

SAAS
Funding your future

Student
Awards
Agency
Scotland

Further and Higher Education in Scotland

Review of Disability Related **Student** **Support**

SUMMARY REPORT

www.saas.gov.uk

- ✓ Informing Choices
- ✓ Funding Futures
- ✓ Supporting Success

Ministerial foreword

As Minister with responsibility for Further and Higher Education, I am pleased to introduce the findings and recommendations of this review.



• **Jamie Hepburn, MSP**

*Minister for Higher Education
and Further Education, Youth
Employment and Training*

As a government we are committed to the principle that access to education should be based on the ability to learn and not the ability to pay. We believe in fair and equal access to education for all students and we recognise the importance of disability related student support in helping disabled students, and those with additional learning needs, to access, participate and thrive in Further and Higher Education.

The findings of this review have highlighted that the current system of disability related student support can be improved and I welcome the recommendations which seek to address this.

I am pleased that work is already underway to implement a number of the recommendations including; an online application process for the Higher Education Disabled Students' Allowance and improved information and guidance for students and practitioners on the Additional Support Needs for Learning Allowance in Further Education.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the project Steering Group for their valuable contribution to this review. Your knowledge and expertise has helped guide this review and ensure that its findings and recommendations represent the needs of users of disability related student support in Scotland.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the students, their representatives and staff from across the sector, who participated and provided evidence to the review. I thank you for sharing your experiences and feedback through the surveys and focus group sessions, your participation has helped shape the final recommendations presented.

03 Contents

04 / Introduction

06 / Methodology

11 / Findings

28 / Recommendations

29 / Acknowledgements

30 / Glossary



Introduction

In 2017, the Independent Review of Student Support (SSR) recommended further review of all non-core support in Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) be undertaken.

In 2019, it was agreed that the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) would lead a review of the disability related student support element on behalf of the Scottish Government.

This review would encompass the support available to students with disabilities and/or additional learning needs in both FE and HE.

The purpose of the review was to:

- Evaluate current provisions of disability related students support in FE and HE. Namely the Additional Support Needs for Learning Allowance (FE) and the Disabled Students Allowance (HE)
- Make evidence-based recommendations which seek to improve the provision of support
- Increase parity across both the FE and HE sectors



Introduction *Continued*

Further Education

In FE, students are supported through the Additional Support Needs for Learning Allowance (which will be referred to as 'ASNLA funds') and colleges' core funding.

Funds are administered to individual students by their college from these funds which are allocated and paid to colleges by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

In most cases the college will assume responsibility for arranging and financing support or equipment on behalf of the student. There are fewer instances where the college will provide financial support directly to the student.

This is a feature common to other areas of FE student support: Colleges are more likely to pay costs on behalf of students (e.g. travel and study materials), rather than funding students directly.

In addition to ASNLA funds, colleges also receive an Access and Inclusion Fund as an integral element of their core funding from the SFC.

This is used to support the teaching and learning of disabled students, including spend such as:

- Estates adaptations, equipment and large items
- Most support staff costs
- The costs of diagnostic assessments for students

Higher Education

In HE, eligible students are supported through the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), a non-income assessed fund which is administered by SAAS. It is intended to support disabled students and those with additional learning needs who are studying a course of Higher Education and may have extra costs because of their impairment.

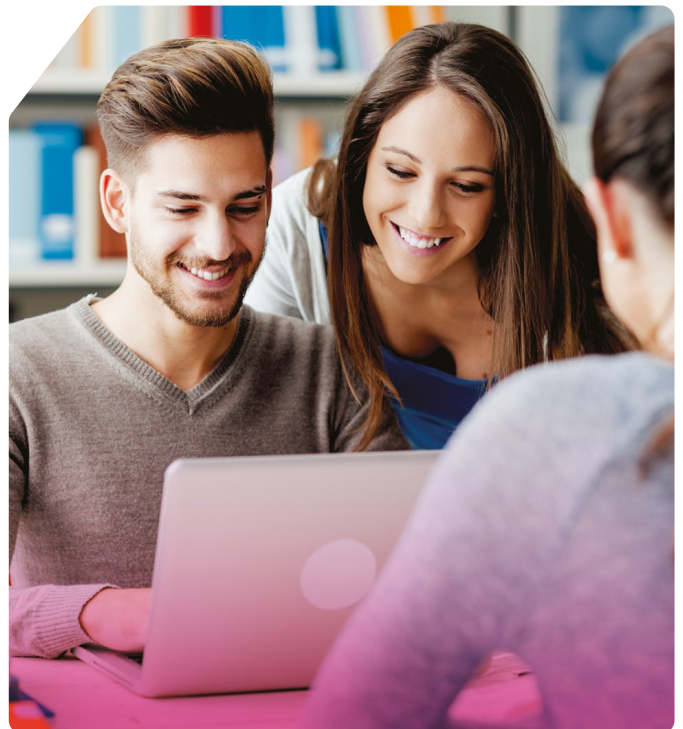
There are three allowances comprising DSA:

- Basic allowance
- Large item allowance
- Non- Medical Personal Help (NMPH) allowance

DSA is awarded to individual students and support is specific to their disability or additional learning needs.



