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4. Our Right to Study:
5. Getting Disabled Students’ Allowance right for students with vision impairment

### 28 January 2019

**Tara Chattaway: Thomas Pocklington Trust**

## Foreword

As organisations that work towards improving the outcomes of children and young people with vision impairment, Thomas Pocklington Trust, VICTAR and RNIB are pleased to come together to present this important report.

We support the Government’s belief that all disabled students should have full access to university life. We want to see vision impaired students achieve in their chosen field of study. We also agree that there is an important role for both Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) and Higher Education (HE) providers.

However, 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.

We believe that there are a number of steps that can be taken to address the issues with DSA. We look forward to continuing to work with the Department for Education, MPs and peers to ensure that all students with vision impairment get the support they need to be able to thrive at university.

**Phil Ambler, Director of Evidence and Policy: Thomas Pocklington Trust**



**Graeme Douglas, Professor of Disability and Special Educational Needs, Head of Department: Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs: University of Birmingham**

**Sarah Lambert, Head of Social Change: RNIB**

## Introduction

‘Our Right to Study’ sets out clear and compelling evidence of students with vision impairment struggling at university. Many are repeating semesters or academic years because technology or support is not in place. The complexity of the challenges they face leave them with precious little time to engage with wider university life, and the opportunities and experiences it provides. Ultimately some face the tough decision of whether to continue or are asked to leave their course.

Disabled Students’ Allowance is a grant that provides support to enable students to study independently and to participate fully in university life. However, as this report shows, it is not delivering for vision impaired students.

The report is informed by evidence gathered from an ongoing University of Birmingham Longitudinal Transitions Study [1], and additional interviews with students. The longitudinal study has followed the experiences of young people with vision impairment from secondary school into further education and employment. The latest stage of the study interviewed 48 young people.

It has found that:

* Some DSA assessors have insufficient expertise to assess vision impaired students, leading to poor quality assessments;
* DSA assessments are frequently disregarded by Student Finance England (SFE) and vision impaired students are being denied the equipment that they have been assessed as needing;
* Equipment provided through DSA is often not fit for intended purpose or durable enough to last the entire degree course;
* Equipment offered isn’t always appropriate, in part because access to mainstream or new technology is restricted;
* Vision impaired students are starting university without equipment or support in place;
* Non-medical help (NMH) that vision impaired students have been assessed as needing does not often materialise, because suppliers do not have the right DSA qualified staff available;
* Lack of mobility support is restricting vision impaired students’ access to university buildings and local amenities [1].

We are calling on the Government to take urgent action. Vision impaired students must have the chance to reap the benefits of university and improve their future life prospects.

### What the Department for Education can do

There are four clear steps that the Department for Education (DfE) can take:

**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.**

## Higher education: the opening of doors

The advantages of attending university are well recognised, not just for the student, but it also has a positive benefit for the taxpayer, and society as a whole [2].

In fact, the role of universities is becoming increasingly important. Businesses are expanding the number of graduate employees year-on-year, and it is estimated that as soon as the mid-2020s, 70 per cent of new jobs will be in occupations most likely to employ graduates [3].

As acknowledged 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” [4].**

This is particularly pertinent for students with vision impairment whose chance of finding employment greatly increases if they have higher qualifications, compared with the general population [5].

However, this is set in a frustrating picture of a stubbornly persistent low employment rate for people with vision impairment. Roughly 42.8 per cent of young people with ‘a seeing difficulty’ aged 16-25 are not in employment, education or training (NEET), compared to 21.7 per cent of 16-25 year olds [5]. This is echoed in the general population where 27 per cent of blind and partially sighted people of working age are in employment, a fall from 33 per cent in 2006 [6].

DSA must do all it can to support students to remain at university to put them on the best footing to break into employment.

## Disabled Students’ Allowance

Disabled Students’ Allowance helps students meet some of the extra costs they may face because of their disability, long-term illness or mental health problem. The aim of DSA is to overcome barriers faced by students that can’t be addressed through inclusive practice and reasonable adjustments. It should ensure that students have an equivalent experience to their non-disabled peers so that they can obtain the qualifications, skills and experiences required to succeed as a graduate.

