

**Changes to Disabled Students Allowance
Question for Short Debate, House of Lords
2 November 2015****Introduction**

1. Lord Addington has tabled a Question for Short Debate on Tuesday 27 October to ask Her Majesty's Government whether they plan to make any changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance.

Summary

2. Our overall view is that the changes to DSA carry the risk of leaving universities without sufficient investment to support disabled students throughout the whole of their course. The government has so far failed to provide sufficient information or assurance to universities about future investment to support disabled students to be successful in higher education. This risk is compounded if the government considers reductions to the Student Opportunity Allocation in the November 2015 spending review. We are also concerned that the impact of DSA changes will be disproportionately spread – concentrated on those universities that have been very successful in providing opportunities for disabled students. Those that recruit a large number of disabled students each year could be facing significant additional costs.

Background

3. In April 2014, the then Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts MP, announced reforms¹ to the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) that aimed to transfer much of the responsibility for funding support for disabled students away from government (through DSA) and to individual institutions. The changes proposed that the government:
 - i. would continue to fund only the most specialist Non-Medical Help (NMH). There are four bands of NMH, from 1 to 4, with 4 being the most specialist help. Support for Bands 1 and 2 would no longer be funding via DSA.
 - ii. would expect institutions to directly fund support for students with 'mild difficulties' and to reform and revise the delivery of courses to ensure that they are able to do this.
 - iii. would no longer fund standard specification computers or the warranties and insurance associated with them or pay for higher specification and/or higher cost computers simply because of the way in which a course is delivered.
 - iv. would fund higher specification or higher cost computers where a student needs one solely by virtue of their disability but students would be expected to fund the first £200 of the cost of any equipment.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/higher-education-student-support-changes-to-disabled-students-allowances-dsa>

4. The announcement caused much concern throughout the sector, for two key reasons. First, that institutions were being asked to make significant changes at short notice without full information. The second reason was that the cut in funding for DSA could disproportionately impact those institutions that were doing the most to provide opportunities for disabled students to study higher education.
5. On 11 March, the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) announced that these changes to DSA that were due to be implemented in the 2015/16 academic year would be postponed until 2016/17. The only exception to this would be the policy on computer equipment: from 2015/16 students will not receive computers as standard, and if in receipt of DSA for specialist equipment would be expected to contribute £200 towards the cost.

Issues for consideration

6. The government has recently consulted on the changes originally proposed in April 2014.² The consultation closed on 24 September but there is as yet no indication of when the government will confirm the changes to DSA for 2016/17. This is in itself problematic, as students are eligible to apply for DSA from January 2016, so will need to be in full possession of the facts in order to do so.
7. Analysis HESA student data for 2012/13 shows that 6.7% of students were in receipt of DSA. Disabled students comprise around 9.5% of the total student population. The government's view is that universities should be able to ensure that they can create a more inclusive learning environment to encourage greater independence and less reliance on individual interventions. However, in 2012/13, in 60 institutions the percentage of disabled students exceeded the average figure of 6.7%. In 24 institutions, the percentage of disabled students was higher than 10% of the total student population.
8. This suggests that the impact of the changes to DSA will be disproportionately felt across the sector. By no coincidence, the majority of these institutions are modern universities that have done the most to widen participation in recent years. It is inevitable that they will face significant additional costs simply due to their success in enabling disabled students to study at university. As yet, there has been no announcement of any transitional funding to support institutions as they take on the additional financial responsibilities should the government no longer provide DSA at Bands 1 and 2.
9. In July 2015, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced funding reductions following the Summer Budget.³ This included a 2.4% reduction in the funding available to institutions to support disabled students. This funding is provided as part of the Student Opportunity Allocation⁴, which institutions use to support students from disadvantaged

² https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/439947/bis-15-81-consultation-on-targeting-funding-for-disabled_students-in-higher-education-from-2016-17.pdf

³ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2015/CL192015/>

⁴ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/funding/annalocns/1516/lt/>

backgrounds and under-represented groups. This is vital investment that helps to ensure that students who need more support while studying are successful in their courses and obtain the qualifications that will secure them jobs when they leave university.

10. The Student Opportunity Allocation has been at risk of significant reduction in recent years. Some observers consider that universities should be able to meet their commitments to support students through the tuition fee, and that the Student Opportunity Allocation is no longer necessary. However, this is investment that has been part of HEFCE's funding to universities since long before the 2012 increase in tuition fees, introduced by the 1997-2010 Labour Government as part of its policy to widen participation.
11. Since BIS is an unprotected department in the Treasury's November Spending Review there are real fears for the future of the Student Opportunity Allocation which provides universities with funding to help meet the additional costs of work on outreach, improving student achievement and helps to support disabled students.
12. Changes to DSA will mean that Student Opportunity Allocation plays an even more important role in enabling universities to support students to be successful. Rather than falling victim to the Treasury's programme of budget reduction, the Student Opportunity Allocation should be increased to match the government's own ambitions to improve university access and student success.

Questions for the government

What estimate has it made of the financial impact on institutions of withdrawing DSA for students requiring Band 1 or 2 Non-Medical-Help?

Will it increase the funding for the Student Opportunity Allocation in order to ensure that institutions can continue to support students to be successful?

Has the government assessed the cumulative impact of changes in funding that have already occurred, and those that are proposed, in order to understand the effect they may have on students?

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