Further information on the fund can be found on the [SAAS website](https://www.saas.gov.uk).



06 Methodology

The review adopted a project methodology which put in place various measures, controls and a reporting structure which built the guiding principles of the review.

A Project Team, consisting of a Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) and Project Manager (PM), was appointed to oversee the review and ensure that it was delivered within the agreed scope, budget and timescales. The SRO and PM reported directly to the SSR Programme Board providing updates on; progress, risks and findings throughout the project lifecycle.



Methodology

The Steering Group

From the outset it was recognised that a Steering Group was needed to represent the interests of key stakeholders in the disability related student support context. In July 2019, a Steering Group of key stakeholders, led by SAAS, was established.

The purpose of the group was to:

- Act as a forum for wider discussion on the review, its aims and approach
- Provide input around their own areas of expertise
- Ensure that the final recommendations are fit for purpose and meet the needs of users of disability related student support in FE and HE

Membership of the group included:

- Scottish Government Advanced Learning and Science officials – representing Further and Higher Education policy
- Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)
- National Union of Students (NUS)
- Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
- Scottish Heads of Disability Services – representing HE sector
- College Development Network – representing FE sector
- Lead Scotland

Scottish Government's Chief Nursing Officer's Directorate and the University and College Union (UCU) also maintained a watch brief throughout the review.

All meetings of the Steering Group were minuted and agreed actions were recorded.



Building an evidence base

A key purpose of the review was to make evidence-based recommendations which aim to improve the provision of support to students. To achieve this the Steering Group recognised the importance of building an evidence base which captured the experience and views of disabled students and those who support them. They recommended that a series of surveys and workshops would be the most appropriate platforms to gather this evidence.

Student and Sector Surveys

In early 2020, a suite of surveys were produced to gather the views of students, their parents/ carers/ representatives and those who work with disabled students, on the current provision of disability related student support in FE and HE. The surveys were designed in collaboration with the Steering Group, with questions set around guided themes which included:

- Information and Guidance
- Funding
- The Application Process
- Equipment
- The Complaints and Appeals Process
- The Funding Model

Note: these surveys were compiled prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and did not include questions relating to students' experiences of remote learning etc.

Methodology *Continued*

Surveys took the form of bespoke questionnaires, distributed via an online survey tool and included a combination of mandatory and optional questions. Primarily, questions were multiple choice but with further opportunities to provide targeted and open feedback.

The surveys focused on three distinct groups:



Survey 1

Disabled students and those with additional learning needs, who are permanently based in Scotland and are undertaking/ have undertaken a course of **Further Education** in Scotland.



Survey 2

Disabled students and those with additional learning needs, who are permanently based in Scotland and are undertaking/ have undertaken a course of **Higher Education** in Scotland.



Survey 3

Staff who work in Scottish colleges and universities in a role involving disabled students, as well as to staff working in organisations that provide information, advice and support to disabled students.

Prior to publication the themes and questions were peer reviewed by a group of students, representatives and staff who support disabled students to ensure that the surveys were fit for purpose.

All three surveys were launched on 5 February 2020 and closed to the public on 10 April 2020.

They were promoted through various platforms to help maximise student and staff participation.

This included:

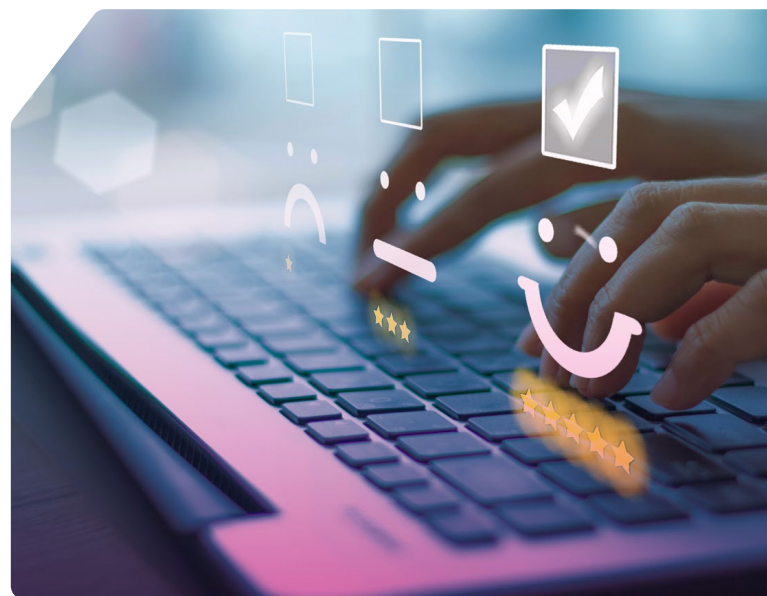
- Targeted communications to students currently in receipt of DSA
- Promotion through SAAS and college/ university social media channels
- Distribution by email to key stakeholder groups across FE and HE

Students were welcome to seek support to complete the survey or alternatively their parents/carers/representatives could respond on their behalf. The surveys were also available in alternative formats, on request, if required.

