



# Review of current DSA Guidance in relation to students with vision impairment.

## 17th April 2019

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## Response to DfE mandatory qualification and professional body membership: Summary of recommendations

### Sighted guide

* All Non-Medical Help (NMH) sighted guides should provide evidence of attending sighted guide training delivered by a qualified organisation, within the last five years.

### Specialist Notetaker for Visually Impaired students

* The role of specialist notetaker for visually impaired (VI) students should be revised to include:
  + Providing the basics of notetaker support as described under Band 2.
  + Production of notes in to an accessible format, in accordance with the working preference of the student. This will most commonly be Microsoft Word, but will differ for some courses. For example, students studying science, technology, engineering and mathematical subjects (STEM) may prefer notes to be produced in LaTeX. These notes should be formatted using a style sheet, using a clear heading structure to enable the student to navigate the document using assistive technology.
  + Interpretation and description of any visual information presented in the lecture.
  + Assistance during the teaching session to access visual content that would otherwise be inaccessible to student.
* The specific skills and qualifications required by specialist notetakers for VI students should be dependent upon needs and driven by the recommendations made by the needs assessor.

### Mobility Trainer

* Department for Education (DfE) should seek to find ways to remove the administrative and financial burden for small specialist providers to ensure that there is adequate provision available to meet the needs of students with vision impairment. This could involve waiving any registration fees until the provider has met a minimum number of hours of support.

### Assistive Technology Trainers

* DfE should review the role of Assistive Technology Trainer and develop mechanisms to ensure that the trainer has adequate knowledge to understand the nature of the learning need/disability of the student to ensure that the strategies introduced are appropriate to the adjustments they need.

### Specialist Support Professional for Students with Sensory Impairment – Visual Impairment

* Due to a lack of clarity on who currently provides the services of a Specialist Support Professional for Students with Sensory Impairment we recommend keeping all the qualifications currently listed. As an interim measure a reference group should be set up to review the qualifications and experiences of professionals who may have considerable professional experience not captured through typical qualifications, or may be still in specialist training, but working professionally as a teacher of children and young people with vision impairment.
* We recommend that DfE undertakes or commissions a more comprehensive investigation into the role of the Specialist Support Professional. It should investigate whether the fee offered for Specialist Support Professionals is sufficient to attract local authorities (LAs) to the market, and whether the current DSA-QAG registration fee acts as a deterrent to LAs who operate a traded services model.

## Recommendations for future work

### Mobility support

* Flexibility must be built into the number of hours of mobility support that students with VI are allocated in DSA needs assessment reports, to reflect the complexity of predicting this in advance of them starting their course.
* DfE should review the way in which mobility support is funded, and whether it should be funded separately to other non-medical support.
* DSA policy should ensure that students with vision impairment are not excluded from participating in HE in its broader sense and receive the full extent of mobility support needed to live and study independently.

### Non-medical support for teaching sessions

* DfE should add the role of specialist workshop/laboratory assistant, to reflect the need for an assistant who has received training in making workshop/laboratory sessions accessible to students with vision impairment.

### Assessments

* DfE should investigate introducing a premium for the assessment of students that require complex support packages. The premium could buy in the support of a specialist professional, such as a Qualified Teacher of Vision Impairment (QTVI), to provide specialist input into the assessment process.
* DfE must ensure that the DSA assessment process is robust and person-centred, and that recommendations made by assessors are accepted unless there is clear evidence not to do so.
* As part of the assessment of needs process the assessor should routinely contact the intended institution to discuss the needs of the student, to ensure that the recommendations made are appropriate for the setting.
* To address the inconsistencies in the processing of DSA reports there should be allocated specialists in VI and VI equipment within the assessment team at Student Finance England (SFE) with whom the assessor and HE institution can liaise.

### Equipment

* Students with low incidence disabilities, including VI, should have access to a ‘personal budget’, which combines the existing NMH and equipment budget, enabling students to focus the allowances on the right solutions that support their needs.
* The proposed personal budget should continue throughout the duration of the student’s course so that they can access equipment as and when needed.
* DSA policy should be revised to allow students with disabilities to access mainstream technology for use by the student to overcome barriers in relation to their disability.

## Background to response

This briefing has been prepared as part of ongoing correspondence between Thomas Pocklington Trust, Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) and DfE regarding the support received by students with vision impairment through Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA).

The brief commences with a short overview of the educational support needs and mobility and orientation needs of students with vision impairment which aims to give context to the recommendations made.

Following this, specific feedback is provided on the latest draft of the mandatory qualification and professional body membership requirements for roles specific to students with vision impairment.

Finally, further evidence and recommendations are provided to outline ways in which the support offered to students with vision impairment (VI) through DSA may be improved further.

The content of this response has been drawn from a range of sources, including:

* Evidence from the Longitudinal Transitions Study: a longitudinal qualitative study tracking 80 young people with vision impairment through key transitions post-school, including higher education.
* Evidence gathered by Thomas Pocklington Trust as part of the ‘Our Right to Study’ campaign.
* Responses given by stakeholders who work with students with vision impairment in different capacities across the Higher Education (HE) sector.

