided by the Equality Act 2010, for the purposes of receiving DSAs. We will also introduce a requirement for registration for those providers offering DSA study needs assessments and DSA assistive technology service providers.

The changes will ensure DSAs provide support where it is needed the most.

The changes in this statement will apply to all full-time, full-time distance learning, part-time and postgraduate students applying for DSA for the first time in respect of an academic year beginning on or after 1 September 2015. This provides sufficient time for us to work with institutions and stakeholders to ensure the changes are introduced effectively.

Existing DSA students and DSA students for 2014-15 entry will remain on the current system of support for 2015-16 ([HC Deb 7 April 2014 c 2WS](#))

2.1 HEFCE response to the announcement

On 7 April 2014 HEFCE made a response to the government announcement and said that they would carry out a review of support for disabled students:

[HEFCE response to written ministerial statement on changes to Disabled Student Allowance \(DSA\)](#)

07 April 2014

HEFCE is fully committed to working with universities, colleges and others to ensure as far as possible that when these changes to the DSA come into effect in 2015-16, those students most in need are properly supported and are able to succeed in their studies and in future employment.

The Government has asked us to review provision and support for disabled students in the higher education sector. We will be doing this over the coming months, working closely with institutions, the NUS, and others.

2.2 NUS day of action

On 6 June 2014 the NUS held a day of action against the changes - this was discussed in an article in the *Times Higher Education* on 4 June 2014, "[NUS to hold day of action on disability cuts](#)" and on the NUS website at [Student survey debunks myths around DSA cuts, as hundreds of students lobby their MPs](#).

3 Potential impact of the changes

3.1 Number of students affected by the changes

The Rt Hon Frank Field MP asked for information on the number of students likely to be affected by the changes in a PQ in May 2014:

Disabled Students' Allowances

Mr Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills pursuant to the written statement of 7 April 2014, *Official Report*, column 1WS, on higher education (student support), what estimate he has made of how many prospective students will no longer be eligible for the disabled students' allowance once the changes set out in the statement are introduced; and what steps he plans to take to support those prospective students. [198137]

Mr Willetts: Disabled students will continue to receive support through a combination of disabled students' allowances (DSAs) and reasonable adjustments made by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Each student's needs are unique. Some will receive more support through reasonable adjustments than previously experienced. Written guidance will be available.

It is not possible to make an accurate estimate of how many prospective students will no longer be eligible for DSAs as many students receive more than one type of support.

Current DSA recipients and disabled students applying for DSAs in 2014/15 will not be affected by these changes in 2015/16. ([HC Deb 14 May 2014 c602](#))

3.2 Equalities Impact Assessment

Information given in answer to a PQ by Roger Godsiff MP on [6 June 2014](#) stated that the changes to the DSA will be brought in using regulations and that an Equalities Impact Assessment would be published before the regulations were laid before the House.

3.3 Effect on higher education institutions

Regardless of the changes to the DSA higher education institutions (HEIs) will continue to have statutory duties to make arrangements for disabled students under other legislative provisions.

Under the *Equalities Act 2010* HEIs have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students. A publication by the Equality and Human Rights Commission sets out guidance for HEIs on the type of reasonable adjustments required in a document [Equality Act 2010 Technical Guidance on Further and Higher Education](#), November 2012. Higher education institutions have expressed concern that the changes in DSA could mean that they will have to fill gaps in provision for disabled students that this will increase their costs.