- **Survey 1** (FE students) received **124 responses** with a completion rate of 57%
- **Survey 2** (HE students) received **810 responses** with a completion rate of 61%
- **Survey 3** (Staff) received **157 responses** with a completion rate of 48%

Analysis of the survey response was delayed until the summer of 2020 following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Steering Group met virtually in October 2020 to start work on reviewing the survey findings.



Methodology *Continued*



Focus Groups

In January 2021, a series of virtual focus groups were held virtually to seek further evidence from users of disability-related student support, their representatives and staff from across the FE and HE sector.

Each session comprised an informal discussion around guided themes which were identified by the student and sector surveys. These sessions provided participants with the opportunity to share their experience, views and feedback on disability-related student support in Scotland.

Themes included:

- Information and Guidance
- Funding - Availability and Processes
- Adjustments and the Physical Environment
- Complaints Process
- Influencing Change
- Impact of Covid-19

Note: The focus group sessions took place after to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Steering Group reflected that the pandemic had brought about significant changes to the student experience and learning environment and chose to include a theme on the impact of Covid-19 as part of the focus group work.

Four distinct focus groups were held to capture the views of students and staff across both the FE and HE sectors:

Focus Group A Further Education Student Focus Group

- Facilitators:** SAAS
- Participants:** Four students, and one parent of a student, across three Further Education colleges

Focus Group B Further Education Sector Focus Group

- Facilitators:** SAAS, representative of the College Development Network and Scottish Funding Council
- Participants:** Six representatives across six Further Education colleges

Focus Group C Higher Education Student Focus Group

- Facilitators:** SAAS, with Lead Scotland and NUS Scotland in attendance
- Participants:** Six students, one parent of a student, and one student's representative across five Higher Education Institutions

Focus Group D Higher Education Sector Focus Group

- Facilitators:** SAAS, with Head of Disability Services, SG Advanced Learning and Science and Lead Scotland
- Participants:** Fourteen representatives across eight Higher Education

Contributions to the surveys and focus groups were anonymised.

Methodology *Continued*

Drafting of Recommendations

In early 2021 draft recommendations were developed in collaboration with the project Steering Group. Recommendations were drafted based upon the evidence gathered throughout the surveys and focus group sessions in line with the scope of the review.

In March 2021, draft recommendations were reviewed by a group of HE students and student representatives. The purpose of the group was to consider the draft recommendations within the context of the review and ensure that they effectively address its findings.

Attempts were made to organise a similar sessions with FE students and student representatives but this was not possible due to a lack of participants. The FE draft recommendations were issued to FE students who attended Focus Group A for comment but no responses were received.

The Impact of Covid-19

The outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020 had a significant impact on the timeline and approach of the review.

Throughout 2020 resource from the Project Team was redirected to focus on the Scottish Governments emergency response to the pandemic. Steering Group members were also required to prioritise the response to the pandemic in their respective institutions and organisations.

This resulted in a pause to project activities for a prolonged period of time during 2020, causing delays to key tasks and milestones.

Although the Steering Group reconvened in early 2021, the pandemic continued to present competing priorities which caused further delays to the project. The final recommendations of the review were presented to the Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training.



11 Findings

The review gathered evidence on a wide range of issues experienced by users of disability related student support.

Whilst much of the feedback was specific to the experiences of students in FE and HE respectively, it was recognised that there was a great deal of commonality across both sectors in some areas.



Findings

The findings of this review are outlined below under thematic headings.

Information and Guidance

Feedback from the surveys and focus group sessions was consistent in highlighting that there is a lack of information and guidance relating to disability related student support across FE and HE.

Participants reflected that the lack of clear information and guidance made it difficult for students to understand what support is available to them and when they can access this.

Further Education

FE students responding to Survey 1 provided strong feedback which indicated that there is a lack of awareness around ASNLA funds; their purpose and how students can access funding.

Over half of the FE students (58%) who answered were not aware of their colleges ASNLA funding and its purpose. Furthermore, 54% answered that their college induction did not include any information for disabled students including information on additional support.

Feedback from Focus Group A made further suggestions that FE students are less likely to declare a disability or learning difficulty to their college if they do not understand that additional support is available to them.

Further feedback from the group indicated that this can have a negative impact if students commence their studies without any additional support in place.

The lack of awareness surrounding the ASNLA fund was also reflected by college staff who responded to Survey 3, with 31% of respondents indicating that they were unaware of the fund or its purpose.

46% of college staff who responded were also unaware of the SFC's guidance on how to administer the funds.

One college staff member, who attended Focus Group B, commented that:

“*(It is) not clear what we can spend these funds on so no one is promoting it. There is no set guidance*”

Another said:

“*(There is a) lack of knowledge about the funds. We don't know what we can promote and what we can deliver*”



Findings *Continued*

College staff who attended Focus Group B said that it was more important for students to know what support and services they could access rather than how this was being funded (i.e. via ASLNA).

Recommendation

1

SFC to ask its core advisory group to consider how their guidance to colleges on the allocation of the Additional Support Needs for Learning Allowance (ASNLA) can be updated to provide clarity of application and consistency across the FE sector.

Higher Education

Survey Groups 2 and 3 evidenced positive awareness of DSA amongst students and staff with 86% and 97% of respondents confirming that they were aware of DSA respectively.