As noted by the Universities Minister Chris Skidmore: “No one’s background or circumstances should hold them back from the opportunity of a university education and there is no reason why disability should be a barrier to fulfilling someone’s potential.” [1]

The evidence we provide demonstrates that whilst DSA is an invaluable mechanism for enabling students with VI to access HE, some of the underlying policies and procedures can have unintended consequence and act as a barrier to accessing support.

In the ‘Our Right to Study’ report [2]), we recommended that DfE should engage in a full review of the assessment process, non-medical help and technology support delivered by DSA. Importantly this must include engagement with students with vision impairment, providers, assessors, specialists and the third sector. We are encouraged by the progress that has been made to date and reemphasise our commitment to supporting DfE in this important process.

In addition to the broad recommendations made in the ‘Our Right to Study’ report, we set out further recommendations on how these can be implemented.

### Educational needs of students with vision impairment

It is estimated that two in every 1,000 (0.2 per cent) of children and young people up to the age of 25 in the UK have VI, while five in every 10,000 (0.05 per cent) are estimated to be severely sight impaired/blind. These estimates were based upon the (World Health Organisation) WHO international classification of childhood VI [3].

Learners with VI are often described as a diverse population within which there is a wide spectrum of characteristics, ability and needs [4]. (The unique challenges to learning associated with vision impairment in an educational setting, and the importance of addressing these challenges with specialist knowledge and skills, are extensively documented [5]).

Central to understanding how best to teach learners with vision impairment requires consideration of their distinctive learning needs. This includes understanding the role of vision in a student’s learning experiences as well as an appreciation of the potential influences of impaired vision on learning and development. Impairment in visual function restricts both the quantity and the quality of information available to a student, reducing their opportunities to acquire accurate incidental information through vision [6].Reduced ‘access’ to visual information can act as a key barrier to students developing knowledge, understanding and skills.

### Mobility and orientation

Mobility and orientation, also referred to habilition/rehabilition, teaches the ability to move efficiently and safely around your environment. It is a key intervention, particularly for young people with severe vision impairment [7]. It includes the teaching of long cane skills to enable a young person to navigate independently inside a building or through their wider community, and the development of routes to ensure that an individual can safely move between places.

In an HE setting the role of a mobility trainer is to ensure that the student can safely and independently move between different rooms and facilities that they need to access. There are many factors which need to be considered when assessing the amount of mobility support a student may require, including:

* Their existing mobility skills.
* The size of the institution.
* The number of buildings and rooms they will need to access.
* The complexities of the different routes they will need to follow, including the number and type of obstacles like roads they may encounter.

The Longitudinal Transitions Study provides evidence of improved mobility outcomes for young people with VI when learning to get around new environments if they receive an intense periods of mobility training, rather than intermittent sessions [8].

## Response to DfE mandatory qualification and professional body membership requirements

#### Sighted guide

Currently sighted guides do not have to provide evidence of holding any mandatory qualifications. Short training sessions on how to act as a sighted guide are offered across the country, and in particular by voluntary sector organisations. These courses do not necessarily lead to a qualification but can enable the trainee to obtain valuable skills and knowledge on how to guide safely.

Recommendation: All Non-Medical Help (HMH) sighted guides should provide evidence of attending sighted guide training delivered by a qualified organisation, within the last five years.

#### Specialist Notetaker for Visually Impaired (VI) students – including Braille

The role description given for specialist notetakers for deaf and students with VI indicates some disconnect to the type of notetaking support that students with vision impairment require. It is not appropriate to combine these role descriptors into one, as the support needs of the two groups differ significantly.

The mandatory qualifications noted in the proposal do not ensure that the notetaker can prepare or produce quality notes in braille. Typed information can be converted into braille by the student if they have the appropriate soft/hardware and the notes have been prepared properly through the use of a style sheet. However, it is unlikely that a notetaker will be required to take notes in braille, and if they do, this is likely to require specialist skills beyond the scope of this particular role (e.g. producing notes in Maths braille).

Students with hearing impairment require support to access information audibly during a teaching session. However, students with VI typically require support to access written information after the session. This includes visual information, like pictures and diagrams. The specific needs of the student will depend upon the nature of their vision impairment and the type of course that they are studying.

Recommendation: The role of specialist notetaker for visually impaired students should be revised to include:

* Providing the basics of notetaker support as described under Band 2.
* Production of notes in to an accessible format, in accordance to the working preference of the student, this will most commonly be Microsoft Word but will differ for some courses. For example students studying science, technology, engineering and mathematical subjects (STEM) may prefer notes to be produced in LaTeX). These notes should be formatted using a style sheet, using a clear heading structure to enable the student to navigate the document using assistive technology.
* Interpretation and description of any visual information presented in a lecture.
* Assistance during a teaching session to access visual content that would otherwise be inaccessible to student. Examples are provided under ‘Evidence and recommendations for future work’.

Often the most important qualification that a specialist notetaker can hold is one which demonstrates a specialist understanding of the material being taught, for example, they may have previously studied a similar course. This is often the case for students studying courses with STEM content where the lecturer may talk through diagrams or equations using mathematical notation.

It would be extremely challenging for a notetaker to record this type of content in a way that the student could interpret, unless the notetaker understands the subject matter themselves. Examples are provided to illustrate this further under ‘Evidence and recommendations’.

