

Summary report of the outcomes of the Our Right to Study campaign

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## GLOSSARY

DfE Department for Education

DSA Disabled Students’ Allowance

HE Higher Education

NMH Non-medical help

OfS Office for Students

RNIB Royal National Institute of Blind People

TPT Thomas Pocklington Trust

SLC Student Loans Company

VICTAR Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research

## INTRODUCTION

### Background to the Longitudinal Transitions Study

The Longitudinal Transitions Study commenced in 2010, and has been following the post-school transition experiences of 80 young people with vision impairment. The participants have been interviewed at regular intervals as they have followed various pathways including further education, higher education, apprenticeships and employment. The project has received funding from:

* Royal National Institute of the Blind (2010-2012)
* Nuffield Foundation (2012-2015)
* Thomas Pocklington Trust (2015-2021)

In spring 2015 a follow on proposal was funded by Nuffield Foundation to conduct a focused investigation into the experiences of the participants who were studying in higher education. This came as a result of emerging findings from the participants who had chosen to go into higher education, which demonstrated that they were facing considerable barriers in accessing their studies.

Findings from this stage of the study were published within a comprehensive report describing the experiences of students with vision impairment in higher education: Hewett, R., Keil, S., and Douglas, G. (2015). Experiences of blind and partially sighted young people as they make the transition into Higher Education, Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, University of Birmingham.[[1]](#footnote-1)

### Using the research evidence to inform policy and practice

VICTAR have sought to use the research findings to improve the experiences of students with vision impairment in higher education, by informing both policy and practice. This summary report provides an overview of engagement with policymakers. This includes:

* The ‘Our Right to Study: Getting Disabled Students Allowance right for students with vision impairment’ campaign
* Meetings with former University Minister Chris Skidmore MP
* Meetings with the Disabled Students’ Allowance policy team at Department for Education
* Meetings with Student Loans Company who administer Disabled Students’ Allowance
* Responses to consultations, inquiries and reviews

### Collaboration with Thomas Pocklington Trust

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a charity committed to increasing awareness and understanding of the needs of people with sight loss and to developing and implementing services which meet their needs and improve lives.

Thomas Pocklington Trust are also a grant making trust, and in 2015 they commenced funding the third stage of the Longitudinal Transition Study (still ongoing) and took on an active role on the reference group for the study. This relationship led to their Children and Young Peoples Manager (Tara Chattaway) reviewing earlier findings for the Longitudinal Transitions Study and suggesting collaborating with VICTAR in order to address the challenges identified for young people with vision impairment in Higher Education, as documented in the Hewett et al (2015) report.

As well as sitting together on the Sensory Impairment advisory group for Disabled Students’ Allowance, VICTAR and Thomas Pocklington Trust later collaborated in January 2019 to launch the ‘Our Right to Study’ campaign, leading to a sustained period of engagement with policymakers and various stakeholders involved in the support of students with disabilities, particularly with regards to Disabled Students’ Allowance. This work is still ongoing.

### Introduction to Disabled Students’ Allowance

Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA)[[2]](#footnote-2) is a government funded scheme which provides support for students in higher education with learning difficulties, health problems or disabilities. It can fund specialist equipment, non-medical help, travel costs, and other disability-related costs of studying. DSA is managed by Department for Education, while the grant administration is managed by the Student Loans Company.

### Purpose and structure of this report

This report provides an overview of the impact of the policy engagement activities of the Longitudinal Transitions Study to date, focusing in particular on the outcomes of the Our Right to Study campaign.

The report concludes by identifying future priorities as we continue to engage with policymakers to challenge for change to allow for students with vision impairment to have an equitable and inclusive higher education experience.

### Summary of key impact

Throughout the report we make reference several impact outcomes, to which the Longitudinal Transitions Study and the Our Right to Study campaign contributed. These may be summarised as:

**Impact 1:** Changes to legislation through the introduction of a new flexible budget for undergraduate students receiving Disabled Students’ Allowance.

**Impact 2:** Changes to DSA policy guidance relating to the specialist support provided to students with vision impairment.

**Impact 3:** Changes to DSA policy guidance relating to the specification of funded laptops.

**Impact 4:** Opportunities for policymakers to meet and consult with students with vision impairment to inform decision making.