On 11 June 2014 Rob Buckland PM asked in PQ if higher education institutions received funding to assist them with their duties under the Equality Act 2010:

Higher Education: Disability

Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what funding is currently allocated to higher education institutes to assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities to disabled students under the Equality Act 2010. [198940]

11: In the academic year 2013/14 £15 million was allocated to higher education institutions through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) grant, to help them recruit and support disabled students. This figure was an increase of £2 million on the previous year and has been maintained by HEFCE for 2014/15. This is in addition to the direct support provided to disabled students through the disabled students' allowances (DSA). In England, £125.1 million was spent on providing DSA in 2011/12. ([HC Deb 11 June 2014 c216](#))

A PQ was asked in the House of Lords by Lord Addington on the effect of these changes on higher education institutions:

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the preparedness of institutes of higher education to fulfil their duties to students under the Equality Act 2010 following changes to the Disabled Students Allowance.[HL7001]

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Discussions are underway with the higher education sector to ensure they are ready to meet their legal duties under the Equality Act 2010 by 2015.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is currently undertaking a review of provision and support for disabled students in higher education. ([HC Deb 13 May 2014 cWA 470](#))

4 Areas of concerns

4.1 Impact on dyslexic students

The NUS have expressed concerns about the impact of the changes and particularly about the potential effects on students with dyslexia. Commentators are concerned that only students with the most complex needs might receive help and that this could exclude students with ‘milder’ forms of disability such as dyslexia.

An article in the *Times Higher Education* (THE)³ highlighted the increase in the number of dyslexic students in higher education and the variability of support offered by universities to these students:

Last month, a leading professor of education [argued in *Times Higher Education*](#) that dyslexia had become a catch-all term for a variety of learning difficulties faced by students and called for its assessment and diagnosis to be rethought.

Julian Elliott, professor of education at Durham University, pointed to figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency showing that the number of students registered as having the condition [had risen 40 per cent in just five years](#).

[...]

However, our survey highlighted that some university disability services follow the DSA recommendations but offer no other specialised support for dyslexic students, while others offer extra one-to-one study skills sessions, extended library loans and deadlines, workshops, mentor support and advance provision of lecture notes. Some institutions foot the bill – often amounting to hundreds of pounds – for the full psychological assessment needed to qualify for the DSA grant, but others ask that students pay £150 towards the cost, while a minority make no contribution.

In addition, some services offered by universities for dyslexic students have no government funding for individuals who are not covered by the DSA, including non-UK students and those who have applied but have not yet been approved for the grant. A handful of institutions mirror the funding available through the DSA for non-UK students, while others have a stockpile of learning assistance technology available for those without a DSA report or grant. Some universities, however, may be unable to provide any specific support for those who are ineligible for the grant.

The changes might also mean that dyslexic students could lose the provision of laptops as standard ones will no longer be provided.

In May 2014 Lord Addington asked PQs on the effect of the changes on dyslexic students:

Questions

*Asked by **Lord Addington***

To ask Her Majesty’s Government, in the light of the changes to the Disabled Students Allowance, what criteria will be used for assessing complex needs in candidates with specific learning difficulties or dyslexia.[HL6999]

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Con): Discussions are underway with experts in the sector. Disabled students whose needs cannot be met by the reasonable adjustments

³ [“No standard offering of aid for dyslexia”](#), 3 April 2014

made by Higher Education Institutions will continue to receive support through Disabled Students' Allowances.

Asked by Lord Addington

To ask Her Majesty's Government, in the light of the changes to the Disabled Students Allowance, what level of assistance institutes of higher education will be required to give to those with specific learning difficulties or dyslexia to enable them to complete their studies.[HL7000]

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Higher Education Institutions will be expected to provide reasonable adjustments under the duties placed upon them by the Equality Act 2010. Disabled Students' Allowances will remain available where additional support is required to enable disabled students to access their studies successfully.([HC Deb 13 May 2014 cWA 470](#))

4.2 Cuts in non-medical help

Students with disabilities may receive a range of non-medical help such as note-takers and support assistants. Student Finance England have published guidance for HEIs on the type of non-medical help provided under DSA rules at SFE [Non-medical help reference manual](#). Under the proposed changes this type of support may no longer be provided to some students.