When DSA was reformed in 2016, the Government’s intention was to ensure that disabled students could access higher education. The aim was to re-balance support between HE providers and DSA, and to improve value for money [7]. This included a recognition of the technological advances that have transformed the manner in which lectures and tutorials are delivered. The reforms looked to increase the role of assistive technology to reduce the need in some cases for separate and dedicated non-medical help.

When DSA works it can enable students to thrive. However, for many vision impaired students, DSA is organised in a way that doesn’t support their needs. It is failing to administer the right equipment and support at the right time.

The impact on students can be profound. The lack of support has resulted in students repeating course modules or an academic year. It has impacted on their self-esteem, confidence and overall wellbeing [1].

A lack of support can also place restrictions on vision impaired student’s opportunities to access wider university life as they play catch up with their studies and spend precious time chasing up support and dealing with administrative tasks.

This has to end. People with vision impairment have a right to study and participate fully in university life too.

## The solution

We believe that that are four steps that the Government can take to address the issues faced by vision impaired students.

### One: Stop, review and listen

**DfE must 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.**

We are aware of a number of consultations or small engagement exercises taking place across various departments including those on non-medical help specifications, and the specifications of computers provided through the DSA scheme [8]. This is at the same time that a tender for the procurement of technological support has been announced [9].

We are concerned that these are taking place independently of each other without engagement with vision impaired students and wider stakeholders. We are calling on the Department for Education to halt the various small consultations and reviews, and instead to look at DSA as a whole to see how it can best work for students with vision impairment.

Sight loss is a low incidence disability. 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 a vision impairment [10]. Therefore, any general surveys or research are unlikely to pick up on the specific needs of vision impaired students.

“Though I have managed through university and my support has been reasonably good. There has still been so much that has gone wrong, and I have had to make difficult decisions about how to use the support that has been allocated to me, or which equipment I should use.

I think that it is important for government to talk to students directly about our experiences. There are lots of practical improvements that could be made to DSA to make mine and other students’ life easier, if only someone would listen to us.” Holly: final year undergraduate student.

### Two. Get it right from the start

**The Department for Education must 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.**

* All DSA assessors should attend mandatory sensory impairment training and keep up to date with the latest equipment available for people with vision impairment. Guidance should be developed on how to assess students with vision impairment.
* There should be recognised specialist assessors that students with vision impairment can choose to be assessed by, and that other assessors can contact for advice and guidance.

The application and assessment process is a crucial stage for students. It is at this point that the right support is identified to put the student in the best possible position to achieve in their course. However, recommendations for equipment or support are often ignored or disregarded by Student Finance England. This has meant that students have been left with equipment or support that they can’t access and/or use.

“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 of 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.

“I have had some of my technology needs rejected, it just seems ridiculous to have an assessment process just for the assessor’s judgement to be ignored. What is the point of having the role if assessors aren’t going to be listened to?” Holly: final year undergraduate student.

Some students with vision impairment have the added pressure of being assessed by assessors that do not have the right knowledge or understanding of what support or equipment would be most suitable for each individual. A one size fits all approach is taken.

There is currently no statutory obligation for assessors to attend any training or to hold a relevant qualification which means poor decisions can be made to the detriment of the student. Finite resources can often be spent on the wrong equipment leaving students without the ability to purchase what is needed.

“It was clear she [assessor] hadn’t worked with a blind person before, …because she said it herself, basically ‘I don’t know what I am doing, you have got to tell me what you need’…I was like ‘actually, I think that’s your job!” University student [1].

**Elin, studying Arts, Humanities specialising in English language and creative writing, Open University**

Elin applied for DSA in October 2017 and received her equipment in April/May 2018. Elin feels that this is a long time but has been told by other students that this is average.

The assessment process involved filling out initial forms to demonstrate that Elin had a vision impairment that affected her learning. Elin had to provide relevant evidence to support her application and was asked to supply a doctor’s note to explain how her disabilities affect the way she works. This process went back and forth as the first letter the doctor wrote wasn’t accepted and more detail was requested.