Recommendations: The specific skills and qualifications required by specialist notetakers for VI students should be dependent upon needs and driven by the recommendations made by the needs assessor.

We therefore recommend removing the current criteria, and instead state that notetakers must have the qualification/s and/or demonstrate the professional experience to produce notes in a format that is accessible to the student, and to meet the specific needs identified by the assessor. For auditing purposes, the supplier should be able to demonstrate how the specialist notetaker met the recommendations of the needs assessor.

#### Mobility Trainer

Consultation with providers of mobility support indicate significant improvements have been made to the qualification list for this role, and they are pleased with the changes. However, there is considerable concern that a significant number of small providers have stopped providing mobility training in HE due to the administrative and financial burden of registering with DSA-QAG.

We suggest that under ‘professional body membership’ the requirement to demonstrate proof of providing relevant support to HE students is removed. Working with any adult in the role of mobility and orientation training should be sufficient.

Ideally a student who requires extensive mobility training (e.g. an individual who uses a long-cane), should have access to intensive periods of mobility training before the academic year begins, to enable them to learn key routes before. Access to mobility training is vital for the independence of the student to partake in the social and academic activities that other students have access to.

A reduction in small specialist providers has made it difficult for students with VI to access the mobility training they need, when they need it.

“[Mobility provider] is a good example of a provider that used to be happy to provide seasonal mobility training at the start of term for students but then did not see it was worthwhile to register with DSA-QAG.” Disability Support Officer

Recommendation: DfE should seek to find ways to remove the administrative and financial burden for small specialist providers to ensure that there is adequate provision available to meet the needs of students with VI. This could involve waiving any registration fees until the provider has met a minimum number of hours of support.

#### British Sign Language Interpreter (BSL) for deafblind students

We do not have sufficient expertise or evidence to provide feedback for this role.

#### Assistive Technology Trainers (AST)

We note that no qualifications have been identified for this role, which we understand to be typical for assistive technology trainers. We argue that the assistive technology trainer must understand the nature of the learning need/disability of the student. This is important to enable strategies to be developed for the assistive technology to be used effectively so that the student can overcome the barriers to learning that they face. If the student is not equipped with appropriate strategies they are unlikely to be able to use the equipment as effectively as they could do, or in some cases not even use it at all [9].

Recommendation: DfE should review the role of Assistive Technology Trainer and develop mechanisms to ensure that the trainer has adequate knowledge to understand the nature of the learning need/disability of the student to ensure that the strategies introduced are appropriate to the adjustments they need.

#### Specialist Support Professional for Students with Sensory Impairment – Vision Impairment

The specialist professional has an extremely important role in the education of students with VI. This is reflected in the fact that qualified teachers of children and young people with vision impairment in the UK are required to hold a mandatory qualification. A model which is used internationally.

At present there is uncertainty as to who provides this type of support in HE. The majority of professionals who hold the mandatory qualification are based in LAs, but our analysis only identified three that are registered with DSA-QAG. We are exploring with RNIB the role of LAs in supporting students with vision impairment in HE.

In the case of a student with VI in HE the Specialist Support Professional primarily takes on an advisory role. This mirrors the services provided by LAs in schools and colleges which offer a visiting teacher service. For example, at regular intervals the QTVI could meet with the student and HE staff to provide specialist guidance and to identify solutions to enable the student to access the curriculum.

In the meantime, we are concerned that a consistent picture of anecdotal evidence shows that students with VI are not receiving the support that they have been allocated, due to a lack of available staff. Therefore, we are keen that the requirements for this role ensure that all professionals who have the expertise are involved in the assessment process.

Recommendations: Due to a lack of clarity on who currently provides the services of Specialist Support Professional for Students with Sensory Impairment we recommend keeping all the qualifications currently listed. As an interim measure a reference group should be set up to review the qualifications and experiences of professionals who may have considerable professional experience not captured through typical qualifications, or may be still in specialist training, but working professionally as a teacher of children and young people with vision impairment.

As DfE broadens this review over the next 12 months we recommend they undertake or commission a more comprehensive investigation into the role of the Specialist Support Professional. It should investigate whether the fee offered is sufficient to attract LAs to the market, and whether the current DSA-QAG registration fee acts as a deterrent to those that operate a traded services model.

We recommend that the qualification ‘PG Cert Ed (Sight Impairment)’ should be added to the existing qualifications list.

#### Specialist Support Professional for Students with Sensory Impairment – Multi-sensory impairment (MSI)

We do not have sufficient expertise or evidence to provide feedback for this role.

## Evidence and Further recommendations

As outlined we welcome that DfE is reviewing some aspects of DSA, particularly in relation to the impact on students with VI. Here we make recommendations on how these reviews can be taken onto the next step.

The evidence presented in this section has been taken from the Longitudinal Transitions Study. A comprehensive report on the experiences of students with vision impairment in Higher Education (including a comprehensive section on DSA) may be found at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-into-higher-education-2015.doc> The report provides evidence of the experiences of 39 participants who took part in interviews in relation to HE, and 6 disability support officers who took part in case study work.