A PQ was asked on this issue on 10 June 2014:

Special Educational Needs

Oliver Colvile: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what specialist one-to-one study skills support will be available for students with specific learning difficulties following the review of the disabled students allowance; and who will provide that support. [199301]

Mr Willetts: Discussions are under way with stakeholders, including those who specialise in supporting students with specific learning difficulties. This will help determine how specialist one-to-one support will be delivered in the future and where the responsibility for funding such support will fall.

I will not make a final decision on this matter until I have considered the necessary Equality Analysis, which is in preparation, and will take account of any relevant evidence provided by stakeholders. ([HC Deb 10 June 2014 c110](#))

4.3 Cuts in specialist accommodation

Some universities provide specialist accommodation for disabled students and there are concerns that the costs of this accommodation will in future only be met in exceptional circumstances.

4.4 Impact on widening participation

A spokesperson for Disability Rights UK expressed concern about the effect of the cuts on widening participation:

Tony Stevens, of Disability Rights UK, was interviewed on this issue in the Guardian. "If you start messing around too much with things that have served universities and disabled people well, some of the widening participation gains that have been made could drop off," he says. "They aren't as embedded as you might imagine." Disability

Rights UK has already noticed that more disabled people are questioning the wisdom of going to university.⁴

A spokesperson for Universities UK has stated that some universities could be more affected by the changes than others:

Universities UK, says: "Although this rebalancing will have an impact on all institutions attracting disabled students, conservatoires and other institutions specialising in arts-based provision have particularly high proportions of students claiming DSA. Any shift towards greater institutional funding could disproportionately affect those institutions."⁵

Research carried out by the [Equality Challenge Unit](#) showed that the prospects of disabled graduates are significantly better than those of non-graduates. In 2012, 71 percent of disabled graduates gained employment compared with 42 percent of disabled non-graduates.⁶

5 Parliamentary debate

Several PQs have been asked on this issue below is an example;

Disabled Students' Allowances

Mr Buckland: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills on the proposed changes to Disabled Students' Allowance and their effect on young people with special educational needs or a disability. [198939]

Mr Timpson: The Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have worked closely together, throughout the passage of the Children and Families Act 2014, on the implications for young people with special education needs and disabilities regarding their transition to Higher Education. As a result of these discussions, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice were strengthened to support a better transition to Higher Education. There continues to be close liaison between the two Departments about broader policies that affect young people with special educational needs and disability. ([HC Deb 11 June 2014 c149](#))

Rob Buckland MP and Lord Addington tabled a series of PQs on 4 June 2014, these PQs have not yet been answered.

Early Day Motion 48 [Changes to disabled students' allowance](#) was tabled by David Blunkett MP on 5 June 2014:

That this House notes the importance of providing support to disabled students to enable them to access education and to help them study; further notes that National Union of Students' research has found that 55 per cent of disabled students have already seriously considered leaving their course compared to 35 per cent of non-disabled respondents with 54 per cent reporting this was because of financial problems; further notes with concern the proposed changes to disabled students' allowance (DSA) as announced on 7 April 2014; further notes that DSA is an important means of support for disabled students to access support and research has shown that students receiving DSA are more likely to reach a first or upper class second honours

⁴ Disability Rights UK [Disabled Students Allowance cuts may deter students](#), 20 May 2014

⁵ "Disabled students could be 'shut out' by government cuts" *The Guardian* 20 May 2014

⁶ *ibid*

degree than disabled students who do not receive an allowance; further notes that many potential students stand to be affected by the proposed changes to DSA; and calls on the Government to provide equal access, wherever the student is studying.

The EDM has received 32 signatures.

6 Announcement on 12 September 2014

On 12 September 2014 Greg Clarke the Minister for Universities, Science and Cities announced that the changes would be delayed until 2016-17:

Student Support

The Minister for Universities, Science and Cities (Greg Clark): In a written ministerial statement on 7 April 2014, Official Report, column 1WS, the then Minister for Universities and Science announced proposed changes to disabled students' allowances which are available to higher education students from England.