**Impact 5:** Ongoing collaboration with Department for Education DSA policy team and Student Loans Company to continue to inform evidence-based policy which improves the experiences of students with vision impairment.

## THE OUR RIGHT TO STUDY CAMPAIGN

### Development of the campaign report

Following initial engagement with Department for Education, VICTAR and Thomas Pocklington Trust concluded that a more comprehensive approach was required in order to challenge for change on behalf of students with vision impairment. This led to the development of the ‘Our Right to Study: Getting Disabled Students’ Allowance right for students with vision impairment’ campaign report; a report presented by Thomas Pocklington Trust, VICTAR and Royal National Institute of Blind People. The report, which was launched in January 2019, challenged the quality and appropriateness of provision through Disabled Students’ Allowance for students with vision impairment.

As the compelling evidence in ‘Our Right to Study’ shows, whilst DSA has the potential to support students to engage with independent study, there are many ways in which this important grant is failing. The impact on students with vision impairment is profound, with some paying the ultimate price of dropping out of university. (Chattaway, 2019, p2).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The majority of the evidence presented in the campaign report was taken from the Longitudinal Transitions Study.

### Overview of recommendations for Department for Education

The campaign report made four clear recommendations to Department for Education.

**One:** To engage in a full review of the assessment process, non-medical help, and technology support delivered by DSA. This must include engagement with vision impaired students, providers, assessors, specialists and the third sector.

**Two:** To ensure that the DSA assessment process is robust, and that recommendations made by assessors are accepted unless there is clear evidence not to do so.

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

**Four:** To ensure that vision impaired students receive the equipment needed to support their studies. The approved list of technology must be reviewed to ensure that equipment is up to date, value for money and relevant to the needs of students.

These recommendations evolved over time, as will be demonstrated throughout the report.

## PARLIAMENTARY ENGAGEMENT

### Launch of Our Right to Study campaign in Parliament

The Our Right to Study campaign report was officially launched at a joint meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Groups on Eye Health and Visual Impairment, Assistive Technology and Young Disabled People on 28th January 2019, following support by Richard Holmes the secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Eye Health and Visual Impairment. Presentations were given by Tara Chattaway from Thomas Pocklington Trust, Dr Rachel Hewett from VICTAR and student representative Holly Scott Gardner. All three APPGs agreed to support the campaign moving forward.

### Meeting with Universities Minister Chris Skidmore MP

Following this meeting, and after support from Vision UK (a partnership organisation supporting organisations across the vision impairment sector) who had written to the Universities Minister in support of the campaign, VICTAR, Thomas Pocklington Trust and Vision UK were invited to attend a meeting at Westminster. This meeting which took place on 13th February 2019 was attended by Universities Minister Chris Skidmore MP and members of the Disabled Students Allowance team at Department for Education.

**Summary of key outcomes as recording in the meeting notes sent to Minister Skidmore (key points noted in bold)**

***Students’ Experiences:***

We welcome your **offer to meet with students with vision impairment to hear about their experiences at universities and particularly on how DSA could work better for them, and what universities can do to support them.** We will liaise with DfE and your office to set up these meetings, with the first one being hosted at the University of Birmingham.

***DSA:***

We are very encouraged by the breadth of the discussion on DSA and what can be done to ensure that this crucial grant supports vison impaired students effectively. **We welcome the opportunity to set up a meeting with DfE and key stakeholders to discuss Non-Medical Help and equipment.** We also welcome the commitment from DfE to look at the assessment process as an outcome of the round table meetings with students. We will work with DfE to set up this meeting as soon as possible.

We are also encouraged that there may be an **opportunity to adapt primary legislation to enable students to have a ‘virtual personal budget’ that enables them to use their budget to purchase the support they require, whether this is non-medical help or specialist/mainstream equipment. We strongly believe the research evidence supports such a change to legislation and look forward to exploring further with DfE and your office on how students with vision impairment can be facilitated to work as independently as possible in higher education.**

We also welcome the commitment from you to do a formal announcement on these reviews and roundtable meetings with vision impaired students.

