A Review of the Disabled Students' Allowances

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also available in Welsh.

Title: A Review of the Disabled Students' Allowances

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Glossary

Acronym/Key word	Definition
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder
ALN	Additional Learning Needs is a new definition for children and young people aged 0-25 who have special educational needs and learning difficulties and/or disabilities
ASC	Autistic Spectrum Condition
ATS	Assistive Technology Services includes the software and other technologies to support students with disabilities
BSL	British Sign Language
DA	Disability advisor attached to disability support services who provide information and advice to students within their respective higher education provider
DSAs	Disabled Students' Allowances
DSA-QAG	Disabled Students Allowances Quality Assurance Group
HE	Higher Education
HEP	Higher Education Provider including universities and higher education in further education colleges
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency provides statistics on students enrolled in higher education in any given year
NMH	Non-medical help support includes support such as note taking, mentoring and/or specialist tutor support
NNAC	National Network of Assessment Centres
OU	Open University
Practitioners	Practitioners in this report include heads of disability services, needs assessors, disability advisors, non-medical help providers and ATS providers

SAAS	Student Awards Agency Scotland, Scottish funding body for HE students
SFE	Student Finance England, English funding body for HE students
SFW	Student Finance Wales, Welsh funding body for HE students
SFNI	Student Finance Northern Ireland, North Ireland funding body for HE students
SLC	Student Loans Company is the UK public sector organisation established to provide financial services in terms of loans and grants and operates the SFE and SFW programmes on behalf of English and Welsh Governments
SpLD	Specific Learning Difficulty, examples include dyslexia and dyspraxia
Stakeholders	These are the stakeholders spoken to as part of the research. These include experts, government officials and charities

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

1.1 In April 2017, the Welsh Government commissioned York Consulting to undertake a review of the effectiveness of the Disabled Students Allowances (DSAs).

1.2 DSAs are non-means-tested allowances available for students who have a disability, long-term health condition, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty. DSAs are additional funding available for students who, without it, may not have been able to attend a higher education (HE) course.

1.3 To qualify for funding, a student must meet the definition under the Equality Act 2010 and demonstrate that their condition is long term and has an impact on their day-to-day life. Students must be able to provide evidence that their condition affects their ability to study and:

- qualify for student finance
- be on a course of at least 25 per cent intensity
- be an undergraduate or postgraduate student (including distance learning students), be studying an Initial Teacher Training (ITT) or a first higher education course (Higher National Diploma [HND] or Diploma of Higher Education [DipHE]); or
- be an Open University (OU) student.

1.4 Maximum allowances for full-time students are as follows:

- non-medical helper allowance - £21,181 per year
- specialist equipment allowance - £5,332 for the whole course
- general allowance (for other disability-related expenditure) - £1,785 per year
- disability-related travel allowance - reasonable spending on additional travel costs incurred as a result of the condition.

Aims of the review

1.5 HE policy in Wales is a devolved policy area which means that decisions about HE and related policy areas are made by the Welsh Government. This includes DSAs, and although the entitlements and administration are similar, as a result of the changes in England, there are now some unique differences. In England, ongoing adjustments from September 2015, aimed at improving cost effectiveness and value for money were implemented by Student Finance England (SFE). These included:

- DSAs no longer pay for higher specification and/or higher cost computers because of the way a course is delivered (for example, students requiring higher specification computers to run course specific software). These continue to be available where a student needs one by virtue of their disability. However, DSAs students are expected to meet the first £200 of the cost of a computer.

- English-domiciled students with more specialised support needs will continue to receive DSAs funding. These support roles align with practitioners from Bands Three and Four (detail provided in Annex J). Where these difficulties are considered to be mild, higher education providers (HEPs) are expected to play a role in supporting students as part of their duties to provide reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. Disabled students will no longer receive DSAs funding for some non-medical support such as note-taking, transcription, or library or workshop support (DSAs Band One and Band Two), with UK HEPs expected to deliver their courses in accessible ways.

- To guarantee quality of support, only Disabled Students Allowances Quality Assurance Group (DSA-QAG) registered or accredited assessment centres, non-medical help (NMH) providers and assistive technology service (ATS) providers can provide DSAs support.

- Additional items such as printers, scanners, consumables and books are no longer routinely funded through DSAs; they can only be funded if a robust disability-related reason is evidenced.

- Where specialist student accommodation is provided by the institution or its agent, any additional costs will be met by the institution, not by DSAs. This does not apply to privately rented accommodation. These changes applied to all full-time, part-time and postgraduate students (including distance learning) applying for DSAs for the first time in respect of an academic year beginning on or after 1 September 2015.