Disabled students' allowances are non-repayable grants that assist with the additional costs incurred by disabled students in relation to their study in higher education. Disabled students' allowances finance a range of support, including the purchase of computers and specialised equipment, assistance with travel costs and the provision of support workers where necessary. In 2011-12 disabled students' allowances provided support of over £144 million to 61,000 students, funded from the higher education budget. Disabled students' allowance continues to be available to support disabled students studying in higher education.

During the summer, I and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who is responsible for disabled people, have listened carefully to suggestions from representatives of disabled students. I have also listened to the views and concerns of representatives across the higher education and disability sectors, as well as receiving representations from hon. Members.

We are determined to ensure that disabled students should be able to make use of and develop their talents through higher education and that there should be no cap on their aspirations.

There was widespread agreement that universities should discharge their duties under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate disabled students, as other organisations do. However, concern was conveyed that some universities may not be able to meet their obligations in full by the beginning of the 2015-16 academic year, given their need to invest in additional support for their students.

With students applying now for places at the beginning of that year it is important that any disabled student should be confident that an institution to which they are considering applying will be able to meet their needs satisfactorily.

Accordingly, we have agreed to give higher education institutions until the beginning of the 2016-17 academic year to develop appropriate mechanisms to fully deliver their statutory duty to provide reasonable adjustments, in particular non-medical help, and to improve the processes by which disabled students can appeal against a higher education institution's decision that an adjustment would not be reasonable. We will explore how this might be supported in institutions' access agreements with the Office for Fair Access for 2016-17.

For the academic year 2015-16, we will continue to provide disabled students' allowance funding to help with the additional cost of a computer and assistive software if needed solely because of the student's impairment. This will be subject to the student contributing the first £200 of the computer's cost—broadly equivalent to the cost of a basic computer. For future academic years we will explore a bulk purchasing scheme for such computers to keep costs down.

Additional items such as printers and consumables will not be automatically provided, with alternative provision in the form of university provided services such as printing services and books and journals in electronic format to be considered as alternatives.

Funding will remain available towards the additional costs of specialised accommodation for disabled students, other than where the accommodation is provided by the institution or an agent of the institution.

A number of commentators made proposals to streamline the assessment process for disabled students' allowance to reduce the burden for students, universities and the taxpayer. My hon. Friend the Member for Forest Dean (Mr Harper) and I will invite representatives to consider how that might be achieved.

The changes summarised in this statement other than non-medical help changes will apply to all full-time, full-time distance learning, part-time and postgraduate students applying for disabled students' allowances for the first time in respect of an academic year beginning on or after 1 September 2015. This provides sufficient time for us to work with institutions and stakeholders to ensure the changes are introduced effectively. All changes are subject to the ongoing equality analysis.

Continuing students already claiming disabled students' allowances and students claiming for 2014-15 entry will remain on the current system of support for 2015-16.

We are grateful to universities, students and their representative bodies for their assistance in informing these changes ([HC Deb 12 September 2014 c 47WS](#))

7 Comment

The changes to funding have been criticised by several organisations including the NUS and Disability Rights UK. The following articles contain comment:

- [“NUS blasts David Willetts over changes to disabled students' support”](#), *Times Higher Education* 7 April 2014
- [“Cuts to grant funding for disabled students will put their studies at risk”](#), *The Guardian* 24 April 2014
- [“Universities minister criticised for 'deeply unfair' cuts to disability funding”](#), *The Independent* 8 April 2014
- [“NUS deeply concerned by cuts to disabled students' allowance”](#), NUS 8 April 2014
- [“Disabled Students Allowance cuts may deter students”](#) Disability Rights UK 8 May 2014
- [Disabled students could be 'shut out' by government cuts”](#) *The Guardian* 20 May 2014

- [“Disabled students could ‘fall through the cracks’ after ‘deeply unfair’ reforms”](#), Disability News Service 11 April 2014
- [“Disabled Students’ Allowance cuts postponed”](#), *Times Higher Education* 12 September 2014