

The Effects of DSA cuts on Disabled Students

NUS Briefing

The announced changes to DSA will jeopardize disabled students' access and success in higher education. The loss of funding for specialist IT equipment and non-medical help, combined with a restrictive redefinition of disability, threaten to make university a non-viable option for many disabled students who already face important financial difficulties.

Introduction

Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) are a non means-tested financial help for UK domiciled disabled students. To receive DSA, students must prove they have a disability or long-term health condition, a mental health condition, or a specific learning disability such as dyslexia or dyspraxia

[At present](#), a disabled student can receive up to £5,161 for specialist equipment (including laptop and assistive technologies); up to £20,520 for non-medical helpers (such as notetakers or scribes); and up to £1,724 for general costs such as travel expenses per year.

These amounts are lower for part-time students (£15,390 for non-medical help and £1,293 for general expenses) and postgraduate students can only receive a single allowance up to £10,260 a year. The exact amount for an individual is agreed through a needs assessment conducted by a specialist staff member in consultation with the student.

[In 2013](#), there were 215,370 disabled students in the UK, which represents 8.6% of all higher education students. However, **only a minority (46%) of disabled student receive DSA**, and this proportion is even lower for postgraduate students (27% of taught postgraduate disabled students).

David Willetts claims that DSA cost has risen from £91.7 million in 2008/09 to £125m in 2011/12, but forgets to mention that this amount [decreased by £5m](#) in 2012/13 despite an increase in the number of DSA recipients. In 2011/12, 53,000 full-time undergraduate disabled students received DSA, compared to 54,900 in 2012/13. **Expenditure is thus already decreasing despite growing need for financial support.**

Disabled students' financial difficulties

Disabled students are heavily affected by cuts in the education sector and welfare state. Increase in fees led to an [increase in disabled students' debt](#) and a decline in their satisfaction. NUS' ['The Pound In Your Pocket'](#) further reveals worryingly high level of financial difficulties suffered by disabled students:

- A great majority - **59%** - of disabled respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had worried about **not having enough money** to meet basic living expenses compared to 47% of non-disabled respondents
- Only 33% agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to concentrate on their studies without worrying about finances compared to 45% of non-disabled students

- Only 25% said it was completely clear how much financial supports they would receive prior to starting their course; and 31% find it easy to understand what financial support they are entitled to
- **55% have already seriously considered leaving their course** compared to 35% of non-disabled respondents; among those, 54% reported it was because of financial problem, 36% because of a health problem, and 20% for a disability issue.

All this is in a context of cuts to the benefit system. This affects disabled students more as they are more likely than non-disabled students to claim state benefits.

Some 11% of disabled students claimed Disability Living Allowance (DLA) [in 2012](#). However, the transfer from DLA to the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) is not automatic and the Government estimates there will be [600,000 fewer disabled people](#) who will qualify for PIP by 2018.

NUS has also been deeply concerned about the **work capability assessment** for the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), and the similar test for the new Universal Credit (UC). Countless [reports](#) of the scandalous difficulties disabled people have experienced in securing vital support thanks to the private company who undertakes the tests, ATOS, has meant the system is regarded with deep distrust by disabled people and widespread concerns that it has left many in poverty.

The period of transition from education to work is usually longer for disabled students, which means they might not receive any financial help whilst they are in between. In addition, cuts in the ESA will directly impact on disabled part-time students who can claim out-of-work benefits and secure through it much needed funding to succeed in their degree.

DSA as a key factor to equality

Disabled students face a **multitude of barriers and challenges**. According to [ECU's 2012 Equality Report](#), they are more likely to study part-time and less likely to access postgraduate degrees (5% of postgrad students are disabled compared to 7.7% of undergrads). The disability degree attainment gap is of 2.2% and disabled students are more likely to drop-out than non-disabled students.

Disabled students' number one priority in choosing a university is [access](#), and **their choices are often dictated by the level of access provided** rather than the courses offered. Students with care needs often avoid courses that involve placements abroad as they believe personal assistant support would be too difficult to coordinate.

In this context, **DSA is vital to ensure disabled students' access to higher education**. Indeed, receiving DSA considerably improves disabled students' experience and success in higher education. A report published by the [National Audit Office](#) in 2007 states that "students receiving an allowance are much more likely to continue their course than other students self-declaring a disability".

ECU 2012 report further shows that **disabled students receiving DSA are more likely to reach a first or upper class second honours degree** than disabled students who do not receive an allowance. At undergraduate level, 62.2% of disabled students who receive DSA reached a first or upper second class honours degree, compared to 60.7% of disabled students not receiving an allowance. However, this proportion remains lower compared to non-disabled students (64% reached a first or 2:1).

Table 1: Disabled students' grade per allowance status

Status	First/2:1	2:1/third/pass
England disabled, DSA	62.2%	37.8%
England disabled, no DSA	60.4%	39.6%
Northern Ireland, DSA	61.2%	38.8%
Northern Ireland, no DSA	65.1%	34.9%
Scotland disabled, DSA	68.7%	31.3%
Scotland disabled, no DSA	66.7%	33.3%
Wales disabled, DSA	56.9%	43.1%
Wales disabled, no DSA	54.8%	45.2%

Source: ECU 2012

Cuts will jeopardize access to higher education

The Government announced four major changes: DSA funding will no longer be provided for standard specification computers, software and associated peripherals; DSA funding will no longer be provided for non-medical help; it will only support students with specific learning disabilities that are 'more complex'; and responsibility between government and institutions will be 'rebalanced'. Each of these points is highly problematic.

1/ **It cannot be expected that disabled students have access to their own computer.** However, having a personal computer is essential to disabled students, especially for those requiring a learning software or hardware that they might not be able to afford without DSA. Besides, access to computers on campus is limited, and using shared facilities can be an issue for students suffering from particular types of impairment or even increase their difficulties when using assistive technologies.

2/ The expectation that the provision of certain less specialist non-medical helpers such as scribes or note-takers will be funded by institutions instead of through the DSA will jeopardize student success. Disabled students are not evenly or proportionately distributed around the sector; **those institutions who are more successful at recruiting disabled students will be penalised for doing so** – small and specialist institutions are particularly affected. In the absence of additional funds, universities will either have to cut other services to balance their budget – or worse, will have a strong disincentive to recruit disabled students in the first place.

3/ The focus on 'more complex needs', without clear definition so far, is designed to **exclude students with specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dyspraxia from financial support.** But they are [the largest group of disabled students](#), and further more a group whose disability explicitly affects learning. Giving them access to computers and supportive technology is crucial in enabling them to undertake a degree. It is not for the Government to decide who is 'disabled enough' and assessment should be left to professionals.

4/ The reduction in support, or perceptions that support is no longer available may also mean

that fewer disabled students will have the possibility to declare their disability and undergo assessments. With an already announced [lower funding from government](#) and a requirement to protect research budgets, it is unclear how universities can adjust to such changes. Where will institutions find the necessary resources to support disabled students and provide reasonable adjustments? The 'rebalancing' of responsibility might lead to the absence of support in some institutions, and will have **long-term damages to disabled students' access and success in higher education.**

Further Information

- [Ministerial statement](#) on the changes
- [Student Support Information Note](#) regarding the changes
- Lobby your MP!