***Office for Students:***

We welcome your commitment to ensure that that the Office for Students does all it can to support Higher Education establishments to support all students including those with vision impairment. We welcome a letter from you to OfS, following on from the roundtables to endorse the recommendations in ‘Supporting the achievement of learners with vision impairment in Higher Education’. **We are keen to support your ongoing work with Office of Students by looking at ways to improve equality of opportunity for disabled students through the use of Access and Participation plans. [[4]](#footnote-4)**Roundtable event at University of Birmingham hosted by Universities Minister

One of the key outcomes of the 13th February meeting with the Universities Minister was a roundtable event hosted at University of Birmingham. This event held on 17th May 2019 provided an opportunity for both the Minister and his staff and colleagues from Department for Education to hear first-hand from students with vision impairment about their experiences in higher education.

**End of notes**

Immediately after the event, the Minister said:

As Universities Minister to come here today at the University of Birmingham to meet students who are visually impaired at this roundtable event which was organised by VICTAR and the TPT to talk about their lived experiences was tremendous. After listening to their stories, concerns and difficulties I am keen to do more as these issues are a key priority around access and participation to higher education. We are currently looking at the Disabled Students Allowance, we know students are grateful for it as it helps them continue their courses, but more can be done. The roundtable discussion demonstrates to me around issues such as the supportive equipment for students who are visually impaired need and the technology that is needed to allow students to progress in their courses. Also the issues around exams and how the right educational material is produced and if things go wrong then students should be able to resolve these issues and have an effective complaints procedure. I want students who are visually impaired to have access to higher education and they should not have these barriers in place.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Later, when speaking at the launch of the Higher Education Commission investigation into the experiences of students with disabilities[[6]](#footnote-6), Skidmore referenced the roundtable event, describing the opportunity to hear directly from students with disabilities as ‘transformative’ in his role as Universities Minister.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Following this roundtable event, the Our Right to Study campaign revised its recommendations to (key points noted in bold):**

1. **For all equipment to be provided at the highest specification required to meet the needs of students with vision impairment.** All equipment should be provided that meets the individual needs of the student and should not be restricted by a standard response of what SFE ‘does and doesn’t supply’. For example MacBooks should be provided when there is an assessed need, as should a range of technology that is required by the student.
2. **For a review of how Non-Medical Help is provided for students with low incidence disabilities.** The current system does not work for students with vision impairment. A system must be in place in which SFE is confident that a named NMH provider can meet the assessed needs of the students. The system must facilitate provision from small specialist providers to bridge the current shortage of specialist professionals working as NMH providers.
3. **For the Government to ensure that students receive the DSA support that best meets their needs by allocating one budget that brings together funding for equipment and NMH provision.** This budget should be flexible throughout the duration of their course to allow the student to purchase the full range of equipment they require, and to give them the ability to access new equipment or to buy in the different types of NMH needed. This would enable the student to overcome access barriers as they arise and to allow the student to work as independently as possible.
4. For all consultations/reviews on DSA to be open and transparent and to engage with a wide range of stakeholders. All findings from the reviews and time lines must be published and made available to the public.[[8]](#footnote-8)

### Summary of impact following parliamentary engagement

#### Changes to DSA legislation

Following our recommendation that the Government ensure ‘that students receive the DSA support that best meets their needs by allocating one budget that brings together funding for equipment and NMH provision’ the new Universities Minister Michelle Donelan MP announced on 6th July 2020 that there would be changes to Disabled Students’ Allowance. She stated:

I am also announcing today changes to Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) that will increase flexibility for students to access the support they need. The undergraduate DSA, which is currently structured as four separate sub-allowances, will be simplified into one allowance in line with postgraduate DSA. [[9]](#footnote-9)

These changes will come into effect in 2021/22.

These announced changes were welcomed in a press release by Thomas Pocklington Trust who noted that it would allow ‘students the freedom to choose how they allocate their grant’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

#### Engagement with students with vision impairment

In the Our Right to Study campaign report, we highlighted the importance of policymakers meeting and consulting with students with vision impairment. This was achieved through the Roundtable event held at University of Birmingham. The Universities Minister afterwards highlighted how beneficial he had found this experience, including referencing it 17 months later at the launch of the Arriving at Thriving report published by the HE Commission when he said:

I found it completely transformative when I actually sat down in a room with students to talk about their experiences and their needs, because you will find and pick up viewpoints that you simply wouldn’t have thought about sitting in a room in Whitehall with civil servants, and I think that’s one of the things the Commission really needs to be commended on. I remember holding a roundtable in Birmingham with visually impaired students and just being struck actually on how grinding it must be for those individual students to constantly have to fight and to come up against barriers time and time again.[[11]](#footnote-11)

#### Collaboration with Department for Education leading to changes to DSA policy

One key outcome from the February meeting with Minister Skidmore was him instructing the DSA team at Department for Education to continue collaborating with VICTAR and Thomas Pocklington Trust. The outcomes of this collaboration are presented in Section 4.