### Non-Medical Support: the access needs of students with vision impairment

In the ‘Our Right to Study’ campaign report we argued that:

DfE must restructure non-medical help so that it meets the needs of students with vision impairment. This must include taking steps to ensure that those with the relevant experience, knowledge and skills can support students.

In the response earlier in this document to the DfE mandatory qualification and professional body membership requirements, we made a number of suggestions of how non-medical support for students with vision impairment could be improved. This section provides further evidence and justification of these recommendations through an analysis of the outcomes of the participants in the study.

#### Mobility support

It is important to note that not all students will necessarily require mobility training. There is a strong association between the severity of vision impairment and whether the participants received mobility training/orientation. All participants registered as severely sight impaired received some form of mobility training. Just over half reported receiving some form of mobility training or orientation whilst in HE.

Whilst all of the participants eventually had positive tales to share with regards to their mobility training and orientation, almost all had some obstacles which they had to overcome at first. A common theme in the responses of the students was the importance of being able to access mobility support as early as possible.

“Personally, I really struggled at first, just because everything was so stressful and really coming at once. I was struggling to maintain the information. It was fine. I was really lucky. I had it straight away, I think it was the third day I had been there, and I was having mobility training, and I know my friends, they had to wait like months sometimes, which would be a nightmare, so I was really lucky.”

The participants who received mobility training/orientation were invited to discuss the scope of the mobility support they received, both in terms of what was covered, and whether it was sufficient. The priority tended to be to ensure that they could get to and from lectures, and to other key buildings such as the library. The support that was received beyond this tended to differ from individual to individual, with many participants describing limitations in the mobility training/orientation they received.

Six participants spoke of limitations in the mobility support which they received around the campus. A common theme which emerged in the course of interviews was the students not being shown more recreational aspects of the campus:

“Not really, there’s probably, they should have shown around the actual union bit, because especially when you are out, you have no idea where going.”

“It covers the route to the student union and the student shop, but it doesn’t cover the inside, so things like there is a café in the main building, so I can get mobility to the café, but I can’t get mobility in the café. So, I mean, my mobility officer has been in there, in the café, not doing official mobility, just sort of walking around, so I have an idea of it, I have a pretty good idea of it. It’s just that you can’t put that down as official mobility.”

Three participants described how they were either not able to get independently to buildings on campus, which they considered to be central to their learning experience. Or alternatively they could get to the buildings, but were not shown how to get around them. For example, one participant did not know how to get to the institution’s disability support service, whilst another student did not know how to get around the library. At the end of her time in HE, a third student reflected that there were some services she would have accessed if she had known how to get to them:

“I think the building that had the library, there are lots of different sections to that building, like courtyards nearby that I would have really liked orientation training with there. Also, just showing me different offices where if I needed help with one thing I could go to that office, and things like that. I never knew where they were.”

A further participant highlighted how she was given insufficient hours for mobility support to learn all the routes that were needed:

“That was the thing which they didn’t seem to give me that many hours of. There were a few things that they kind of underestimated how much I would be using them. We guessed that I would need a certain number of hours, and they gave me enough, but I got through them quite quickly.”

Our discussions with rehabilitation officers has confirmed how difficult it is for assessors to estimate how many hours of mobility support a student with VI might need.

Therefore, it is extremely important that there is flexibility in the allocation given to the student, to ensure that there are not administrative barriers to the student receiving the support they need. Further to this, one student argued that mobility and orientation should be funded separately to other non-medical support:

“I think there should be a separate pot specifically for mobility so that it makes it easier. I think it comes out of the non-medical help does it? And then you know, because it has to be shared with something else if you use notetakers, or research assistants or whatever else, and there is a limit of how much you can have for your mobility, and then that limits the amount of mobility that you can have, which in my case has limited everything, my uni experience as whole. That’s one thing that I would like to change and that I think would make a big difference in terms of making it easier for people, especially who have to have long cane training, or guide dog training, or whatever.”

Recommendation: Flexibility needs to be built into the number of hours of mobility support that students with vision impairment are allocated in DSA needs assessment reports, to reflect the complexity of predicting this in advance of the student starting on their course. DfE should review the way in which mobility support is funded, and whether it should be funded separately to other non-medical support.

Eight of the participants expressed their frustrations of the limitations of not receiving any mobility support external to their institution – for example in the city centre, or the areas where students would typically live when not in university-owned accommodation.

Researcher: “What kind of things did your mobility training cover?”

Participant: “Just campus. Which is kind of annoying as it means I have been in [city] a year and don’t know any of [city]. But I can’t complain.”

We have noted an association between some participants’ lack of off campus mobility and their decision making in continuing to live in institution-owned accommodation, rather than moving into private accommodation.

Recommendations: DSA policy should ensure that students with VI are not excluded from participating in HE in its broader sense and receive the full extent of mobility support needed to live and study independently.

#### Non-medical support for teaching sessions

As note-taking was the non-medical support most commonly received by the participants, specific questions were asked to the participants about their experiences of working with notetakers, and how beneficial they found this support for accessing lectures.

Four participants described how they found the notetaker support vitally important, otherwise they would struggle to keep up with the pace of the lecture or would be worrying about missing something important. Compared to their normally sighted peers reading speeds are typically considerably slower for people who read braille [10], and those with VI who read print [11].