1.6 The changes in England were brought in as a way of rebalancing the responsibility between central government and HEPs in terms of ensuring students with disabilities were not discriminated against in HE. Under the Equality Act 2010, institutions providing HE have legal responsibilities to support disabled students to be able to study at their institution.

1.7 In 2015, the Welsh Government proposed similar changes to those undertaken by England and consulted key stakeholders to seek views on the proposed changes. There was little support for the changes with most respondents concerned that students with disabilities would experience a gap in support.

1.8 Therefore, this review was commissioned to:

- review the provision of DSAs and the arrangements for providing financial support for students on designated HE courses who have a disability, long-term health condition, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty
- develop and consider options for improving current arrangements.

1.9 The key foci of the review were to:

- assess the trends in applications and access to DSA entitlement
- examine the characteristics of students and the elements of support accessed and used/elements not used and if not, why not
- examine the extent to which the process addresses all of a students' needs relating to their disabilities at the time of application
- consider if DSA can be better targeted
- pay particular regard to those students whose chosen language of communicating and/or learning is Welsh
- consult with English students studying in Wales to make comparisons
- review the appeals and complaints procedures
- learn lessons from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

1.10 The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter Two** provides context to the review
- **Chapter Three** details the method used to generate evidence
- **Chapter Four** reviews the effectiveness and efficiencies of DSAs
- **Chapter Five** provides evidence of the benefits of DSAs to students
- **Chapter Six** provides the conclusions and recommendations from the evidence.

2.   Context to the review

2.1   This section provides important context to the review with regards to the Equality Act 2010 and the inclusive learning agenda.

Inclusive learning

2.2   Meeting the needs of students with disabilities is increasingly viewed as needing a wider institutional response to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to achieve in HE. Access to HE has moved up the widening participation agenda and is increasingly becoming a priority issue[1].

2.3   The importance of HEPs' engagement in inclusive learning has been brought into sharp focus recently as a result of the Equality Act 2010 and the reduction in DSAs funded support in England[2].

2.4   The Equality Act 2010 requires all education providers, including HEPs and further education institutions (FEIs) in both England and Wales[3], to make reasonable adjustments to prevent any discrimination against people with particular characteristics, including those with a disability[4]. A person has a disability for the purposes of the Act if he or she has a physical or mental impairment and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. The duty includes making reasonable changes to practices, the physical environment and the provision of auxiliary aids and services.

2.5   Adherence to the Equality Act 2010 is underpinned by HEPs' strategies to develop comprehensive reasonable adjustments across their institution to recognise and value the diversity of their cohorts of students.

2.6   This requires a commitment among HEPs to drive forward change across the institution and to commit funds to ensure students get the support they need, whatever and wherever they study. Currently in Wales and previously before the

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[1] University of Leeds (2009) Evaluation of Provision and Support for Disabled Students in Higher Education.
[2] Department for Education (January 2017) Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence. Reference: DFE-00044-2017.
[3] Alternative Providers (private institutions with designated courses) are covered by Part 3 of the Equality Act as a service provider and therefore likewise have a duty to make reasonable adjustments in respect of disabled persons. (quoted from BiS/DfE Equality Analysis - https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/392610/bis-14-1108-higher-education-disabled-students-allowances-equality-analysis-revised-16-12-2014.pdf) (Accessed 04/07/17).
[4] The principle behind the new duty is that anticipating the needs of students and making reasonable adjustments is not related to the complexity of a disability.

changes in England, over half of the funding for students with Special Learning Difficulties (SpLD) came from DSAs[5]. Universities also invest a considerable amount of their funding into their core disability services from outside of the DSAs, including from Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and other sources of private income.

2.7 The level of investment required to develop inclusive learning practices across the HEPs is substantial. A panel of experts established to review the higher education funding and student finance arrangements in Wales[6], known as the Diamond Review, agreed that HEFCW needs to be equipped with un-hypothecated funding[7] to drive change forward in a number of areas, including social aspects of widening access for students with disabilities.

2.8 In England, funding from HEFCE to HEPs to support disabled students has risen from £40.5 million in 2010-11 to £59.1 million in 2015-16 to help HEPs prepare for the change in SFE DSAs entitlements. As a percentage of total HE sector expenditure, this is an increase of 0.9 percentage points, from 5.8 per cent to 6.7 per cent.[8]

2.9 The ultimate goal is for institutions to see disability as being socially constructed and to reduce barriers to learning for all. This encourages a comprehensive reshaping of pedagogy, curricula and assessment.