Eventually Elin had her needs assessment: **“It was tiring. It lasted a couple of hours, and I found myself continuously explaining what I needed. The assessor pushed back on what he thought I needed. The assessment was all about me having to get my needs across. In the end he wrote a needs assessment report, but I still needed to adjust it. It recommended what he thought was best not what I said I needed.**

**I eventually got the equipment I needed, a couple of months after the assessment began and a month after the course started. Luckily, I had some old equipment to use to get me through otherwise I don’t know what I would have done.”**

### Three. Provide the right support

**The Department for Education must 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.**

* Role descriptors should mirror the needs of young people with vision impairment.
* Qualifications required by staff should meet the needs of vision impaired students. They shouldn’t be too rigid as to exclude those with the right experience and ability.
* Providers should be able to prove how they will be able to meet the needs of vision impaired students before winning a contract.
* A professional body should be established that checks the qualifications and experiences of all non-medical helpers.

The support required by young people with vision impairment is varied and complex. It can be influenced by a range of factors including the type of course studied, level of sight loss, preferred formats and access needs.

Currently NMH is simply not working for many students with vision impairment. It is too specific, and the qualifications required for staff to deliver the support are restrictive. This often means that even qualified staff with a wealth of experience are not permitted to support students in some roles.

“I was assessed as requiring mobility support. The person I wanted to employ, who has been doing this work since the early 1980s, wasn’t DSA registered so she wasn’t allowed to support me. I went with the person that was recommended by the provider. I thought I’d go ahead and give them a try. Within the first session I knew it wasn’t going to work, we had completely different ideas, she was perfectly nice, but I didn’t feel she was well qualified. I don’t understand why somebody who has been doing their job since 1980 can’t be employed when those who don’t have the right experience and training can?” Mariwan

Our evidence indicates a worrying trend of NMH providers bidding for contracts without having the right staff to provide support to vision impaired students. This has a devastating impact on students who are being told that the support they have been identified as needing will not be provided.

**Wayne**

Wayne is in the second year of a three-year counselling degree at Newman University in Birmingham. This is his second degree, and he previously studied Social Work at a different university.

Before embarking on his original university course, Wayne applied for DSA. He was recommended the wrong equipment, but was allocated support for his lectures, specifically for accessing lecture notes and finding the right books and journals at the library. However, due to a lack of support workers that hold the prerequisite qualifications, and the providers bidding for support they could not provide, he only received support for some of these lectures and limited support for his work placement.

**“I was asked to leave my course because I didn’t pass my law module and work placement. It was the module that I had no support with. I was left to struggle on my own with limited equipment and difficulties in finding the resources I needed.”**

This isn’t representative of his ability to do the job. Within the workplace he would be entitled to Access to Work and would have the support required to do the job he is employed to do.

Wayne was able to transfer onto the second year of a counselling course at a different university. The university has been very supportive; however, he is still experiencing ongoing issues with DSA.

**“I haven’t been assessed again, despite starting a different course. But they have reduced the number of hours of support that I can receive. This impacts on lots of different parts of my life. I have to ask my friends when they come to visit if they can type up my notes if I dictate to them. I am having to rely on friends and fellow students for support. That doesn’t enable independence.”**

### **Four: Provide the right equipment**

**The Department for Education must 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.**

* Equipment should meet the needs of students, be powerful enough to run relevant software, and be reliable and durable.
* DfE should place firmer requirements on institutions to have in-house technical support to support students using assistive technology, and to develop inclusive practice.
* Mechanisms should be in place so thattemporary loans of equipment for students who experience problems with DSA funded equipment are provided in a timely manner to minimise disruption to the student.
* There should be commitment to review the minimum £200 contribution for laptops for students with vision impairment because they are not able to access standard equipment available to all students.
* **The approved list of equipment should be more flexible and include new and mainstream technologies.**

Without the use of equipment most vision impaired students simply would not be able to participate in university. However, we have worryingly identified a number of ways in which DSA is failing in its intended aim.

#### Upper limit on equipment

Students have reported that it is easy to reach the maximum amount of funding available without fully addressing their needs. The equipment often required is of a high specification and therefore costly; for example, a braille reader can take up all of the equipment budget. This means that students with vision impairment settle for equipment that is cheaper but isn’t practical and doesn’t meet their needs. They are having to make difficult either/or choices on what equipment to purchase, forcing them to have to buy essential equipment from their personal finances.