It is important to note that in the majority of cases, the participant wanted notetaker support to allow them to focus, whilst being confident that an accurate record of the lecture was being captured by their assistant.

“Very, very beneficial, yeah. It’s very difficult to follow the lecture because you have to make extra effort in the lecture either on the iPad or your computer and having to do that whilst taking notes and listening to what the lecturer is actually saying, doing three things at once it’s quite difficult. So, having a notetaker takes a lot of the strain off.”

Two participants spoke of the benefits of receiving lecture notes through their notetaker in helping them with preparing for their exams, and producing assessed work:

“It’s really good. Especially when I need to revise for exams. That’s been the most beneficial part of my note-take support. It means I am taking information in, and the notetaker can be getting all the notes. But even when preparing a presentation, you can look back at the notes of the lecturer and remember all the key points, that kind of thing.”

Finally, one participant simply expressed being reliant on receiving this support to be able to take the course:

“I think it is a highly beneficial system – I don’t think I could have done a lot without notetaker support.”

Additionally, participants who studied courses with STEM content often relied on their notetaker to assist them in accessing information during the lecture. These students received DSA support prior to the recent DSA reforms, which enabled the institution to identify postgraduates to support them in teaching sessions, who had specialist knowledge of the subject matter. For example, one severely vision impaired student who learnt through braille, speech and touch benefited from having NMH support through a PhD student in lectures who produced tactile diagrams for him during the lecture using a special type of paper (German film) and then quietly explained the diagram to the student. This was also the case in practical sessions where the student relied on the assistant to be able to explain and interpret what was taking place in the session. These types of responsibilities are not reflected under the current description of Workshop/Laboratory Assistant.

Recommendation: DfE should add the role of specialist workshop/laboratory assistant, to reflect the need for an assistant who has received training in making workshop/laboratory sessions accessible to students with vision impairment.

### DSA assessment of needs

#### Evidence of poor quality assessments

Just under half of the participants in the Longitudinal Transitions Study who commented on the outcomes of their needs assessment meeting were dissatisfied with the quality of their needs assessment. This included reports that the assessor didn’t have sufficient understanding of vision impairment to identify an appropriate support package for them. This is also supported by Disability Support Officers (DSOs) at HE institutions, who said that they often signposted students who had contacted them to ‘good assessors’ that they had confidence in.

“It was clear she hadn’t worked with a blind person before, and it was clear that, because she said it herself, basically ‘I don’t know what I am doing, you have got to tell me what you need’, rather than… I was like ‘actually, I think that’s your job!’” Student with severe vision impairment

“For me, I think that study needs assessments for VI and blind students, should be done by somebody who absolutely understands that, and knows the technology that is out there, because I don’t think that’s happening. I think we are getting assessors who have seen the odd VI student, and perhaps aren’t as up to date as they should be on equipment. I think that’s an issue.” Disability support officer

“Personally, for me, [participant]’s needs assessment wasn’t the greatest. I was quite disappointed with that report, I have seen far better reports. So yeah, the allocation wasn’t great, and I basically rewrote the human support, with [participant]’s input, kind of thing, so we could get something better.” Disability support officer

One participant suggested that because the support allocation she had received was not appropriate to her needs, this led to wasted equipment:

“In terms of the funding, reviewing how it is actually used. Because I think, like I was saying before with the practicality of the equipment my DSA has paid for. It’s a lot of things that weren’t practical enough for me to ever use, and I think that was a lot of money wasted really.”

These findings demonstrate the importance of a student with VI being assessed by someone who understands vision impairment and how it can impact upon a student’s learning.

We do however, acknowledge the importance of the student having access to the same choice of assessment centres as other disabled students, so as not to cause disadvantage to students who are unable to travel.

We therefore suggest that specialist professionals are bought in to act as an advisor to the needs assessor. For example, this person could be a QTVI who has previously worked with the student. The assessor should also be encouraged to draw upon the expertise of the disability support officer, VI technology experts and any experienced assessors of students with vision impairment.

Recommendation: DfE should investigate introducing a premium for the assessment of students that require complex support packages. The premium could buy in the support of a specialist professional, such as a QTVI, to provide specialist input into the assessment process.

#### Person-centred assessment process

One participant spoke of her frustration at being left out of discussions between her needs assessor and SFE when deciding on her final support allocation:

“The only thing is sometimes there is a problem between… sometimes the student doesn’t really know what is going on behind all the conversations the assessor has with Student Finance, because obviously they can’t… but then Student Finance only notify you once everything has been done […].

I think I called up Student Finance about something else, and they started going on about how I had had something rejected on my DSA, and I was just like ‘do I get a notification of this at all’, and apparently no, they only communicate with the university. And then when it’s all done they send you a final report. The only thing I would change about DSA is the student having a bit more of a role in what is going on. Sometimes you have the assessor talking to Student Finance about the person, and the student has no idea. It should be a three-way conversation, not a two-way conversation.”

Consultations with stakeholders has shown that that there is inconsistency in the outcomes of assessments of students with VI.

