**Consultation response to: Changes to disabled students’ allowances**

Lead organisation: **Wales Council of the Blind**

Wales Council of the Blind is the umbrella agency in Wales representing blind and partially sighted people and the clubs and societies that support them. We gather the opinions and views of vision impaired people through groups and consultation. We put their voice at the centre of what we do, reporting their views to the people who are responsible for the services that help them. We also act as an agency to direct people to these services, giving them impartial advice and choice.

Wales Council of the Blind consulted with our members and third sector partners.

This response includes contributions and support from the following:

Disabled people

Sense Cymru

Thomas Pocklington Trust

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**Question 1: Do you agree that one allowance would be better than four separate allowances?**

**Comments**

We believe that the important thing is that more flexibility is provided through the entire period of the course and that students are able to apply, on an ad-hoc basis, for additional funds, as determined by the demands of the course.

Having categories provides a meaningful structure for the assessment, as well as demystifying the allowance by highlighting the types of support available.

It is also quite likely that a student would require, at the earliest opportunity, the purchase of equipment to see them through the duration of their course. Non-medical help, on the other hand, would be best financed from a flexible pot that would adapt to the requirements of the course over its duration. It is unreasonable to expect either the student or the assessor to know what will be required in the way of NMH support before starting the course.

The other risk with dispensing with categories is to the student’s independence. It would be all to easy in some cases to provide all support in the form of a non-medical helper which would create a culture of dependency and ill prepare them for life outside of the HEP such as with employment. This level of dependency, for many disabled people, runs counter to the social model of disability.

With regard to the ceilings on allowances, experience has shown that the equipment maximum allowance must be raised or removed all together to allow disabled people to purchase the most appropriate equipment to meet their study needs, thereby maximising the opportunity for the student to work independently of the non-medical helper. Technological solutions will better equip a student with sight loss in the longer term and this should be promoted, along side non-medical helpers, where necessary.

In summary we believe that the principle of categorisation should remain (although the categories may require revision) but that the allowance should be a global sum, allowing for flexibility of application arising from changes in the course or changes in the student’s medical condition over time.

Furthermore, there is a view that the student should decide how the money is spent. In England there is evidence that students with vision impairment require more money for equipment, and that students with hearing impairment require more money for NMH.

**Question 2: Could a DSA ‘package of support’ be awarded rather than requiring every disabled student to undergo a study needs assessment?**

**Comments**

A standardised package of support might send the wrong signal both to the disabled person and the professionals supporting them by devaluing the need to address the individual’s contribution and personal needs. Our experience is that people with sight loss have such varied access needs that a standardised package would not address them adequately.

Assessments should be offered as a matter of right. Someone has to make an assessment whether that be the student, an independent assessor or HEP. It makes complete sense to obtain a fully informed assessment to get the best solution for a student.

There is a concern that not all assessors have the knowledge or skills to assess a student with sight loss. Such assessors rely on the knowledge of the student but not all students will understand their own needs and what they will require in the way of access technologies and support. On the other hand, the student may often be well informed about the type of support they need.

What should ensue is a discussion between the assessor and the student on the full range of the support available and to arrive at an informed decision as to the most suitable products and support. There will be instances where the student knows very little, and some where they know exactly what they need, but it remains essential that a discussion takes place that considers the needs of the student and their course.

Where students don’t know what is available it is the role of the assessor to advise them. We believe that each assessor should be banded by skill set. Assessors should have the skill-set and knowledge to assess people with sight loss and there is evidence of an inconsistent service in this regard. We would like to understand the level of training offered to assessors, as well as their experience and knowledge of sight loss and the range of access technologies available.

Assessors who have direct knowledge of sight loss and the impact it has on everyday life can bring significant added value to the student, the Higher Education Provider (HEP) and funding body.

We advise caution that DSA assessments do not go the way of Access to Work in Wales[[1]](#footnote-1). We must not devalue the expertise of assessors. Instead we must retain the specialism that is required for students to be assessed by people who understand fully their needs, the course and their chosen HEP. This may require engagement with specialist third sector organisations who can advise in relation to specific impairments.

The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act brought changes to the age (up to 25 years) of students supported in school or further education. More could be done to enable smooth transition for students from school and Further Education to Higher Education, as well as utilise / buy-in existing services that benefit from knowing the student and their learning needs.

To summarise, we believe that a package of support without assessment would be wasteful and result in inappropriate solutions. This should not be an opportunity to provide a cheap alternative to a fully thought through support package. Also, students should have access to specialist assessors who understand their sight loss and the impact it has on their studies. The assessment process could be more holistic and any previous assessments should be drawn upon. Also, the assessor must take into account how the student has previously accessed education successfully.

**Question 3: Should the student’s HE provider be responsible for arranging DSA funded support?**

**Comments**

Placing responsibility for the DSA in the hands of HEP could result in disabled students choosing their HEP according to its record as a provider of study needs assessments and non medical help instead of for academic reasons. This will disadvantage disabled students who will be drawn to HEPs that offer the best support to them.

Another concern is that by locating control of the budget within the HEP could create an awkward relationship between the student and their HEP more generally. That is to say students may be disinclined to complain about HEP services in general when they know that their funding is managed by the disability support team there.