'This calls for a shift in thinking and focus to one which not only advocates the social model of disability but also promotes French and Swain's (2000) affirmation model which views disability as a normal part of diversity and views it as a matter of pride and not personal tragedy'[9].

2.10 Risks relating to HEPs meeting their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 are set out in the DfE (2017) report[10] and include:

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[5] York Consulting and University of Leeds, (July 2015) Support for Higher Education Students with Specific Learning Difficulties. HEFCE.
[6] The Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales, (2016) An independent review.
[7] Funding allocated without restrictions on how it should be spent.
http://www.assembly.wales/NAfW%20Documents/qg09-0010.pdf%20-%2027042010/qg09-0010-English.pdf
(Accessed 03/07/17)
[8] HEFCE, Monitoring Outcomes for the Student Opportunity Fund.
[9] Department for Education (January 2017) Inclusive Teaching and Learning. Reference: DFE-00044-2017.
[10] Department for Education (January 2017) Inclusive Teaching and Learning. Reference: DFE-00044-2017.

- HEPs not fully understanding their Equality Act 2010 requirements for reasonable adjustments

- HEPs' disability policy/practice not adhering to expectations set out in technical guidance

- HEPs not adequately responding to their enhanced requirements stemming from changes to DSAs

- a lack of clarity about what the concept of individual reasonable adjustments means in practice

- a lack of understanding of what constitutes genuine competence standards.

2.11   According to some stakeholders, these risks are very much present within HEPs and threaten their adherence with the Equality Act 2010. Although progress is being made within all HEPs, the landscape is uneven and there is a lack of information and transparency for students. Work to achieve equality is very much an ongoing task and any changes in effective practice are best considered as an institution in transition[11].

2.12   For example, a report by the Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee[12] collated evidence around the experience of disabled people and British Sign Language users in applying to, and studying at, Scottish universities. A number of problems and inequalities were highlighted during the call for evidence, including:

- the attitudes and level of training of academic staff

- variations in policy both between and within individual universities

- issues of attainment and transition from secondary to post-16 (tertiary) education

- resource and facility issues relating to the physical environment and access to services.

2.13   The report acknowledges that delivering changes in a policy area such as widening access to university, coupled with providing the funding and resource to deliver such change, takes time. However, there are lessons that can be learned from these findings which relate to the Welsh Government's desire to promote greater engagement in inclusive learning practices within Welsh HEPs.

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[11] The Centre for Disability Studies and School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds.
[12] The Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee (January 23rd 2017) Disabilities and Universities. SP Paper 66, 1st Report 2017

2.14   A number of relevant recommendations were provided aimed at improving access to HE and the experiences of disabled students in HE:

- 'A more coherent and transparent link to be made between HEPs equality commitments and their Outcome Agreements with the Scottish Funding Council.
- The Scottish Government and universities must now work to move from a voluntary to a mandatory position on rights-based equalities training as part of academic-wide continuous professional development.
- Greater transparency is required across the entire university applications process in order to ensure fairness and provide confidence.
- The Scottish Funding Council and the Fair Access Commissioner oversee the coordination of a sector-wide strategy to ensure universities meet their requirements under the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act.
- As a minimum, all universities in Scotland should have clearly accessible video information about their institutions, academic courses, student life…on their websites/social media platforms etc., by no later than the start of academic year 2019/20'[13].

2.15   The report noted that evidence was received from student representative groups around the applications process for DSAs and the need to ensure that applications are received before the start of the university semester. It was acknowledged that there was a need to review the transition for disabled students from secondary to university level education'[14].

2.16   The model of support for students with disabilities is evolving and is shaped by HEPs' commitment and progress in inclusive learning practices. The appropriate model of support for disabled students is, therefore, best considered as a tiered model with inclusive learning, reasonable adjustments and DSAs[15].

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[13] Ibid
[14] The Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee (January 2017) Disabilities and Universities.
[15] Ibid.

2.17   Evidence shows that students with DSAs are much more likely to continue their course and achieve a better outcome[16]. The disability degree attainment gap (worked out as a percentage of those achieving a First Class or Upper-Second Class degree with or without a disability) shows a 2.7 percentage point gap (61.4 per cent and 64.1 per cent respectively)[17].

Summary

2.18   This section has briefly detailed the context for the review, including changes in DSAs in England, the wider context regarding the Equality Act 2010 and the need for HEPs to develop their inclusive learning practices, to support students with disabilities appropriately.

2.19   The importance of HEPs' engagement in inclusive learning has been brought into sharp focus recently as a result of the reduction in DSAs funded support in England. However, the level of investment required to develop inclusive learning practices across the HEPs is substantial and challenging.