“I am aware of students that require roughly the same equipment to support their studies. Recommendations have been made by the assessor where one person received all the recommended equipment and the other received none. There is just so much inconsistency and there doesn’t appear to be any valid reason behind decisions taken.” Technology specialist who supports students with DSA applications

Recommendation: DfE must ensure that the DSA assessment process is robust and person-centred, and that recommendations made by assessors are accepted unless there is clear evidence not to do so.

#### Partnerships

All of the DSOs highlighted the importance of them working alongside DSA assessors and SFE to ensure the best quality of support for students. One officer described how the assessors would normally forward the assessment of needs report to the institution so that they could start preparations:

“The assessment centres will generally send them to us, and then as soon as we get them, we pick them up, and offer an appointment to the student, so that’s done quite efficiently.”

In the case of the participant he was working with, the assessor had not done this, and the DSO had difficulties in tracking them down:

“Originally [participant] wasn’t sure who actually assessed her either, because when I met with her prior to needs assessment. She knew she had a needs assessment, but she wasn’t too sure who did it, because her actual support worker at the time arranged it, so I was then trying to chase it up for her.”

Other DSOs described how they preferred to communicate with the assessor in advance to ask them to bear specific things in mind. For example, in two cases the DSO spoke to the assessor and asked them to keep the allocation of non-medical support as flexible as possible as they anticipated that it would be difficult to predict in advance exactly what the student would need:

“He had had an assessment of needs, and basically there was a report that was done for DSA purposes, that highlighted what support he would need, and we knew that we would have to tell the funder that it was pretty vague at the start, and that the number of hours of support would definitely need to change, as and when required. So, we sort of put in a sort of random, quite a high figure of hours of support.”

Another DSO highlighted the disadvantages of having an assessor who was unfamiliar with the type of support available at the institution, emphasising the importance of communication between the institution and the assessor:

“There are kind of disadvantages with that, with the fact that the needs assessment may be done by a person who doesn’t have an idea of the type of support that is available in the university, you know.”

Recommendation: As part of the assessment of needs process the assessor should routinely contact the intended institution to discuss the needs of the student, to ensure that the recommendations made are appropriate for the setting.

At the ‘DSA and students with vision impairment’ meeting we hosted in Birmingham on 25th March 2019, it was noted that there are often inconsistencies when it comes to the approval of DSA funded support. It was felt by the group that this was due to SFE staff not having sufficient understanding of vision impairment.

Recommendation: To address the inconsistencies in the processing of DSA reports there should be specialists in the education of VI learners and VI equipment within the assessment team at SFE with whom the assessor and HE institution can liaise.

### Equipment: removing barriers to learning

In the ‘Our Right to Study’ report we identified several problems which students with VI face in accessing the right equipment to support their studies. We noted that:

DfE must ensure that students with vision impairment receive the equipment needed to support their studies.

This section expands upon this recommendation by drawing upon the experiences of the students in the Longitudinal Transitions Study.

#### Current funding cap for equipment

We asked twenty participants about the breakdown of support they had received through DSA - 50 per cent reported that they reached the maximum amount of funding available in at least one of the three categories of support, whilst another two were unsure.

Eight of these ten participants were registered severely sight impaired and were two registered sight impaired, showing, a direct link between the level of vision impairment and the amount of support required. This means that the more severe the vision impairment, the more likely they are to be limited in accessing the support they need. For example, for some this meant compromising on the range of equipment that they were allocated, or the specification of the equipment they were given:

“I got everything I needed, minus my braille display, because there wasn’t really enough money to cover that. I think financially there could have been more money. I think apart from that it was good.”

Another participant who had wanted to get a higher specification of braille display than she one she was allocated (due to budget restraints) instead decided to sell the equipment she was given and use the money to buy the equipment which she would have preferred:

“I bought my braille sense… because of my equipment budget being limited at that point, I got a 18 cell, but actually I needed a 32. So, I got the 18 and sold it and then used the money to put towards something I actually wanted, which I am not sure is strictly legal. Still it’s my equipment isn’t it. I am not sure what the rules on that are.”

One participant chose not to request a computer as part of DSA as he knew that the equipment budget was limited, and was concerned about receiving a low specification computer which would not be capable of running the necessary software:

“I decided that I would buy one before I went through DSA, thus freeing me up another couple of thousand on the budget. You need the best laptops really, because running screen reader software as well, they freeze to death.”

One participant expressed concerns about how the DSA funding structure works in the same way, regardless of disability:

“I basically think they need to think of it more and have separate processes for different disabilities. Because obviously the nonmedical help is completely different for someone who is in a wheelchair than someone on the autistic spectrum. If you have someone who is disabled in terms of their visual impairment, or they have a hearing impairment, then they will need a bit more equipment. It just seems a bit more logical, but these processes aren’t ever logical!”

One participant made explicit reference to the cap on equipment and expressed the view that this cap should be removed:

“There definitely needs to be more. I think there shouldn’t really be a cap. I think you should be provided with what you need. It’s not like you are taking advantage. At the end of the day you need stuff, the government should just be willing to give you whatever you need providing your assessor says so. I think it’s really unfair because blind stuff is really expensive and it’s not fair, and I think the government should help us with that.”

