18th March 2019

**Disabled Student Allowances (DSAs) – Assistive Technology Equipment and Training Tender**

Dear colleague,

Please find attached a questionnaire in relation to the above tender. We would welcome your input into this project to ensure that the finalised requirements are as comprehensive as possible.

Please note responses must be received via the Delta e.Sourcing site by **17:00 on Friday 5th April 2019**.

Comments must be submitted on this form, please note it will not be possible to provide individual responses to feedback which is received.

Best regards

Anthony Hill Signature

Anthony Hill

**Head of Targeted Support**

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**Tender for Assistive Technology Training Provision**

Whether it is part of a single or a split tender the assistive technology training will be subject to identical quality measures and standards.

What would be the benefits to this split approach?

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| Our response 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.  <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/research/victar/research/longitudinal-transitions-study/index.aspx>  https://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/cyp/  We are not in the position to comment on whether a single or split tender is the preferred option without further information.  To make an informed comment we would need to see an ‘Equality Impact Assessment’. Our main concern is whether the tender process has measured and understood the risks of any unintended consequences. For example, whether the reduction of suppliers might narrow the range, type and availability of technology and training, which could negatively impact low incidence, high-needs groups.  We note that without the use of equipment most vision impaired students simply would not be able to participate in university and it is vital that they have access to appropriate equipment and training in a timely manner.  We strongly advocate that any procurement system must ensure that mechanisms are in place to safeguard the needs of students with vision impairment.  **Equipment**  **Current issues:**   * The equipment often required by students with vision impairment is of a high specification and therefore costly; for example, a braille reader can take up all 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 (For further information, and evidence see Hewett et al, 2015, available at <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-into-higher-education-summary.pdf>, p11). * Some students with vision impairment do not have the equipment they require 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 ([Hewett](https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/education/victar/transitions-into-higher-education-summary.pdf) et al, 2015, p12-13). * Mainstream equipment such as tablet computers play an important role in supporting students with vision impairment to access information quickly and discreetly (<http://scholarworks.csun.edu/handle/10211.3/151201> and Hewett et al, 2015 p14-15). 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.”  **“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.”**   * Despite applying for DSA several months before starting their course, students with vision impairment are experiencing delays in the receipt of equipment. They are starting their courses without vital equipment and are placed at a disadvantage to their peers, as they are unable to fully engage with their studies. * There are issues with the functionality of equipment, that has resulted in equipment returned to the supplier (Hewett et al, 2015, p12).   **Recommendations**   * Any procurement process must ensure that students have access to the equipment that is suitable for them, and that will aid their studies effectively. This should include access to mainstream technologies where identified that it will support the student; including training on that equipment or software. An Equality Impact Assessment should be conducted to ensure this. * **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..**   **Training**  Any procurement contract must ensure that:   * training is delivered before students start their course, and that they can access it again as and when needed. How students with vision impairment use software and equipment may change as their course progresses. For example, this may be because their level of sight fluctuates or deteriorates during their course. Or it may be that they select a university module that requires data analysis/the use of more sophisticated packages etc. * The student is also not always best placed to judge their training needs until they have started on their course, and therefore some flexibility is needed. * Students should have access to training on any tools that may aid their learning, even if these tools are available free of charge to ensure that they are able to appropriately apply such tools to their learning. * It must be based on the needs of the students, for example not just how a package works, but how the student can use the package in relation to their study. * Courses must be made available at a time and in a place that is suitable for the student. |

What would be the disadvantages to this split approach?

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| Please see above response. |

**Quality Measures for Assistive Technology Training Provision**

The draft specifications for the tender use the DSA-QAG QAF as a basis for the quality of the service which will be delivered to our customers.

What do you think are the 5 most important quantitative measures or requirements which should be included within the requirements for the assistive technology training tender?

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| Additional feedback on ensuring the quality of the assistive technology training which is provided to our customers: |
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**Specialist Equipment – for hearing impairment, visual impairment and ergonomic items**

We understand that at the present time there are a number of ways that our customers are recommended specialist equipment, such as radio aids, Braille devices and ergonomic equipment. In some circumstances a student’s Needs Assessor will make a recommendation for specific items whereas others refer them to a supplier to make this determination.

We would be interested to understand views on what are the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches.