2.20   The model of support for students with disabilities is evolving and HEPs' commitment and progress in inclusive learning practices is essential. At present DSAs remain a key element of support for individual students with recognised disabilities. The appropriate model of support for disabled students is, therefore best considered as a tiered model with inclusive learning, reasonable adjustments and DSAs.

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[16] National Audit Office (2007) The Retention of Students in Higher Education. London. The Stationery Office.
[17] Equality Challenge Unit. (2012) Equality in Higher Education report 2012.

3.   Method

3.1   The review was led by a Steering Group that consisted of the Welsh Government policy lead and a senior research officer from the Social Research and Information Division, representatives from the National Network of Assessment Centres (NNAC), National Union of Students Wales, the OU in Wales and the research team from York Consulting.

3.2   The review adopted a mixed-modal approach, including quantitative data and qualitative data. This ensured the review generated the necessary evidence to generate robust findings and to provide clear and insightful recommendations for improvements where necessary.

3.3   The method included nine key elements of activity.

1.   **A literature review** to provide policy context from across the UK to compare differentials in entitlement and provision.

2.   **Analysis of HESA student data**. Data showing the trends of students accessing HE with disability and claiming DSAs over the last four years were analysed to show changes. More detailed data were provided by the Welsh Government for the academic year 2015/16. These data provided context on the disabled student population who were Welsh domiciled. The total number of records received were 97,583 students; of which 5.44 per cent (5,308) stated they had a disability. These data were analysed (see Annex A) against the population of students in HE for 2015/16 to understand:
     a.   the nature of their declared disability
     b.   ethnicity
     c.   whether they were in receipt of DSAs and their characteristics

3.   **Student Loans Company (SLC) Data** were supplied by the Welsh Government. This showed the characteristics of all students claiming DSAs from 2014/15 to 2016/17. These data accurately represent the population of students claiming DSAs and funded by SFW. An analysis of the SFW DSAs student population data is also provided in Annex A.

4.   **Stakeholder interviews** were undertaken with 21 stakeholders (the list was agreed with the Welsh Government). This included interviews with national experts, government officials from Scotland, England and Northern Ireland, service providers (e.g. needs assessors, Assistive Technology Service (ATS)

providers, non-medical help providers) and relevant charities. A full list of organisations interviewed is included in Annex B. These interviews helped to probe on specific issues and generated opinions on policy, entitlement and support. The stakeholder topic guide is included in Annex C.

5. **Interviews with 12 student support services across 12 HEPs**: nine in Wales including two HE in FE colleges, two HEPs in England and the OU in Wales (see Annex D). Interviews were undertaken with head of student support/disability services, disability advisors (DAs), disability practitioners (e.g. specialist support tutors or mentors) and needs assessors (if located in HE). With the permission of the interviewees, interviews were recorded and were semi-structured in nature. The consultation guide is included in Annex E.

6. **E-survey of DSAs applicants across Wales**: using the annual SLC online survey of SFW-funded students in receipt of DSAs, a series of additional questions were added to support the review. The full survey is provided in Annex F. Students replied voluntarily and there was a total of 261 responses. Complete records were provided by 229 students and these were analysed in detail. Response data enabled an analysis of the levels of satisfaction experienced by students from the DSAs process to be undertaken. The representativeness of the survey sample in comparison to the population of all SFW funded students in receipt of DSA is detailed in Annex G. There is an over-representation of part-time (sample = 19.7 per cent and population = 12.8 percent), postgraduate (sample = 12.2 per cent and population = 8.7 per cent) mature students (sample = 72 per cent and population = 59 per cent) and females (sample = 70 percent and population = 61 per cent) in the sample. There is also an over-representation of those with longstanding illnesses (sample = 13 per cent and population = 9 per cent), multiple disabilities (sample = 17 per cent and population = 10 per cent) and wheelchair/mobility-related disabilities (sample = 3.1 per cent and population = 1.5 per cent). More females are represented in the sample, in comparison to the population. On the other hand, the sample by year of study shows very good representation of the population. A paper detailing all the responses is provided in Annex H.