Recommendation: Students with low incidence disabilities, including VI should have access to a ‘personal budget’, which combines the existing NMH and equipment budget, enabling students to focus the allowances on the right solutions that support their needs.

We note that this recommendation mirrors proposed changes by the Minister for Universities Chris Skidmore, for DSA for postgraduate students to have a combined budget [12].In the case of undergraduate students, however, we suggest that the use of the personal budget should still be guided by the DSA assessor.

#### Changing needs for equipment

A final limitation identified in the DSA funding structure related to the changing support needs of the student over the period of their course. For example, a participant in her second and third year was required to use a specialist piece of software which she couldn’t access with her version of a screen reader. She was aware that if she upgraded to the most recent version, it would be far more compatible. Unfortunately, she had used up all of her equipment budget and was told that she wasn’t able to go back and ask for equipment retrospectively.

A further participant upon entering into his final year realised that, as a braille/screen reader user, he would have some difficulties with his research project and being able to access scientific journal articles due to significant mathematical content. The institution identified some software which could be used to convert the PDFs into a readable format (including the mathematical content), which would overcome these barriers. These examples illustrate how the equipment needs of the student can change over time and call for greater flexibility in the way equipment is funded.

Recommendation: The proposed personal budget should continue throughout the duration of the student’s course so that they can access equipment as and when needed.

### Evaluation of the appropriateness of equipment provided through DSA

Several of the participants in the study identified ways in which the equipment they were allocated proved not to be fit for purpose, and nine of the twenty-one participants who were specifically asked about the quality of the equipment they received reported having faults repaired on their devices.

The following case studies outline some of the main challenges identified by participants involved in the Longitudinal Transitions Study. The case studies given below are illustrative and in no-means exhaustive of the problems which these students encountered.

#### Equipment judged not fit for purpose

In a discussion about the support she received in HE, one student shared her frustration after discovering that the laptop she had contributed £200 towards only cost SFE £192:

“…making you pay £200 for a laptop that turned out when I looked at it, you know when they send you the breakdown of what they spent money on, actually cost £192 and I had to fund £200 towards it, I wasn’t very pleased about that.”

When asked how suitable the laptop was for her studies, she responded:

“It wasn’t, and my lecturers complained, and they complained to disability services who said ‘we can’t do anything because we are only the uni, but we will complain to Student Finance on your behalf’, because they are really good my disability service. Student Finance went ‘no, this is perfectly adequate’. We went ‘well, that’s wonderful’. So, I just use my own laptop. If I had known that they would buy me such a bad laptop I wouldn’t have paid the money and just bought my own. It’s annoying I paid £200 towards a laptop and then had to buy my own anyway because the one they gave me was so bad.”

One participant questioned the specifications of the computer that he had been given, noting that his DSA funded laptop was unable to reliably run his assistive technology. In the end he applied to a charity for additional funding to buy a different laptop:

“On paper probably what DSA do is they get the minimum specs required to support ZoomText. But in practice that does not work, it is very unreliable, it keeps crashing, and you can’t use that… it’s just impossible, it’s not practical, you can’t use that for university. So, if they did spend a bit more on processing power and a better computer, yeah, I think that would have made a massive difference, and I might have stuck with a Windows computer rather than going for a Mac, but I don’t know.”

One participant who shared that he had ‘given up’ on using the assistive technology he had been given because it was slowing the computer down so much. However, the student didn’t have any alternative strategies in place and subsequently struggled to access large volumes of text.

#### Unreliability of equipment

Two participants who both use a laptop with a screen-reader shared that their laptops were unreliable and had to frequently returned for repair.

“My laptop kept on getting taken back to DSA to get fixed, and then I was left with nothing, so fortunately I had my [self-funded] iPad. For like six weeks I would have been able to do absolutely nothing. When I asked if they had a back-up they said oh yes, but we haven’t got Jaws. I was like ‘oh yay!’”

“It had ups and downs. Most of the downs, you could link very directly to technical issues I had, laptop failure… I had technical issues in all three terms. The first term it was concerning and worrying. The second time it was ‘oh no, not again’, but I think the second term was the more problematic one as it left me with days where I didn’t have a laptop […]. Then I got it back, and then it started having problems again and they hadn’t fixed it at all. So, I ended up significantly, a week or so behind the rest of my class. I was absolutely going full pelt just to keep up, and it’s one of the modules from that term is the one that I failed, and yeah, the other module is one which I generally didn’t get much of it.”

These last two responses demonstrate the implications of breakdown in equipment for the student and illustrate the importance of the equipment and how reliant they are upon it.

#### Problems experienced with equipment suppliers

Several young people experienced problems with the suppliers who were providing their equipment and training. For example, one participant had problems when arranging for the supplier to repair her equipment.

“They delivered the equipment, but apart from that I would say that they aren’t much good, because they don’t listen to me…. I have rung up, I have contacted them twelve times about the same issue, about the scanner, and they don’t…they don’t fix it.”

Another participant had particular problems with delivery of a talking calculator; an essential piece of specialist equipment he required for his scientific course:

“The [talking] calculator though, we kept being told, the date kept being rescheduled for its delivery, until eventually I received it about two weeks, no getting on for a month into my course starting. It being something that I really did need. I actually managed to, I was visiting my school, my old school, just before the start of term, which meant that I could get a spare calculator from there, they had spare calculators that I could use, and I borrowed one, and returned it near the end of the term. So, I did manage to, it was ok, although it was potentially quite an issue.”