However, some students who responded to Survey 2 commented that they did not receive enough information or guidance about the DSA process or how to organise support once DSA was awarded to them.

Students specifically commented that they did not receive enough information on how they should purchase equipment or organise personal support e.g. proof readers, note takers or BSL interpreters.

Students commented that the information they did receive was “confusing”, “vague” or “hard to understand”.

College and university staff who attended Focus Group D referred to recent changes to the SAAS DSA process. They described how SAAS’ decision to stop sharing DSA award letters with colleges and universities, as a result of General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) concerns, had made it increasingly difficult for staff to provide students with appropriate information and guidance.

Staff explained that having access to DSA award letters in the past had allowed them to confirm a student’s DSA entitlement and help them organise support.

However, they now rely on students notifying them when their DSA funding has been approved and in most cases this does not happen. They explained that this has made it challenging for staff to provide students with the information, guidance and support some students need to organise their additional support.

Staff commented that this can lead to students purchasing equipment which is not suitable to their needs or cause delays to support being put in place.

Staff unanimously agreed that an alternative process for sharing this information should be considered as soon as possible.

Recommendation

2

SAAS to consider developing a replacement notification process for DSA Assessors which will maintain GDPR compliance.

¹ SAAS actively promoted the HE student surveys by contacting all 2019-2020 DSA applicants directly via email. It is highly likely that the number of students responding positively to this question would be higher as a result.

Findings *Continued*

Both Sectors

Feedback captured across all surveys and focus groups highlighted that more needs to be done to provide students with clear information and guidance to support their understanding of the additional support available to them.

Feedback from students and staff also highlighted that tailored information for school leavers, those transitioning from FE to HE and those progressing to Postgraduate study will support and inform student choices and help them to access support at the right time.

Recommendation

3

Student Information Scotland (SIS) website should be updated to provide information on advocacy groups and support available for disabled students/ those with additional support needs. Could include tailored information for those who are transitioning from school to FE/ HE and FE to HE.



Findings *Continued*

Funding

Disability related student support in FE and HE is fundamentally different.

As mentioned previously, colleges assume responsibility for arranging and financing support or equipment on behalf of FE students. By contrast, DSA support is provided directly to HE students who are then responsible for purchasing equipment and/ or arranging personal support.

The student experience in FE and HE differs significantly and this was reflected in evidence gathered under the theme of “Funding”.

/ Further Education

FE students who responded to Survey 1 and attended Focus Group A generally reflected positively about the disability related support they received e.g. equipment and classroom support.

However, students commented that they were unaware that the support they received was financed through ASNLA funds. Students reflected that improvements could be made to make ASNLA funding more visible and therefore easier to access.

In June 2021, SFC concluded a [comprehensive review](#) of its funding. [SFC’s Review Report](#) recognises that there are some areas of crossover between student support and core funds which need further investigation (page 76, para. 3.5.2). This could allow colleges to take a holistic approach to addressing disabled students’ overall needs without having to draw unhelpful distinctions between what are teaching-related costs and what are personal costs.

Recommendation

4

SFC to consider the relationship between the ASNLA (Bursary) Fund and its core college funding for disabled students and whether there is scope to merge these two strands of support into one fund.



Further and Higher Education in Scotland

Findings *Continued*

Higher Education

The majority of HE students and staff who responded to Surveys 2 and 3 (77% and 75% respectively) felt that the level of funding available through DSA was sufficient to meet students' needs.

However, further feedback from the surveys and Focus Groups C and D revealed that there are areas of the current DSA policy which may present barriers to specific student groups.

One of the key issues highlighted was the current eligibility criteria which requires part-time students to be undertaking at least 50% of the pace of the full-time equivalent course to be eligible for DSA.

e.g. a student undertaking an HNC, which is traditionally a one year full time equivalent course, must take no longer than two years to complete the course on a part-time basis to be eligible for DSA.

The majority of HE students who responded to Survey 2 (68%) did not agree with the current policy and several commented that it was "unfair".

Further comments from Survey 2 and Focus Groups C and D highlighted that disabled students may study on a part-time basis as a direct result of their disability.

HE staff attending Focus Group D also highlighted that Student Finance England (SFE), Student Finance Wales (SFW) and Student Finance Northern Ireland (SFNI) all employ an eligibility criteria which requires only 25% of the pace of the full time equivalent course to qualify for DSA funding.

Recommendation

5

The DSA eligibility criteria which requires part-time students to be undertaking at least 50% of the pace of the full time equivalent course should be reviewed.



Further and Higher Education in Scotland

Findings *Continued*

It was also identified that 60% of HE staff found it challenging to distinguish between support which should be met by the college or university (referred to as “[reasonable adjustments](#)”) and that which should be supported through DSA. Particularly in cases where the cost of support exceeds current DSA thresholds.

One respondent commented:

“The UK Equality Act 2010 is unhelpfully worded. It (the term “[reasonable adjustments](#)”) is open to interpretation. There are no practical examples of what adjustments look like. This means employers or universities can just say “no it is unreasonable”.

HE staff who attended Focus Group D commented that the lack of clarity surrounding “reasonable adjustments” can be particularly challenging when recommending highly specialised support for students with complex needs or specific disabilities such as hearing or visual impairments.