7. **Five focus groups with students funded by SFW**: focus groups with students funded by SFW were held at five of the 12 HEPs in Wales (all SFW-funded students). The original method stipulated six focus groups but due to the timescales of the project, many students had returned home for the summer break and some HEPs struggled to provide students. In total, 25 students were consulted via focus groups. Students were informed of the topic for discussions prior to the visit and were selected on their willingness to take part, as well as their range of support needs. Students were recruited through the DAs. These students were known to the disability support teams as a result of being recommended for, and engaged in, DSAs support. Therefore, these students reflect the views of those who successfully navigated through the system and had a positive view of the support. With the permission of students, interviews were recorded and were semi-structured in nature. Upon completion of interviews, participants were awarded a £20 voucher. The HEPs were unable to supply any students who preferred to communicate in Welsh; as noted earlier, due to the timescales of the project, many students had returned home for the summer break and this left a very small pool of students from which to select. The topic guide for the focus groups and telephone interviews is included in Annex I.

8. **Telephone interviews** with 16 students who agreed to be consulted following the DSAs survey. All but two students were funded by SFW. The rationale for the telephone interviews was to generate in-depth qualitative data from students who may have had a different experience of DSAs. Students who indicated that the DSAs did not meet all of their needs were included in the sample, alongside students from the OU, part-time and postgraduate students. Students interviewed included those with a range of needs, including: bipolar, mental health issues, myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), Autistic Spectrum condition (ASC), Asperger's, dyslexia, dyspraxia, hearing and visually impaired students, and students with complex and/or higher-level needs (e.g. physical disability, post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], mental health and anxiety). Upon completion of the interviews, participants were awarded £10 vouchers.

9. **Presentations to two DSAs forums**: practitioners including DAs, heads of service, needs assessors, learner support workers from both HE and FE, Welsh Government officials and a member of the SLC meet on a three-monthly basis to discuss issues, share experiences and effective practice related to DSAs and more broadly, supporting students with disabilities. A presentation and discussion of the key research findings was held with both forums in North Wales and South Wales. These discussions gave researchers an opportunity to reflect and consider appropriate recommendations for the study.

3.4 A structured and rigorous process was used to analyse the large volume of qualitative and quantitative evidence. A framework analysis approach was used where data were sorted and tagged against the key areas of investigation. The team regularly shared findings and evidence received against each research question and identified recurring and common themes to investigate similarities and differences in future interviews.

Points of methodological consideration

3.5 There were three areas where the review was limited due to a lack of evidence. These were:

- Consulting with English students: none of the English universities provided SFE-funded students with whom to consult and it was agreed not to consult with Welsh and English students together in the focus groups in Wales. Only two SFE-funded students were consulted. This limited the extent to which the review could capture the impact of changes in England on SFE from the students' point of view.
- Reviewing the appeals process: Limited data was provided regarding the complaints and appeals process as so few students register complaints against SFW. In addition, the detail regarding the nature of the complaint was very limited.
- More effective targeting of DSAs: through qualitative interviewing, this review highlighted gaps in the take-up of DSAs support. However, it was not possible to generate any robust quantitative evidence to understand take-up of entitlements and, therefore, to comment on how DSAs can be more effectively targeted. Accurate data were not be provided by SFW within the timeframes.

3.6   This review focused on the DSAs model of support for entitled students. It was not a review of HEPs' support for students with disabilities. However, when considering the impact of changes in England in terms of DSAs entitlement, discussions with practitioners and key stakeholders raised broader and important issues relating to the inclusive teaching and learning agenda in HE. This topic was outside the scope of this review but reference is made to it where necessary to place any findings and recommendations within the broader context of meeting the needs of disabled students in HE.

4. Key findings: Effectiveness of the application and awards system

Introduction

4.1 This section provides the key findings from the review of the application and awards process and the support provided to students.

4.2 Key findings are based on the evidence generated from interviews with practitioners, stakeholders and quantitative data from HEFCE and SLC survey data. Findings that emerged fall under the following headings:

- trends in application and access to entitlement
- awareness of DSAs
- student journey through the DSAs application process
- needs assessments and entitlements
- DSAs provision.

Trends in application and access to entitlement

4.3 The number of students claiming DSAs in Wales has been steadily rising over recent years. HESA data for Welsh domiciled students in receipt of DSAs shows an increase of 545 students claiming DSAs since the academic year (AY) 2012/13 to 2015/16.

4.4 HESA data for 2015/16 for Welsh domiciled students (a total of 97,583 records) showed that 12.9 per cent of students enrolled in HE declared a disability and 5.4 per cent of all Welsh domiciled (5,308) students were in receipt of DSAs. This indicates a take-up gap of 7.4 per cent, although it should be noted that not all students apply and not all will be eligible for DSAs. A more detailed analysis of the data is provided in Annex A.

4.5 Table 4.1 shows the number of students claiming DSAs as a percentage of all HE students from AY 2012/13 to 2015/16 by country of domicile. This shows a slightly higher rate of increase in Wales over this period than in England (0.74 per cent against 0.54 per cent respectively).