A further participant explained that although he received his equipment before the start of the course, that there were delays before his training was delivered, which impacted upon his experience at initial transition:

“Yeah, actually. I got my equipment really late in August, which meant that I did not get my training until September, and I had to do it mid to the end, the dates were so scattered, they were a week apart some of them. It impacted on my time at Freshers, and there was really, I was a bit, I am not terribly happy about that, because I had to miss a social afternoon with my course to do some training that would affect my studies. I really wanted to embrace the whole social thing, but I had to sacrifice it for training.”

#### Restrictions for accessing mainstream technology

Research evidence highlights that accessible mainstream technology can be used by young people with VI to act as assistive tools, to enable them to access otherwise inaccessible (or difficult to access) information. Whilst mainstream, it is important to note that these young people often use such technology in different ways to their sighted peers, often making use of imbedded assistive tools, such as magnification and speech. This proved a source of frustration and challenge to several participants who had effectively used devices such as iPads in school.

“When I was first going into DSA and all that, they were saying that maybe we could get you a laptop, we wouldn’t be able to get you an iPad or anything like that, but if it was an on-balance thing, the iPad in terms of my visual impairment and accessing uni. The iPad has made a bigger impact to me and made it easier to access things. Although obviously my laptop has been very useful, if I was to have to choose between the two the iPad would be a bigger deal.”

Several of the participants identified ways in which they benefited from their self-funded mainstream technology on their courses. For example, a participant who uses a combination of speech software and braille shared a range of ways in which she used her iPad:

“The iPad, oh lots of things, making notes, recording, I use Dropbox a lot for saving chapters and things that we get emailed to read, obviously emails, researching things, I have a little foldable Bluetooth keyboard, so I can type on that. I can connect the braille-x to it as well, my calendar, sync with Gmail which is what uni runs off.”

Another expressed her frustration at not being able to access an iPad for her studies:

“Thought no point in asking for anything like that, an e-reader, anything that would help me do an English degree. There’s no point. There are brilliant apps for, like iPad and other Tablets that would be helpful, but thought there is no point asking, not going to get it.”

Increasingly more specialist services in the UK are routinely providing iPads to students in schools as a means for them to access the curriculum. This means that in time a larger proportion of students who apply for DSA will have used an iPad as part of their learning. It is therefore extremely important that DSA legislation adapts to meet the changing needs of the student to ensure continuity between settings. We also note that a recent review from the Work and Pensions Committee concluded that it was important that disabled workers were able to take advantage of mainstream technology access solutions through the Access to Work scheme [13].

We acknowledge that one of the concerns of DfE is that laptops and tablet computers are substitutes for one another, and therefore funding both equates to a duplication of support. However, the evidence from the Longitudinal Transitions Study doesn’t support these concerns and has demonstrated clearly that tablet computers are used by students in different ways. The findings from the study in relation to accessible mainstream technology have been written up as a comprehensive analysis [14].

Recommendation: DSA policy should be revised to allow students with disabilities to access mainstream technology for use by the student to overcome barriers in relation to their disability.

## Conclusion

As noted in our campaign report, it is clear that improvements must be made to Disabled Students’ Allowance for the Government to meet its aspirations to ensure that there are no barriers for disabled students to access higher education.

We have outlined a series of clear recommendations of changes that should be made to the list of mandatory qualifications and professional body membership organisations. Central to our recommendations is the revision of the role descriptions outlined in DSA guidance, to ensure that they are reflective of the type of support that students with vision impairment need, and are focused upon the individual needs of the student.

We have also outlined recommendations for future work as DfE continues to review the support offered to students with vision impairment. We believe that with specialist input into needs assessments, access to flexible DSA budgets and a wider choice of equipment, students with vision impairment will have improved outcomes in higher education.

We continue to welcome the opportunity to meet with and work with DfE to ensure that all students with vision impairment receive the support they need to be able to achieve and participate fully in higher education.

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### About Thomas Pocklington Trust

Thomas Pocklington Trust (TPT) champions the needs and aspirations of all blind and partially sighted people. We strive to influence change across the sight loss sector, strengthening partnerships with local and national organisations that share our vision.

TPT believes that children and young people with vision impairment should have the right support in place to help them to fulfil their potential.

Children and young people with vision impairment have the same potential to learn, achieve and thrive as their fully sighted peers. Without the right support and tools in place they are at risk of not fulfilling their potential and being placed at a serious disadvantage when reaching adulthood.

We are working on projects to help to support children and young people with visual impairment.

### About VICTAR

The Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) was launched in Autumn 2001 and brought together the teaching and research activities of colleagues at the University of Birmingham in the area of vision impairment and education. VICTAR has a long record of leading innovative and influential UK and international research and is the largest UK provider of teacher training in the area of vision impairment. Underlying its work is the belief that through education, through research, and through access to appropriate resources, the barriers to learning and participation that may be experienced by people with vision impairment can be better understood and reduced.

#### END