Furthermore, students often transfer to other HEPs, so it would be expedient if the management of the budget and the arrangement of support remains the responsibility of the assessor. This would be particularly useful when the reason for transfer poor support from the disability team.

While we recognise that there are benefits from locating the management of the budget and assessment service in the HEP, we should not lose the benefits of having it handled independently by an assessor of the student’s own choosing and overseen by the student’s local authority whose interest lies solely in what’s best for the student. This level of control empowers the disabled student and is compatible with the social model of disability.

There is a risk that two distinct issues are being merged in this debate. HEPs have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to provide their services without disadvantaging disabled people and other people with protected characteristics. Equality of access should be the primary focus of the disability support team, irrespective of whether or not a student receives a DSA grant. It is our view that the issues should be kept separate: the DSA is there to support the individual student but it should not replace the need for non-discriminatory services as demanded by the law.

We are concerned that the HEP is often insufficiently resourced to deliver support and we must not assume that the relationship built between the student and the support service would be a positive one. For example, we have evidence that some disability support teams do not provide services that they are required to supply.

We also hear of a lack of understanding being shown towards students with sigh loss; sight loss can be seen as being quite black and white. This rigid and inflexible understanding of sight loss combined with a tendency not to listen to the student can result in a dysfunctional relationship that results in inadequate support.

Regarding the study needs assessments the current practice of selecting one of the registered centres to carry out an assessment has many benefits: the prospective student can choose a centre near to home; can choose an assessor who understands their condition; and can feel confident that it will be delivered independently of the prejudices of the chosen HEP. Sometimes, a centre may be recommended by other people with similar conditions.

We are concerned with the statement that ‘each HEP would be expected to adopt its own service standards’. This could create a postcode lottery where students will choose a course depending on the quality of the disability support. There should be one set of standards coproduced by disabled people and the organisations that support them to be applied and monitored across Wales. We know of an instance where a student with sight loss was refused flexibility in examination time that is routinely given to students with dyslexia. Our worry is that standards should not be devised by people who do not understand fully the nuances of the various solutions that an individual disabled person might benefit from. Disabled people ourselves are best placed to establish service standards, particularly for students with low incidence disabilities such as severe sight impairment, that require more specialist equipment and NMH support.

**Question 4: Would improving the awareness of DSAs, particularly within schools and the medical profession, increase their uptake?**

**Comments**

Yes

The four purposes of the new curriculum for Wales states that all our children and young people will be:

* Ambitious, capable learners;
* Healthy, confident individuals;
* Enterprising, creative contributors;
* Ethical, informed citizens.

In order to ensure this happens for disabled children and young people schools and colleges must, as a duty, raise awareness of DSA so that young people can make good choices around the support available to them. The student may have experienced various packages of support at school and FE but this is most often delivered in an environment where decisions are being made by adults on behalf of children. In HE education the young person is moving into an environment in which they ought to have greater personal control over all aspects of their lives and not just disability support. Therefore, it is important that the individual is prepared for this through a programme of awareness. This awareness will give young students more confidence to demand the appropriate support.

Anyone working with young disabled people ought to raise awareness of the types of support available to disabled people outside the school or FE. This applies equally to awareness of Access to Work in the domain of employment. Our experience is that if people do not know what is available to them they are not empowered to know what to ask for. The question should be ‘how would awareness of DSA be imparted?’ Should it be delivered to all pupils collectively in order to raise awareness more generally? Any one of us could become a disabled person at some point in our lives, and some pupils may have undiagnosed conditions for which they may receive support when known, so general awareness is important for us all.

Equally it is important to educate professionals, such as Rehabilitation Officers for the Visually Impaired and Habilitation Officers, on the purposes and availability of all forms of support including DSA so that they can advise their clients accordingly.

**Question 5:** We would like to know your views on the possible effects that these proposals would have on the Welsh language, specifically on opportunities for people to use Welsh and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than English.

1. What effects do you think there would be?
2. How could we increase positive effects and mitigate any negative effects?
3. Are there any other changes you would consider necessary to the policy to ensure the Welsh Language is given parity with English.

**Comments**

We believe that there is a real risk that students wishing to communicate in a language other than English may be at a disadvantage regarding awareness of DSA and communication with study needs assessors, HEPs and local authorities. Furthermore, problems may arise when a student’s preferred means of communication is Braille, for instance.

**Question 6**: We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

**Comments**

While we can see the need to review the structuring of the support to students we feel that instead of fixing problems with the system this consultation is trying to create a new one. The basic structure is there and is effective for the student when delivered fully and in a timely manner. Possible improvements to the existing system could be:

* More flexibility with the funding over the duration of the course and between the types of support;
* Raising or removing the ceiling on the equipment allowance;
* HEPs focussing their attention on delivering their services under the Equality Act 2010;
* Assessments being carried out promptly and by assessors who understand the individual’s particular condition and the nature of their study and chosen HEP;
* Keeping the social model of disability and student’s independence in mind in the delivery of support.

Concerns have been raised as to the differences of support between FE and HEP. We would welcome a consultation on the support offered to disabled students in FE as we believe that many students may be prevented from progressing to HE due to the insufficiency of support in FE.

1. How Accessible is Access to Work for people with sight loss in Wales? 3 year on, Wales Council of the Blind [2019] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)