

STUDENT SUPPORT INFORMATION NOTE (SSIN)

DISABLED STUDENTS' ALLOWANCES – UPDATE ON DSAs REFORMS

SSIN 05/16
January 2016

To:

Student Finance administrators and practitioners in institutions of higher education;
DSA assessors, assessment centres and suppliers;
Student Finance advisors, and
The Student Loans Company

Dear Colleagues

Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) - update on DSAs reform

Introduction

The Government is undertaking reforms of Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) to ensure that Government funding is targeted in the best way and to achieve value for money, whilst ensuring those disabled students most in need continue to get the help they require. The reforms also aim to ensure that Higher Education providers consistently meet their duties under the Equalities Act 2010, which is to the benefit of all disabled students, not just those in receipt of DSAs.

The DSAs system has been in its current form for nearly 25 years. The current arrangements do not recognise technological advances, increases in use of technology, or the introduction of the Equality Act, which placed specific legal duties on higher education providers. The rise in the number of disabled students in higher education highlights the need for better provision of inclusive practices in the learning environment.

The Government recently consulted about changing the balance of responsibilities for disabled students, which would result in Higher Education providers taking a bigger role in supporting disabled students. The Government Response, published on 2nd December 2015, confirmed what changes will be made. These are detailed below, and this SSIN also provides an update on other areas of reform of the DSAs.

The Government Response to the consultation

BIS received over 200 responses to the consultation from a wide range of DSAs stakeholders, and are moving forward on implementation. The Written Ministerial Statement made on 2nd December 2015 gives full details of the changes and the Student Finance England guidance on DSAs for 2016/17 is currently being revised to reflect the new policies from 2016/17. It will be issued shortly and will contain detailed instructions for the administration of DSAs.

The DSAs guidance will continue to set out the range of support available to disabled students through DSAs. In particular, the guidance will set out which types of NMH support are expected to become the primary responsibility for HE providers for new DSAs students from 2016/17. Information will also be provided on the cost maxima for the different NMH roles and the qualifications, professional body membership and experience a support worker is expected to have to provide the service. A new Exceptional Case Process is being introduced to support those students who require interim support whilst in dispute with their institution over the provision of an adjustment, and details will also be set out in the DSAs guidance. On accommodation, we do not expect institutions, or anyone providing accommodation to students on their behalf, to pass on any additional costs of specialist accommodation to disabled students. Finally, the policy changes for computer peripherals, which includes no longer providing as standard 'the bundle', digital voice recorders or printers and scanners, will be reflected in the new guidance and BIS is working with SFE to ensure the changes are administered smoothly.

As part of the Government response to the consultation BIS undertook to work with stakeholders to consider how best to identify, promote and disseminate best practice in inclusivity, and to work with partners to identify ways in which existing assurance frameworks can help embed and/or monitor inclusivity. The first of these meetings have taken place.

Quality Assurance of Assessment reports

BIS has begun work on developing a new process for the quality assurance of DSAs study needs assessment reports, which will form part of the existing DSA-QAG audit arrangements.

The new process will consider whether the report can be read as a standalone document which demonstrates:

- The impact of the student's condition on their ability to study
- An understanding of the requirements and demands of the course
- A commitment to the provision of cost-effective solutions for each student within the parameters of DSAs funding as set out by BIS
- An analysis of all the strategies available to the student
- A clear decision making process for the strategies ultimately recommended

The report should also set out those areas of support that fall to the HE provider to address, but should not make specific recommendations on the form that support should take – that is a matter for the HE provider.

BIS will be looking to work closely with DSA-QAG and other sector colleagues in developing the new process.

Two-quote policy

Stakeholders may be aware that BIS has made a commitment to Parliament to bring exemptions to the two-quote policy for selecting non-medical help suppliers to an end. That work has been ongoing throughout 2015, with some exemptions already brought to a close and the remaining exemptions ending on 31 January 2016. From February 2016 the two-quote process will be used for the selection of any DSAs-funded NMH support for new DSAs students. BIS is currently considering whether the two-quote policy should be replaced with an alternative method of selecting DSAs-funded NMH suppliers. No decision has been made on an alternative process and the two-quote policy will remain in force until such time as any new process is agreed. NMH services that are not funded through DSAs are outside the scope of this work.

NMH quality assurance process

In parallel BIS has been working to introduce a new quality assurance process for the supply of non-medical help support. This consists of four strands:

- A requirement for all suppliers to register with DSA-QAG in order to provide DSAs-funded services for any student receiving a type of NMH support for the first time after the launch of the NMH quality assurance framework – this will lead to an ‘accredited’ status
- A new quality assurance framework setting out the standards expected to be met by accredited NMH suppliers
- An audit process to ensure accredited NMH suppliers are meeting the required standards
- Cost maxima introduced for any DSAs-funded NMH support from 2016/17

NMH suppliers will receive an invitation to register with DSA-QAG shortly.

Students in receipt of NMH support prior to the NMH register going live will be able to continue with their current supplier until further notice. NMH services that are not funded through DSAs are outside the scope of this work.

Centralised procurement

During the course of 2016 we will be modernising the way DSA funded IT, Software, and Specialist Equipment items are procured and introducing behind-the-scenes changes to the way that these items are supplied to students.

BIS has recently notified ATSPs and Assessment Centres that Office 365 should be recommended as standard. BIS intends to launch a tender exercise during this year

to tender for suppliers offering the Assistive Technology Equipment Support and Supply service to students, and is working to move all procurement of assistive technology, computers, software, and specialist equipment which is fundable by DSAs onto frameworks.

Future DSAs policy

BIS will work with the sector to encourage a sector-led approach to sharing best practice and supporting inclusive learning environments. BIS plans to work with the wider Higher Education sector regarding supporting all disabled students to access Higher Education. Disabled students' should expect to have their needs met through inclusive learning practices and individual reasonable adjustments made by their HE provider, as far as possible, with DSAs supplementing this for students with more specialised needs.