Further comments suggested that the costs associated with specialist support, such as British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters, can be very expensive and frequently exceeds the upper limit of the Non-Medical Personal Help (NMPH) allowance (currently £25,520 per year). Staff commented that there is a lack of clarity around who is responsible for meeting any shortfall in funding.

SAAS operates an exceptions process which considers applications for costs which exceed the upper limits of DSA. However, Focus Group D commented that not all HE staff were aware of this process.



Recommendation

6

The current upper limit of Non-Medical Personal Help (NMPH) should be re-evaluated for those students who have visual and/ or hearing impairments or complex medical needs.

Applications

Higher Education

When asked about their experience of applying for DSA on a scale of 1 (complicated) to 5 (simple), HE students responding to Survey 2 gave an average score of 3. This indicates that while most students found the process straightforward, there is a need to make the DSA application process simpler for students.

Respondents were asked to provide comments to support their answer and those who provided a lower score described the process as “overly complex”, “confusing” and “stressful”.

The length of time the process takes was highlighted as a key issue. Whilst the majority of students who responded (74%) experienced no delays, over a quarter (26%) experience delays with their application. The delays reported by students were caused by gathering evidence, waiting for a needs assessment appointment or waiting for equipment to be provided.

Findings *Continued*

When asked what could be done to improve the process many respondents suggested that the current paper-based DSA application should be provided online. This was echoed during HE Focus Groups, who remarked that an online DSA application could simplify the process and reduce some of the delays.

A further suggestion was to consider the frequency of applications, which is currently annual.

One student responding to Survey 2 commented:

“*“Having to apply every year is time consuming and annoying. Unless applying for extra financial help having a rolling allowance would make life easier.”***”**

Recommendation

7 SAAS to provide an online application process for students wishing to seek DSA funding.

SAAS are actively developing their online services and application procedures and aim of providing a more accessible and inclusive experience to students.



Findings *Continued*

Equipment

Further Education

In FE there are fewer instances where ASNLA is used to provide assistive technology to individual students.

FE staff attending Focus Group B suggested that this is because many colleges prefer to mainstream their access and inclusion plans rather than providing assistive technology to individual students. Equipment is therefore funded through college's core funding rather than the student support budget.

This reflects the different way that colleges are funded with support for disabled students forming part of the core provision, rather than something that students individually apply for.



Higher Education

In HE there is more provision of assistive technology to individual students, predominantly through DSA. Students who receive DSA to purchase equipment are also entitled to keep this beyond their studies.

The majority of students who responded to Survey 2 (78%) confirmed the equipment recommended to them under DSA met their study needs. However, 18% felt that the recommended equipment did not meet their needs.

Students commented that they did not use all of the equipment provided to them. Some students commented that they were unable to use their equipment because the training they received was "minimal" or "not sufficient", whilst others said that they received "too much" or "unnecessary" equipment.

HE staff who attended Focus Group D highlighted challenges managing student expectations when recommending equipment.

Staff commented that students often apply for DSA with an expectation that they will receive a new laptop or tablet, irrespective of their disability related needs. They explained that managing these expectations can be challenging for staff.

HE staff suggested that improvements to information and guidance and sharing of best practice amongst Needs Assessors would help make recommendations for equipment more consistent, fit for purpose and provide better value for money.

They also suggested that less reliance on DSA and more focus on inclusive practice would help promote greater consistency.

Findings *Continued*

Both Sectors

FE and HE staff who attended Focus Groups B and D highlighted that students can find it difficult to fully engage with their studies if there is a delay to provide them with assistive technology. Staff provided examples where students had withdrawn from their studies as a result of such delays.

Whilst some institutions are able to facilitate the loan of equipment as an interim solution, the use of loan banks is at the discretion of the individual college or university and varies across the sector.

FE staff who attended Focus Group B explained that colleges who support both FE and HE learners will tend to use their loan banks to support FE students, including non-disabled students. Most operate a “first-come-first-served” policy and the equipment contained within the loan banks are not necessarily equipped with assistive technology or software necessary to support specialist requirements.

When asked, only 51% of HE students who responded to Survey 2 said that they received support from their college or university whilst their DSA application was being processed.

Students commented that they were either unaware that loaning equipment was an option or that there was no equipment available to them.

One student commented:

“*This was a huge problem. I was entitled to a laptop (from DSA) but had to wait around 3 months for this to arrive and was given nothing in the meantime. I didn't have a working laptop myself.”*

Recommendation

8 *Where possible, colleges and universities should utilise their loan banks to provide students with upfront equipment and support whilst they await their funding application being processed/awarded.*



Findings *Continued*

Complaints and Appeals

20% of both FE and HE students who responded to Surveys 1 and 2, confirmed that they had accessed their college or university's complaints and appeals procedure for a reason related to disability or additional learning need.

Students were also asked on a scale of 1 (complicated) to 5 (simple), how they had found this process. The results for this particular question were deemed unusable due to an insufficient response rate (FE) and students answering outside the 1 to 5 criteria (HE).

However, respondents were given the opportunity to provide comments and whilst some said that they found the process straightforward, others did not.