Table 4.1: Students claiming DSAs by academic year and country of domicile

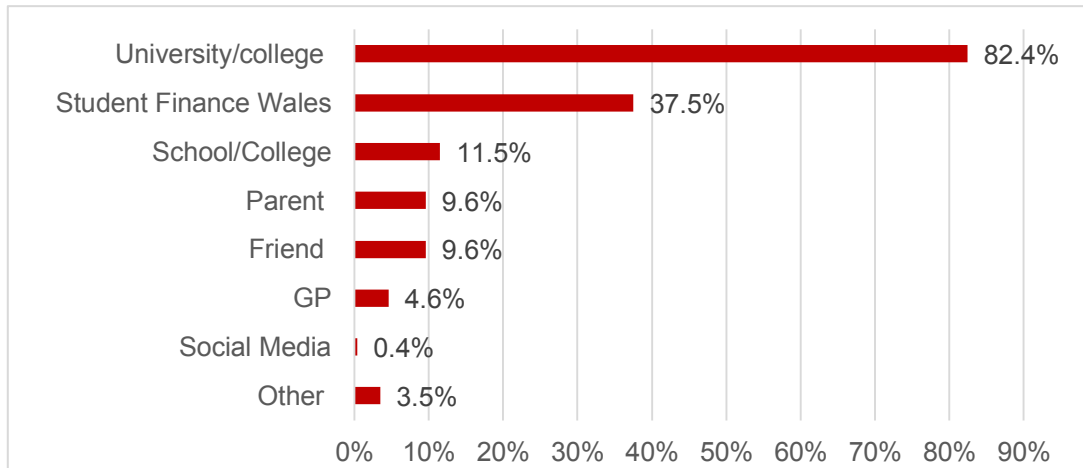|	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	% increase as a percentage of all students in HE
Wales	4,760	5,120	5,350	5,305	
	4.69%	*5.11%*	*5.39%*	*5.43%*	0.74
England	83,875	87,220	87,220	88,460	
	5.31%	*5.70%*	*5.82%*	*5.85%*	0.54

Source: HESA data for Welsh/English domiciled students claiming DSAs 2012/13 to 2015/16

4.6 The rise in the number of students accessing DSAs in Wales is apparent in students with a mental health condition (up from 300 to 540 students), students with ASC (up from 140 to 245 students), and those with a SpLD (3,020 to 3,130). However, the proportion of HE students who declare they have a disability (12.9 per cent) and access DSAs is fairly consistent, and ranged from 44 per cent in 2012/13 to 42 per cent in 2015/16.

4.7 An analysis of trends in take-up of DSAs (see Annex A) shows some interesting observations. When comparing full-time to part-time students who declared they had disability, part-time students are less likely to be claiming DSAs than full-time students. A total of 71.7 per cent of part-time students who stated they had a disability were not claiming DSAs, as opposed to 43.2 per cent of full-time students.

4.8 The number of students not claiming DSAs but who declared a disability at the age of 18, is 51 per cent. This drops by the age of 19, to 47 per cent and continues to drop slightly up to the age of 21, with 45 per cent not claiming DSAs. It then increases to 53 per cent for students who are 25 years old and continues to rise as people get older, indicating that the more mature a student is, the less likely they are to claim DSAs.

4.9 There was a one per cent difference in take up of DSAs between students who were fluent Welsh speakers and students who did not speak Welsh (52 per cent compared to 51 per cent respectively who did not access DSAs).

Awareness of DSAs

4.10 HESA data for 2015/16 show a gap of 7.4 per cent between those students that declared a disability and those that received DSAs for 2015/16. This research reviewed general awareness of DSAs among students. Data from the SLC survey (see Annex H for the full responses) showed that 67.7 per cent of students thought that awareness of DSAs could be improved.

Figure 4.1: How students heard of DSAs

University/college 82.4%
Student Finance Wales 37.5%
School/College 11.5%
Parent 9.6%
Friend 9.6%
GP 4.6%
Social Media 0.4%
Other 3.5%

Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17

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4.11 Figure 4.1 shows that 82.4 per cent of students in receipt of DSAs reported hearing about DSAs at their university. This included information from student services, websites and publicity material. SFW was the next most common source of information with 37.5 per cent of students hearing about DSAs through SFW. Fewer students (11.5 per cent) found out about DSAs through their schools or colleges.

4.12 According to disability teams in HEPs and students themselves, knowledge of DSAs in schools and colleges is patchy. Although 47 per cent of students responding to the SLC survey stated they had applied for their DSAs prior to coming to HE, many had not. Many students consulted face to face stated they had not heard of DSAs prior to coming to university.