## ENGAGEMENT WITH DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, STUDENT LOANS COMPANY AND DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS, INNOVATION & SKILLS

### Responses to consultations/reviews into delivery of Disabled Students Allowance

Evidence from the Longitudinal Transitions Study has been used to respond to a number of consultations/reviews by the civil service team responsible for Disabled Students’ Allowance policy. Previously this team sat under Department for Business, Innovation and Skills who had formerly had responsibility for Higher Education, but now the group sits within the Department for Education Higher and Further Education Group.

#### Response to consultation on targeting funding for disabled students in higher education from 2016/17 onwards

This consultation, conducted in September 2015, sought evidence ahead of reforms to Disabled Students’ Allowance which proposed to place greater responsibility on HE providers to support students with disabilities through inclusive practice. Within the response from Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research we noted the importance of ensuring that the funding is available to ensure that students are able to access the equipment they need in order to work independently. We also noted the importance of several specialist roles for supporting students with vision impairment, emphasising the importance of specialist note-takers and mobility officers as well as overall support allocations from both DSA and the HE provider being informed through a detailed assessment by a trained assessor.

#### Response to consultation on DSA-NMH mandatory qualifications or professional body membership criteria and role descriptors review 2017/18

This review, conducted in January 2017, sought responses to proposed changes to DSA funded non-medical helper mandatory qualifications or professional body membership criteria and role descriptors, ahead of publication for the 2017/18 academic year. Whilst the review focused on specific aspects of the delivery of DSA, throughout we were able to incorporate evidence from the Longitudinal Transitions Study, and to highlight some of the particular challenges faced by students with vision impairment. The VICTAR response led further opportunities to engage with the DfE DSA team.

#### Response to procurement review for Disabled Student Allowances (DSAs) – assistive technology equipment and training tender

This review, conducted in April 2019, was conducted by the Student Loans Company, who have administrative responsibility for DSA. They sought responses to proposed tender arrangements for the delivery of DSA funded Assistive Technology. Our response was led by Thomas Pocklington Trust in collaboration with VICTAR. In the response we used the findings from the Longitudinal Transitions Study to: highlight ongoing challenges for students with vision impairment accessing appropriate equipment to enable them to study independently; argue for the importance of broadening the range of equipment funded by DSA; highlight the importance of students receiving training before starting their courses.

### Meetings with to DfE DSA policy team

Following the first two responses to consultations/reviews into delivery of DSA, Dr Rachel Hewett from VICTAR and Tara Chattaway from Thomas Pocklington Trust were invited to meet with the DfE DSA policy team. The objective of this role is to provide specialist guidance on the delivery of DSA support for students with sensory impairment. As well as being able to provide direct input into decision making by the DSA team through email responses and a meeting in June 2018, it allowed us to raise some of the challenges faced by students with vision impairment, as identified through the Longitudinal Transitions Study. Our key recommendations following the June 2018 meeting were that:

1. The DSA team consult directly with students to broaden understanding of their experiences.
2. A more comprehensive review into the specialist support received by students with vision impairment is required.
3. DSA needs assessors should receive mandatory sensory impairment training and guidance in vision impairment.
4. DfE work with the sensory impairment sector to develop further accredited training.
5. Guidance documentation to be updated to ensure all information on specialist support for students with sensory impairment is available and accessible.

### Collaboration with Department for Education DSA team

Our engagement with Department for Education through the meeting with the Universities Minister on 13th February 2019 and our ongoing participation to the Sensory Impairment Advisory Group provided the opportunity for ongoing collaboration with the DSA team. This ongoing collaboration has led to a series of events and activities, as detailed below.