Students who responded less favourably commented that:

“*I had to seek help from an advocacy group with the complaints process and one of their staff became my advocate.”*

“The college did not take my complaint seriously it is currently with the SPSO.”

“*(I) found finding information hard to access and understand lots of paperwork.”*

“The complaint system is overly complex.”

Many of the HE students who attended Focus Group C described having a negative experience when navigating their college or university complaint process. Those who submitted a complaint felt this had not influenced change. They also reported issues with the handling of their complaints and in some instances they exceeded the [Scottish Public Services Ombudsman](#) (SPSO) timescales.

Those who commented felt that their complaints should have been dealt with by an independent person or body. They also highlighted that not all students were aware that they could receive support from advocacy groups during the course of their complaint.

The Steering Group acknowledged that the complaints and appeals procedure for individual colleges and universities was not within the scope of this review. However, they suggest that colleges and universities should consider their Complaints Handling Procedures and provide further information and advice on advocacy groups who can support students if they need to raise a formal complaint.

Findings *Continued*

Student advocacy

Focus Group C provided strong evidenced which suggests that there is a lack of independent advocacy available to students who were going through the complaints process. They highlighted that the lack of independent advocacy was not limited to issues relating to complaints.

The Steering Group recommended that the [Student Information Scotland](#) website should be updated to provide information on existing advocacy groups and further consideration should be given to improve the availability of independent advocacy. This is reflected in Recommendation 3.

Quality Assurance and Governance

Both Sectors

Student support is already protected in legislation but it does not make specific provision for disability related student support.

The Scottish Government should consider incorporating disability related student support into legislation and publish appropriate supporting guidance. This could help promote and protect the rights of disabled students who require additional support whilst they study and address some of the issues evidenced in relation to the Complaints and Appeals process.

In the interim, Scottish Government should publish updated guidance in relation to [Partnership Matters](#) and promote awareness of its existence.

Partnership Matters currently provides information and guidance on the legal obligations, roles and responsibilities of colleges and other agencies and practitioners in supporting students with additional support needs.



However, this guidance has not been updated for several years and our surveys evidenced that only 5% of FE students and 2% of HE students, who responded, were previously aware of the guidance.

Recommendation

9

Scottish Government should consider specifically incorporating disability related student support into legislation which is then underpinned by appropriate supporting guidance.

10

Scottish Government should publish updated guidance in relation to Partnership Matters.

Findings *Continued*

Higher Education

HE staff who responded to Survey 3 and Focus Group D highlighted concerns about the current quality assurance measures and the validation processes which underpin the delivery of DSA.

They explained that DSA Needs Assessments are undertaken in line with the [Toolkit of Quality Indicators for Needs Assessments](#) guidance which was previously produced by Scottish Government Higher Education and Science Division (HESD) in conjunction with the Disabled Students Advisory Group (DSAG), a Scottish Government stakeholder group which was made up of 22 representatives from higher education institutions and the third sector.

The DSAG, who maintained this guidance, disbanded in 2016 and the guidance has not been updated for several years. All colleges, universities and Access Centres which undertake Needs Assessments, for the purposes of DSA, are required to be validated in line with the guidance. They were also subject to an annual revalidation process.

Pending a separate review, the validation process was paused in 2017. However, the review of the validation process itself was then postponed in anticipation of the recommendations of the Student Support Review and this work did not recommence.

Since that time, the validation process has been inactive and the Needs Assessment process has not been updated to reflect new practice. Institutions which have wished to become validated over this period have been unable to do so.

Recommendation

11 *Scottish Government to consider establishing an Advisory Group to look at disability related issues in FE and HE. The remit of the group would include quality assurance and HE compliance.*

12 *Quality assurance across all HE colleges and universities (including the validation of HE Needs Assessment process) would be under the remit of the Advisory Group.*



Further and Higher Education in Scotland

Findings *Continued*

The Funding Model

Both Sectors

The review explored questions around the current funding models and the majority of students agreed that having separate allowances (ASNLA and DSA) is the best way to support disabled students and those with additional learning needs - 65% FE students and 90% HE students who responded to Survey 1 and 2 agreed.

Further Education

At present ASNLA funds are administered by colleges and they assume responsibility for arranging disability related students support on behalf of individual students. Funds are not paid to the students themselves.

In response to Survey 1, 42% of FE students stated that they would prefer to receive these funds directly, similar to the way HE students apply for DSA. The majority of these students also stated that they would prefer to arrange support without assistance from the college.

When asked, 71% of FE staff who responded to Survey 3, agreed that students should be given the opportunity to apply directly to ASNLA, similar to DSA.

They commented that:

“Yes, this will allow for continuity when the student progresses on to HE.”

“It would be more valuable to parents and carers if they could make the application directly rather than waiting for the funds to be highlighted to them and then accessed. It would remove any delay in the awarding of the funding and it could be tailored precisely to the needs of the students.”

The Steering Group recognised that whilst this feedback does not provide unanimous evidence to support a different funding model, it does suggest that improvements could be made to current practices to improve the experience of disabled students.