'I applied when I had been here [HEP] for two weeks...I saw through my personal statement there was DSAs but I didn't know much about it and I never had help in the college where I was previously…I didn't know I was entitled to anything.' (Student with a known disability at college)

'I completed an Access Course and the FE college knew I had a diagnosis for dyslexia as I'd had it from school, but no-one mentioned DSAs to me.' (Interview with an undergraduate student)

4.13 Many HEPs reported undertaking considerable work with schools to improve awareness of DSAs. This included visits and presentations in schools, sending out leaflets and encouraging school staff to contact the disability teams with any queries. However, evidence shows there is still a need to improve awareness. An interview held with a special educational needs (SEN) teacher corroborated the lack of awareness among teaching staff.

'I had heard of DSAs but did not know what it was or how students apply…we also don't have the capacity to support students like universities do, so schools tend to leave it to staff in universities.' (SEN teacher)

4.14 Many students interviewed reported not realising they would be entitled to support:

'I just thought this was something I had to cope with, I didn't have a clue that I could get help for this, it's been amazing.' (Interview with a student completing her third year with bi-polar disorder)

'At postgraduate level, I don't think there is much awareness that there is an allowance.' (Postgraduate student survey respondent)

4.15 Some students consulted in focus groups reported not wanting to admit to, or declare any disabilities, and for some the label 'Disabled Students Allowance' was regarded as a barrier to take-up. There were some suggestions for alternatives that aligned more with inclusion rather than difference, such as learner support allowance. However, others felt that the term 'disability' communicated clearly what the allowance covered and recommended no change.

4.16 All HEPs reported very proactive strategies to encourage take-up among students including emailing all students who declared a disability on the UCAS form, welcome talks and offers of free screening for SpLD.

4.17 FE colleges reported that issues regarding student transition from school/college to university may improve with the introduction of the new Adult Learning Needs Framework as part of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill[18]. This Bill introduces a new system to integrate support and improve

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[18] See http://www.assembly.wales/laid%20documents/pri-ld10862-em/pri-ld10862-em-e.pdf.

identification of additional learning needs among young people from the age of 0-25. According to some FE colleges participating on the DSAs forum in north Wales, the adoption of the new Individual Development Plan as part of the framework will help develop a simpler, more transparent system for identifying and sharing learners' additional needs.

The student journey from application to awards

4.18   Evidence for this section is drawn from interviews with disability support services, needs assessors, providers and students (including evidence from the SLC student survey) to show the students' role in applying for DSAs.

4.19   Although 70 per cent of students stated that overall, they were satisfied with the application process (see Figure 6, Annex H) all practitioners interviewed and a number of students (particularly evidenced in the survey) held negative views of the DSAs application and awards system. They stated that it was overly complex, fragmented and placed too great an onus on the student to navigate themselves through the process.

4.20   The process seems particularly difficult for students suffering from dyslexia, anxiety disorders, ASC, visual impairments and those with debilitating diseases, such as myalgic encephalomyelitis or fibromyalgia, which results in a lack of energy. Many students reported frustrations with the difficulties in accessing support.

'You should make the application process a lot easier. The stress and complications that I faced from the whole process was pretty unacceptable.' (Student survey respondent)

'It takes such a long time for requests to be approved that by the time I would receive it, the academic year will have come to an end.' (Student survey respondent)

'You need to understand people with disabilities more and make things easier for them.' (Student survey respondent)

4.21   Evidence from consultations with three OU students suggested the process could be additionally difficult. According to the OU and a key stakeholder, OU students tend not to have the same level of support from disability services but have a greater level of need. Without having the support from the disability support team, some students give up on the process. An example of this is provided in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2: Case Study of an Open University student

Mary*, who suffers from fibromyalgia and Addison's Disease was studying for a degree in Clinical Psychology with the OU. She was two years into her studies and had hoped to complete next year. However, recently she suffered from ill health and experienced a lot of pain.

'I struggle to write at the moment, it is too difficult so I can't commit to doing more studies until I get better.' (Mary)

Her experience of applying for DSAs was not a positive one. She did not understand that she could apply for a home assessment so she did not request one, but instead took herself to her needs assessor. She said this was very stressful and she struggled to complete the trip. The letter of entitlement stated that she was entitled to a laptop with assistive technology and a mentor. However, SFW requested more information from her regarding her fibromyalgia but Mary stated she could not afford to pay for the medical evidence. She gave up with the application process.

