

Government reforms to Disabled Students' Allowances Update

Summary

The DSA Task and Finish Group was convened to monitor Government's proposed changes to Disabled Students' Allowances. The group's remit is to assess implications of the changes for disabled students. Implications will be financial and legal, in relation to City's continuing commitment to support students and duty under the Equalities Act 2010. The group will provide options for how the University can best respond to the significant changes to DSAs provision that may result in 2016/17.

This paper provides an update on activity.

Recommended action

Education & Student Committee is asked to:

- (i) **note** the update.

Publication: Open

DSA Task and Finish Group Update

Purpose

This paper provides an update from the DSA Task and Finish Group.

Background

The DSA Task and Finish Group was convened to monitor Government's proposed changes to Disabled Students' Allowances. The group's remit is to assess implications of the changes for disabled students. Implications will be financial and legal, in relation to City's continuing commitment to support students and duty under the Equalities Act 2010.

Update following BIS consultation

The BIS *Consultation on targeting funding for disabled students in Higher Education from 2016/17 onwards* closed in late September 2015. BIS published response to the consultation and the attendant Equality Analysis in December 2015. In addition to the BIS response, the Student Loans Company published a Student Support Information Notice (SSIN 05/16 – Update on DSAs reform) to practitioners in January 2016. The Written Ministerial Statement made on 2nd December 2015 gave 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.

Assessment of the BIS response and its full implications is underway. BIS is moving forward on implementation and has recently published information about proposals for 2016/17 (Student Support Information Note, January 2016).

Changes to support in 2015/16

In 2015/16 the £200 payment to students to cover laptop purchase was rescinded. A process of referral of students to the University hardship fund upon registering with Learning Success has enabled City to continue to provide this support. In line with OFFA guidance, the Hardship Fund was supplemented via City's Access Agreement to absorb these costs.

Headlines

- Government has announced that DSAs will no longer be available to fund NMH bands 1 and 2. BIS will publish guidance on the range of support available to disabled students through DSAs. It is foreseen that band 1 and 2 support will now become the primary responsibility for HEIs for new DSAs students from 2016/17. A summary of provision covered in Bands 1 and 2 is included in Appendix A.

Action: Work to establish minimum and maximum cost implications is underway. Levels of expenditure on Bands 1 and 2 covered by DSAs will be established to identify an estimate of the cost transferred to the University.

- BIS will provide information on the maximum costs for the different NMH roles.
- BIS will require support workers to have specific qualifications, professional body membership and experience to provide the service. This will be recorded in a register

Action: This information is being gathered for submission and the University is in the process of registering as a Non-Medical Helper provider of support in the higher bands.

- 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. Details will also be set out in the DSAs guidance.

- BIS and the SLC do not expect HEIs, *or anyone providing accommodation to students on their behalf*, to pass on any additional costs of specialist accommodation to students.

Action: Group will seek clarity on policy and practice in relation to City's accommodation providers and the status of these relationships (definition of 'on [City's] behalf' – i.e. what sort of formal agreement needs to exist to bring an accommodation provider into this remit).

- Finally, DSAs will no longer provide computer peripherals, digital voice recorders or printers and scanners.

Action: Work is underway to establish cost implications if passed to the University.

Two-quote policy

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 31st 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.

This means that City will be obliged to seek two quotes for provision of support work. This is likely to have an impact on the processes and procedures in place in Learning Success and the Student Counselling and Mental Health Service particularly around staff time and the possibility that City students will be recommended support provided by other suppliers.

Future DSAs policy: inclusive learning environment

BIS plans to work with the wider Higher Education sector regarding supporting all disabled students to access Higher Education. The initial guidance outlined by the SLC states: "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."

This suggests a shift to an inclusive learning approach will be expected. Such an approach may have benefits for City and work will be done to assess this.

Next steps

Up to this point the task and finish group has not convened regularly. Instead relevant colleagues in relevant areas have provided input, done analysis and any alterations to practice on a rolling basis. From here the group will be convened more regularly to begin to identify critical actions.

The group will produce a proposal to conduct an audit and review of City's current provision of inclusive learning practice. The outcome of the review will be to gain a better understanding of any gaps in provision or where funding inclusive practice may offset the additional costs passed to the University with the end of DSAs support.

Recommendations will then be made to ensure that support is as effective as possible. One approach to the changes to DSAs would be to consider and fund individual types of support previously covered by DSAs. This is a straight swap approach and potentially somewhat piecemeal and is not the approach preferred by the Government. It may be more effective to take the inclusive approach. This would involve directing resource into making improvements that benefit all students, including those who may be negatively affected by the changes to DSAs. Instead of effectively replacing DSAs funding with University funding in a 'like for like' way, which may be necessary in the first instance, the project may demonstrate that improving the inclusive learning environment may be more cost effective and positive for students.

The value of such an approach will become more clear once an estimation of potential costs to the University is completed based on a straight replacement of the costs previously met by DSAs.

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Appendix A

Outline of Non-Medical Help support Bands 1 and 2

Band One (£15 - £25)

Support Assistants

This band includes activities which provide practical assistance for students. Staff carrying out these activities have the skills and competence to work effectively, at the direction of the student, in their own particular context.

Functions undertaken by Support Assistants include:

- Providing practical support around the campus
- Providing practical support in the library, laboratory or workshop/studio etc.
- Reading aloud
- Scribing
- Text checking (pointing out errors but not providing corrections)

Roles which might provide this support include:

- Practical Support Assistant
- Library Support Assistant
- Reader
- Scribe
- Workshop/Laboratory Assistant
- Sighted Guide
- Proof Reader

Band Two (£20 - £30)

Enhanced Support Assistants

These are activities which demand an enhanced level of skill, knowledge and training to Band One activities.

Functions undertaken by Enhanced Support Assistants include:

- Supporting students to develop their independence and autonomy in HE, for example by providing support with issues such as time keeping; organisational skills etc. and can be supplemented by practical support e.g. library support, workshop support etc.
- Supporting a disabled student during examinations

Roles which might provide this support include:

- Study Assistant
- Examination Support Worker
- Manual Notetaker

Work is required to establish the number and cost of provision of such roles at City currently funded by DSAs. This will then provide a picture of future implications when DSAs no longer cover this cost.