Findings *Continued*

/ Higher Education

The majority of HE staff (64%) who responded to Survey 3 agreed that having a separate allowance (DSA) was the best way to support disabled students and those with additional learning needs.

Further evidence showed that 43% of respondents would prefer SAAS to continue to administer DSA to individual students. 32% confirmed they would prefer DSA funds to be incorporated into college and university ring fenced core funds to support access and inclusion and 21% would prefer DSA to be devolved to colleges and universities.

Whilst the survey results returned positive evidence which was slightly in favour of a different funding model (such as the funds being administered by the colleges and universities directly), Focus Group D provided strong evidence in support of further and independent review of the current funding model. This evidence was strongly supported through separate feedback submitted by the Heads of Disability Services group.

The Steering Group supported this recommendation and acknowledged that the wider recommendations of this review will require time to be implemented and tested before any further review is undertaken.

Recommendation

13

The future funding model of disability related student support should be independently explored.



Findings *Continued*

Out of Scope

The scope of this review was to evaluate the current provision of disability related students support in FE and HE. Namely the ASNLA and DSA.

Throughout the review process a number of wider issues were identified in relation to disabled students, but these were deemed to be out of scope. These issues have been highlighted below but no formal recommendations have been provided.

Passporting

Timescales was a consistent theme which came through during the surveys and focus groups. A particular concern in relation to timescales, which was reported during all of the focus group sessions, was the length of time it takes for new applicants to receive support.

The focus group sessions discussed the benefits of 'passporting' adjustments, equipment requirements and/or assessments when a student is transitions between levels of study e.g. from school to college/ university, from college to university or from one institution to another. It was generally accepted that the use of "passporting" would help mitigate many of the delays experienced by students and provide a consistency of support to students whilst they navigate key transitional phases of their education.

Although there are examples of this occurring at some regional levels, particular between schools and local colleges, it does not appear to be happening nationally and the level of information transmitted can vary.

Whilst some transitional support may be in scope of this review, it is felt that this issue is much wider and could cover the whole learner journey.

Lecture Capture

There was strong evidence from the student surveys and focus groups to suggest that there is a lack of support within colleges and universities to allow lecture capture. This was described as a significant barrier for many disabled students who rely on lecture capture so that they can review and fully understand lectures and seminars.

It was recognised that lecture capture has become more widespread as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but it is not standard practice amongst all colleges and universities. The Steering Group suggested that a national strategy on lecture capture should be considered for all academic teaching staff.

Implementation of Support Plan

The surveys found that 39% of FE students who responded to Survey 1 and 54% of HE students who responded to Survey 2, felt lecturers did not make appropriate adjustments and follow support plans created.

The Steering Group suggested that further consideration could be given to the introduction of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for academic and senior staff in supporting disabled students and those with additional learning needs. Colleges and universities could also look to introduce disability champions amongst their staff.



Findings *Continued*

/ Complaints procedure

As evidenced earlier in this report, students described their experience of navigating their college or university's complaint process. Some of which felt that this had not influenced change within their institution. Other students reported that the handling of their complaints far exceeded the published SPSO timescales. Some felt their complaints should have been dealt with by an independent person/ body.

Not all students were aware that they could receive support from advocacy groups during the course of their complaint. The Steering Group advised that colleges and universities should consider their Complaints Handling Procedures and provide advice on advocacy groups that can support students if they require to raise a formal complaint.

/ Student advocacy

The Steering Group recognised that there was strong evidence (particularly in the student focus groups) of limited independent advocacy available to students who were going through the complaints procedure (but not limited to complaints).

It was suggested that the Scottish Government may wish to consider whether additional funding or support could be provided for the creation of new and independent student advocacy groups.

/ Estates/ physical environment

18% of FE and 20% HE students who responded to the student surveys said that the physical environment at their college or university did not meeting their disability related needs. The Steering Group acknowledges that each of the college and universities estates will vary in regards to accessibility.

Institutions have an obligation under the Equality Act in regards to reasonable adjustments which would include removing barriers to a student being able to undertake their studies. The Steering Group suggested that colleges and universities could consider undertaking accessibility audits undertaken by a Disabled Persons' Organisation (DPO) to improve their estates.



Recommendations

1. SFC to ask its core advisory group to consider how their guidance to colleges on the allocation of the Additional Support Needs for Learning Allowance (ASNLA) can be updated to provide clarity of application and consistency across the FE sector.
2. SAAS to consider developing a replacement notification process for DSA Assessors which will maintain GDPR compliance.
3. Student Information Scotland (SIS) website should be updated to provide information on advocacy groups and support available for disabled students/ those with additional support needs. Could include tailored information for those who are transitioning from school to FE/ HE and FE to HE.
4. SFC to consider the relationship between the ASNLA (Bursary) Fund and its core college funding for disabled students and whether there is scope to merge these two strands of support into one fund.
5. The DSA eligibility criteria which requires part-time students to be undertaking at least 50% of the pace of the full time equivalent course should be reviewed.
6. The current upper limit of Non-Medical Personal Help (NMPH) should be re-evaluated for those students who have visual and/ or hearing impairments or complex medical needs.
7. SAAS to provide an online application process for students wishing to seek DSA funding.
8. Where possible, colleges and universities should utilise their loan banks to provide students with upfront equipment and support whilst they await their funding application being processed/ awarded.
9. Scottish Government should consider specifically incorporating disability related student support into legislation which is then underpinned by appropriate supporting guidance.
10. Scottish Government should publish updated guidance in relation to Partnership Matters.
11. Scottish Government to consider establishing an Advisory Group to look at disability related issues in FE and HE. The remit of the group would include quality assurance and HE compliance.
12. Quality assurance across all HE colleges and universities (including the validation of HE Needs Assessment process) would be under the remit of the Advisory Group.
13. The future funding model of disability related student supported should be independently explored.