#### Roundtable event with DfE and key stakeholders

A key outcome from the February 2019 meeting with Minister Skidmore and DfE was the instruction from the Minister for DfE to engage with the Our Right to Study campaign team to seek to identify ways in which students with vision impairment might be better supported in higher education.

The first agreed activity was a roundtable event in March 2019, held at University of Birmingham which was attended by three members of the DfE DSA team and 13 key stakeholders involved in the delivery of support for students with vision impairment in higher education settings. Several recommendations arose from the meeting, including:

**Recommendation 1**: Students with low incident disabilities, such as vision impairment should have access to a ‘personal budget’ (which combines the existing NMH and equipment budget) so that students can focus the allowances on the right solutions that support their needs

**Recommendation 2:** attendees agreed that all Children and Young People (CYP) with vision impairment should be given the opportunity to be assessed by a specialist assessor. Though it was agreed that how this is operationalised and what it mean in practice would need to be looked into.

**Recommendation 3:** In order to address inconsistencies to the approval of DSA support there should be specialists in vision impairment and VI equipment within the assessment team at SFE.

#### Review of DSA guidance in relation to students with vision impairment

In response to the outcomes of the DfE roundtable event, Rachel Hewett (VICTAR) and Tara Chattaway (Thomas Pocklington Trust) provided a tailored briefing to the DSA team at Department for Education which provided a response to proposed DSA guidance in relation to students with vision impairment, gave an overview of key findings from the Longitudinal Transitions Study in relation to DSA and made recommendations for future development.

**Summary of recommendations**

**Sighted guides**

* 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.

#### Roundtable event with students with vision impairment

A further key outcome from the February 2019 meeting with Minister Skidmore and Department for Education was a roundtable event with students with vision impairment, as reported upon in 3.3. Of particular significance to Department for Education were the opportunities it presented for the DSA team to hear of and respond directly to some of the challenges faced by students with vision impairment.

### Collaboration with Student Loans Company

The Our Right to Study campaign team’s ongoing engagement with Department for Education also provided opportunities for collaboration with Student Loans Company (SLC); the organisation who have responsibility for administering Disabled Students Allowance.

In particular, we were invited to meet with senior members of staff at the SLC head office. This meeting was also attended by representations from the Department for Education DSA team and National Deaf Children’s Society (NDCS) who were representing the needs of students with hearing impairments.

Following this meeting and the discussions about the challenges with students with vision impairment have in applying for Disabled Students’ Allowance, the Student Loans Company met with a number of students to discuss the accessibility of the application process. This event was organised by Thomas Pocklington Trust, and constituted an ongoing aspect of our campaign – to improve the application experiences of students with vision impairment.[[12]](#footnote-12) Staff attending from Student Loans Company broadened their understanding of the challenges that are faced by students with vision impairment and identified ways in which the DSA application process might be improved:

We are always trying to improve what we do. This conversation helps us to understand what the biggest challenges for students are and will enable us to feed back to our government shareholders on priorities. External Affairs Manager, Student Loans Company

This was a powerful call that will live with me for a long time. I feel terrible that you have had such a poor experience. This is not much consolation to you, but we are listening, and we will engage. It’s about more than ensuring we are compliant; it’s about doing the right thing and making sure everyone has access. Head of Service Design, Student Loans Company

### Summary of impact following engagement with policy makers

#### Changes to DSA legislation

Throughout our discussions with Department for Education, we repeatedly made the recommendation that the Government ensure ‘that students receive the DSA support that best meets their needs by allocating one personal budget that brings together funding for equipment and NMH provision’, giving more flexibility in the way in which students might use their allocated funding. As discussed in 3.4, the new Universities Minister Michelle Donelan MP announced on 6th July 2020 that these changes would be made to Disabled Students’ Allowance, coming into effect in 2021/22.

#### Changes to DSA policy guidance

Through our engagement with Department for Education VICTAR had the opportunity to inform two key changes to DSA policy guidance. The DSA policy team carried out a detailed review of the qualification requirements for support workers who provide DSA-funded non-medical help to students in consultation with various experts. Through the research findings VICTAR were able to inform a change of qualification requirements for the roles of Specialist Notetaker for Visually Impaired Students and Specialist Support Professional for Students with Sensory Impairment – Vision Impairment. This change took effect in August 2019.