“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 [1].”

“I bought my braille sense…because of my equipment budget being limited at that point I got an 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 [1].”

#### ‘The computer says no’

Some vision impaired students do not have the equipment that they need because it is not on the approved list of technology. Others are provided with laptops which simply are not powerful enough to run the software required.

Unfairly, students are contributing £200 towards laptops that are slow to run and are simply not fit for purpose.

“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 [1].”

“I don’t use my laptop that much because it’s really slow, and it kind of freezes all the time, so I use my old one really [1].”

#### Non-specialist equipment

Mainstream equipment such as tablet computers play an important role in supporting students with vision impairment to access information quickly and discreetly [11].

They’re effective for downloading and reading lecture notes and can enable students to take pictures of information on screens, lecture boards and handouts, that can then be magnified. They play a different and complementary role to laptops.

“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. [1]”

“I get the lecture slides emailed to me, or I can get them on the student sharing website…at university. I can just download them onto my tablet and I can view them as the slide is playing during the lecture, and I can pull the screen quite close to my face, whilst I wouldn’t be able to do that with a computer. In different situations they are both very, very good. But, you know, the iPad in just certain situations is very useful, especially in a packed crowded lecture theatre where it’s not always easy to lug around a big computer [1].

#### Delays and problems with technology

Despite applying for DSA several months before starting their course, vision impaired students are experiencing delays in the receipt of equipment. They are starting their courses without vital equipment and are placed at a massive disadvantage to their peers, as they are unable to fully engage with their studies.

This is exacerbated by issues with the functionality of equipment, that has resulted in equipment returned to the supplier.

“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 [1].”

**Nigel (not real name) is studying computer science at Oxford Brooks**

It is Nigel’s first year at University, and he applied for DSA in plenty of time.

The assessment process went well, and Nigel was allocated an advocate to help with timetabling and liaising with lecturers and the university on accessibility issues.

Nigel was also allocated a notetaker so that he could concentrate more closely on what is being said and refer to any relevant materials during lectures.

The notetaker support has never materialised. The company that won the contract to provide the notetaker has said that they have no suitably trained staff available. This has meant that Nigel has had to go through almost the whole first semester with no support.

A fellow student has offered to take notes for Nigel, and the university is now paying this student.

In addition, Nigel paid £200 towards a basic laptop that is not powerful enough to run the software needed.

**“I have had to use my own money to upgrade the hard drive to enable Supernova to work on my laptop. However, it causes the battery life to be very short, so I am constantly having to plug in my laptop during lectures. The laptop is slow and just isn’t powerful enough to run the software I need. It will need to be replaced again in a year’s time. What is the point? It is just costlier to the Government and students to operate this way. We should simply receive the equipment we need from the start.”**

The combination of lack of support and not having the right equipment has caused Nigel much stress and has meant that he has not been able to successfully complete all of his modules.

**“I have had to apply for an extension under mitigating circumstances, so that I can get the grade I deserve and not just the pass rate that is given for work handed in late.”**

## Conclusion

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 universities.

Our evidence shows that in many situations HE providers are going above and beyond their duty, to substitute where DSA has failed to deliver. For example, by paying for laptops or notetakers.

It is clear that there is not a level playing field. Some vision impaired students receive the equipment they need when many do not; some students are not provided with the NMH they are assessed as needing; and equipment is frequently not of a good enough specification to deliver.

**We believe that by taking the steps set out in this report, including to engage fully with vision impaired students, that the Government can effectively address the issues with the DSA assessment process, non-medical help, and equipment, which we have highlighted.**

We welcome the opportunity to meet with and work with the Department for Education, MPs and peers to ensure that all students with vision impairment get the support they need to be able to achieve and participate fully at university.

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## Further information

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### About RNIB

Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), is one of the UK’s leading sight loss charities and the largest community of blind and partially sighted people. We recognise everyone’s unique experience of sight loss and offer help and support for blind and partially sighted people – this can be anything from practical and emotional support, campaigning for change, reading services and the products we offer in our online shop. We’re a catalyst for change – inspiring people with sight loss to transform their own personal experience, their community and, ultimately, society as a whole. Our focus is on giving them the help, support and tools they need to realise their aspirations.

### 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