Acknowledgements

On behalf of the Scottish Government, Student Awards Agency Scotland would like to thank the Project Steering Group for their excellent contributions to this review.

The Steering Group members were central in the development of the surveys, supporting officials with the 2021 focus groups and developing the language around the final recommendations.

We would also like to thank the students, their representatives and staff who participated in the surveys, focus groups and quality assurance group. Your contributions provided the evidence based from which our recommendations have been made.

Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS)

SAAS is an Executive Agency of the Scottish Government responsible for administering financial support for eligible Scottish students undertaking courses of Higher Education.

SAAS administer the HE Disabled Students Allowance.

Scottish Government Advanced Learning and Science officials (ALS)

ALS officials work closely with SAAS and the SFC on the policy and delivery of financial support to Further and Higher education students.

A key priority for ALS is supporting the needs of vulnerable student groups including disabled students.



Scottish Funding Council (SFC)

The SFC is the non-departmental public body responsible for funding Scotland's further and higher education institutions, including its 26 colleges and 19 universities.

The SFC administer ASNLA funding to Scotland's colleges to support disabled students and those with additional learning needs in FE.

National Union of Students (NUS)

NUS Scotland represents around 500,000 students in Scotland through their member college and university students' associations. They work to promote, defend and extend the rights of students and to champion strong students' associations.

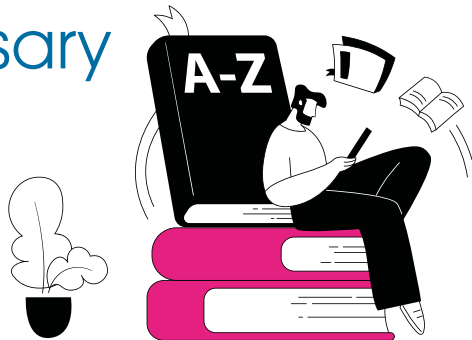
Scottish Heads of Disability Services

The Scottish Heads of Disability Services is an informal network of all Managers/Heads (or their representatives) of university services for disabled students in Scotland.

Lead Scotland

Lead Scotland is a national charity supporting disabled people and carers by providing personalised learning, befriending, advice and information services.

Glossary



ASNLA - Additional Support Needs for Learners

Allowance is a non-income assessed allowance that is administered by individual colleges. It is intended to support students with disabilities or additional learning needs who are studying a course of Further Education and may have extra costs because of their impairment.

Basic Allowance is a form of support which comprises the DSA. Students can claim the basic allowance for items such as photocopying, additional printing costs, Braille or Livescribe paper.

Disability related student support is the term we have used to describe the additional financial support which is available to disabled students in relation to their disability related needs. This includes the ASNLA and DSA.

Disabled student - Someone studying in further education or higher education with a condition or impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal daily activities.

DSA - Disabled Students' Allowance is a non-income assessed fund administered by SAAS. It is intended to support disabled students and those with additional learning needs who are studying a course of Higher Education and may have extra costs because of their impairment.

DSAG - Disabled Students' Advisory Group was a Scottish Government stakeholder group made up of 22 representatives from higher education and the third sector.

FE - Further Education is a term used to describe courses undertaken at a college under Higher National (HN) level - for example, SCQF Level 6 or below, National Certificate courses, Access courses, National Qualifications (NQ) or Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ).

HE - Higher Education is a term used to describe SCQF level 7 courses and above, Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) courses at college and Degree level courses undertaken at college or universities.

HEI - Higher Education Institutions are publicly funded universities and other institutions primarily providing higher education.

Large Items Allowance is a form of support which comprises the DSA. Students can claim the large items allowance for equipment such as laptops/ pc's, assistive software or ergonomic tables and chairs.

NMPH - Non-medical Personal Help is a form of support which comprises the DSA which is not medical in nature. Students can claim NMPH for services such as note taking, study skills support, mentoring.

NUS - National Union of Students is a confederation of students' unions in the UK. This review worked exclusively with NUS Scotland.

Reasonable Adjustments - The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on public and private sector organisations (including colleges and universities) to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that disabled people are not disadvantaged. This includes making changes to processes or procedure and the physical environment if a disabled person would otherwise be disadvantaged.

SpLD - Specific Learning Difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, or ADHD.

Student Awards Agency Scotland

Saughton House
Broomhouse Drive
Edinburgh
EH11 3UT

Tel: 0300 555 0505

www.saas.gov.uk



Facebook



Twitter



YouTube



Instagram



TikTok



- ✓ Informing Choices
- ✓ Funding Futures
- ✓ Supporting Success