Department for Education also set specifications for computers that are provided through DSA, with the aim of ensuring that they are able to run the required assistive software. The Our Right to Study campaign report highlighted that the specification at the time was not optimal in terms of computer performance for the assistive software used by vision impaired students, and therefore we made recommendations to Department for Education that the specification should be improved in order to ensure that supplied laptops were fit for purpose for students with vision impairment. Following further consultation, Department for Education updated this computer specification in November 2019 to increase the RAM and thus enable better performance for this software.

#### Engagement with students with vision impairment

In the Our Right to Study campaign report, we highlighted the importance of policymakers meeting and consulting with students with vision impairment. This was achieved through the roundtable event held at University of Birmingham which was attended by representatives from Department for Education and the roundtable event hosted by Thomas Pocklington Trust which was attended by representatives from Student Loans Company.

## CONCLUSIONS

This summary report has detailed many ways in which the findings from the Longitudinal Transitions Study and resulting campaign have been used to inform policymakers through a variety of mechanisms. The Our Right to Study campaign and subsequent evolving recommendations have led to several direct impacts:

**Impact 1:** Changes to legislation through the introduction of a new flexible budget for undergraduate students receiving Disabled Students’ Allowance. This will allow all students with disabilities to have greater access to a range of technology which can enable them to work as independently as possible. Previously students were restricted from obtaining the equipment they required due to caps on the amount of money which can be spent on equipment, which in turn meant they were more reliant on human support.

**Impact 2:** Changes to DSA policy guidance relating to the specialist support provided to students with vision impairment. This will allow students with vision impairment to more readily access support from professionals with expertise in supporting students with vision impairment.

**Impact 3:** Changes to DSA policy guidance relating to the specification of funded laptops. This will ensure that the laptops students receive are sufficient to run their assistive technology, facilitating them in accessing lectures and in undertaking their independent study.

**Impact 4:** Opportunities for policymakers to meet and consult with students with vision impairment to inform decision making. This will enable policymakers to understand the specific challenges faced by students with vision impairment who are a minority group, and therefore often their experiences and views are missed through more general consultations.

**Impact 5:** Ongoing collaboration with Department for Education DSA policy team and Student Loans Company to continue to inform evidence-based policy which improves the experiences of students with vision impairment. Through the research we have identified many ways in which Disabled Students’ Allowance might be better tailored to meet the needs of students with vision impairment, and this ongoing collaboration will enable us to help inform future policy changes which reflect these findings.

1. [Hewett, R., Keil, S., and Douglas, G. (2015). Experiences of blind and partially sighted young people as they make the transition into Higher Education, Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, University of Birmingham](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/victar/research/longitudinal-transitions-study/phase-two.aspx). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Help if you’re a student with a learning difficulty, health problem or disability](https://www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowances-dsas/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. @@need to get this campaign report uploaded again@@ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Key outcomes taken from follow up email sent to Minister Skidmore following the meeting on 13th February 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [Universities Minister visits University of Birmingham to take part in roundtable discussion with students with vision impairment](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/latest/2019/05/Chris-Skidmore-visits-to-take-part-in-roundtable-discussion-on-vision-impairment.aspx) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [Hector, M. (2020) Arriving at Thriving. Learning from Disabled Students to Ensure Access for All. Higher Education Commission](https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/sites/site_pc/files/apdf_raa40680_i_pc_i_disabled_students_inquiry_report_screen_reader_version_i_djl_i_f_raa.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [Chris Skidmore's speech at the Higher Education Commission disabled students report launch event](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=em7Rsj4oZWs&app=desktop) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Key outcomes taken from follow up email sent to Minister Skidmore following student roundtable event on 17th May 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [Higher Education Student Finance Statement made on 6th July 2020 by Michelle Donelan, The Minister of State for Universities](https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2020-07-06/HCWS336) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [TPT welcomes Disabled Students’ Allowance reform](https://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/news/tpt-welcomes-disabled-students-allowance-reform/) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [Chris Skidmore's speech at the Higher Education Commission disabled students report launch event](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=em7Rsj4oZWs&app=desktop) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [Students speak plainly about their experience of applying for student finance](https://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/what-we-do/student-support/student-stories/students-speak-plainly-about-their-experience-of-applying-for-student-finance/) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)