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| Advantages of Needs Assessor determining all equipment needs: |
| We believe that assessments are key to ensuring that the DSA process runs smoothly. However, we are surprised to see this question posed as part of this procurement review.  We understood that this review is solely about the supplying of equipment and not about assessment. To understand who is best placed to assess students with vision impairment, a wider review of the assessment process should be undertaken.  This review has mainly been promoted via providers of equipment, and not assessors, and other interested parties. Therefore, there are key stakeholders whose views will not have been sought.  However, to answer the question set out here, both the assessor and the provider have a role to play in assessing what the right equipment is for students, alongside the students themselves.  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 (Vision2020UK, 2015; Bone and Meltzer, 1989; Cumberland et al, 2010; Flanagan et al, 2003).  In our conversations with assessment providers, the total number of students with vision impairment assessment can be one per cent of the total assessments carried out in a 12-month period.  **“Assessors are expected to keep training up to date. There is a huge difference between training and assessing a student with a low incidence disability - you don’t get the nuances. Students presenting with similar levels of vision, may require completely different packages. It is not a one size fits all approach” (Staff from an assessment centre).**  It is therefore difficult for assessors to become an expert in assessing students with vision impairment.  SFE has identified that “**14%** of our students who are not satisfied with their DSA, identify issues with their supplier being the cause.”  Whilst our findings have also identified problems with the supply of equipment, dissatisfaction in many cases is not because of suppliers, but rather because of the processes in place. As this question is about who should assess students with vision impairment, here are some the wider issues we have identified with the assessment process:   * **the assessor has not had the right experience and skill set to assess a student with vision impairment**   **“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.”**  “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.   * **There is disagreement between assessor and SFE**   **“There should be a professional qualification for the assessor. Assessors should be seen as professionals, and their professional assessments should hold weight. The SFE will assign a caseworker – who has limited time to read through an assessment. A lot of time is wasted going back and forth between the assessor and SFE to make the case as to why a student should receive the equipment that has been recommended. This can still be happening even when the student has started their course” Assessment centre staff member.**  “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.   * **Inconsistencies in what is approved by SFE**   “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. |

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| Disadvantages of Needs Assessor determining all equipment needs: |
| Please see above response |

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| Advantages of referring student to a specialist supplier to determine equipment need: |
| Please see previous response |

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| Disadvantages of referring student to a specialist supplier to determine equipment need: |
| Please see previous response |

**Requirements Document**

The draft requirement document was provided in advance of the meeting. If you have any comments/suggestions on the specific requirements which are currently included, please share these below. Please state the requirement number to allow these to be easily identified.

NB – please duplicate the table, if more feedback is required.

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| Requirement Number: | A002 |
| Feedback:  This should include reference to low incidence disabilities, for example: “Suppliers must ensure that all customer facing staff receive specific training on the ways in which disabilities, **including low incidence disabilities** can impact the requirements of their customers.” | |

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| Requirement Number: | A003 |
| Feedback:  “Suppliers must ensure they will maintain knowledge of the latest developments in the areas of disabilities and assistive technologies.”  We have the following comments:  ‘will’ should be removed, so that it reads that “Suppliers must ensure they maintain….”  We understand that currently students are told that they cannot receive equipment that would support their needs as it is not on an approved ‘list’. This list must be reviewed to ensure that a flexible approach is taken to provide a range of equipment to students with vision impairment. It should include mainstream and new and emerging technologies. | |

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| Requirement Number: | A004 |
| Feedback: We welcome the opportunity for stakeholders to provide feedback.  Students should have the opportunity to feedback at one time on the whole of the DSA process, rather than having to provide feedback on different elements of their DSA support.  Whilst it is noted that “This will include students, needs assessors and staff within Higher Education Providers (including but not limited to disability advisers)” it is not clear whether the providers of equipment should be promoting a feedback form, or actively collecting the information themselves.  A more integrated approach would be for SFE/SLC to have one survey that a student can complete, that is promoted by assessors, DSA advisers, NMH and equipment providers etc.  This would enable SFE/SLC to a have a clear understanding of what is and isn’t working. It would also mean that the student can feel confident on commenting directly to SFE/SLC without concerns that they may be upsetting the company that is providing their equipment.  It will also allow for a consistent approach for collecting information and data. | |

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| Requirement Number: | A005 |
| Feedback: If feedback is provided annually – a time frame should be set, so that feedback is provided in sufficient time before a new intake of students, so that any areas for improvement can be addressed.  Please see our response above, that the feedback process should cover the overall DSA journey. | |

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| Requirement Number: | A006 |
| Feedback:  Whilst we agree that providers should be working together, we would question whether this is the sole duty of the providers of equipment.  They may not have been part of the assessment process and may not know what other support has been provided.  We also note that “Other Providers” would include (but is not limited to) Needs Assessor, Disability Adviser, Non-Medical Help Provider, this should also include SFE and SLC. | |

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| Requirement Number: | B007 |
| Feedback: We have concerns with “Suppliers must ensure that they can deliver a **suitable** range of products..”  Students with vision impairment often require complex and varied equipment. It is not acceptable for a suitable range of products to be available– but rather it should be products that meet the needs of the student.  What is ‘suitable’ should be further defined. As mentioned previously in our response. We understand that there is a ‘list’ of acceptable equipment. Please see previous comment.  An equality impact assessment should also be carried out to measure and understand the risks of any unintended consequences. For example, whether the reduction of suppliers could narrow the range, type and availability of technology and training. | |

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|  | C012 |
| Feedback:  “Suppliers must provide all documentation to students clearly written and available in multiple and accessible formats.”  This should go further to ensure that suppliers record the preferred format of the student and communicate with them in that medium. | |

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| Do you feel as though there are any requirements/standards missing? |
| Feedback:  Students with vision impairment often rely on expensive and complex equipment. Suppliers should receive the funding required to loan and trial equipment to students to ensure that it is right for them, before the student commits a large chunk of their DSA to a certain piece of equipment that may not be suitable. |

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| General feedback on the requirement document: |
| Feedback: |

Please note responses must be received via the Delta e.Sourcing site by

**17:00 on Friday 5th April 2019**.