Mary was unaware of the support she could get from the OU and had no idea of whom to contact to get advice and help. The OU looked in to what happened to her case and reported having not received a copy of the entitlement (DSA2) letter so could not encourage Mary to continue to get evidence. The student needed to provide further medical evidence in order to get her DSAs entitlement and this caused the delay. Although elements of her entitlement were approved because of her recognised disability, she received no DSAs support due to other issues pending.

At the time of interview, the student considered she was unable to apply for additional courses, based on her previous experience of the demands on her health and wellbeing. 'I just couldn't do it, I can't write any essays.' (Mary) This means she cannot enact any further DSAs support. She also stated that her studies were crucial to her own health and wellbeing.
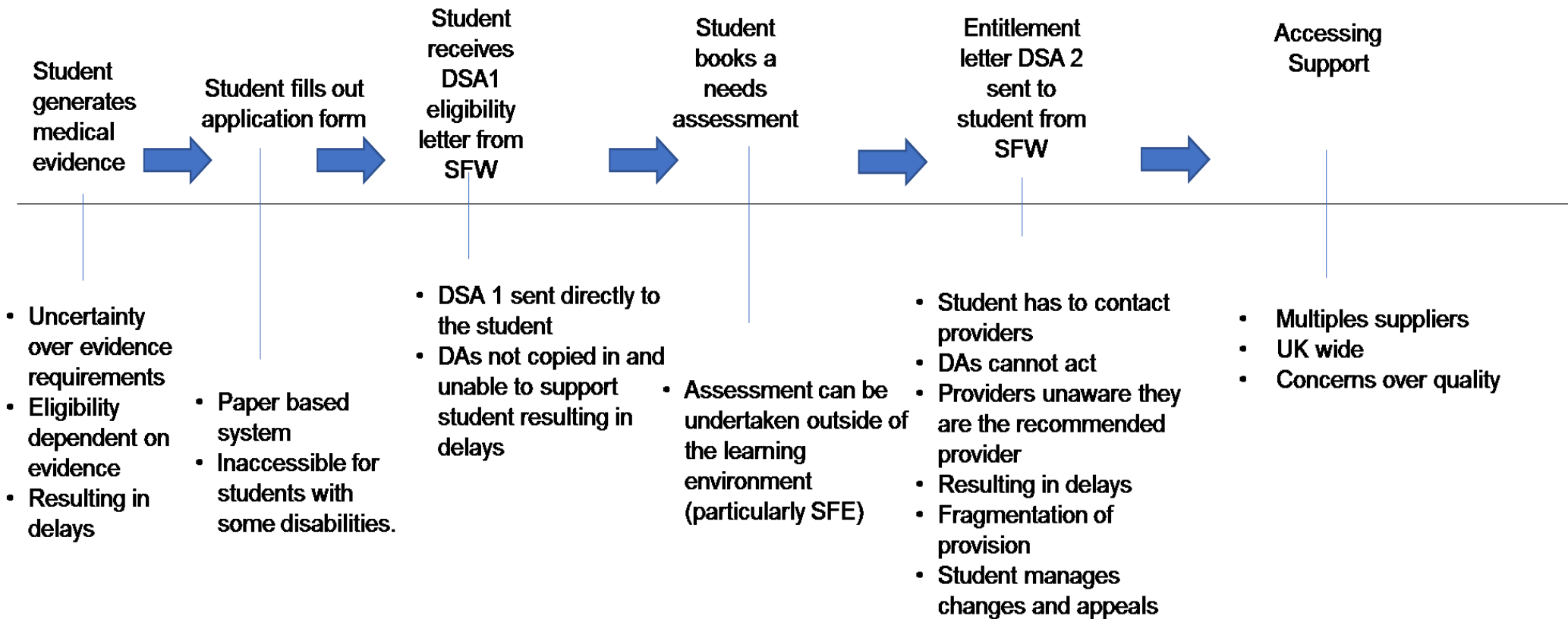
Source: YCL Interview
*All names have been changed to protect anonymity

4.22   An additional case detailing the range of issues experienced by a student is provided in Annex K.

4.23   Key points of concern were raised by support staff and students of the challenges within the current process. An overview of the key concerns regarding the process are summarised in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3: Key concerns regarding the DSAs process

| Student generates medical evidence | → | Student fills out application form | → | Student receives DSA1 eligibility letter from SFW | → | Student books a needs assessment | → | Entitlement letter DSA 2 sent to student from SFW | → | Accessing Support |

- Uncertainty over evidence requirements
- Eligibility dependent on evidence
- Resulting in delays

- Paper based system
- Inaccessible for students with some disabilities.

- DSA 1 sent directly to the student
- DAs not copied in and unable to support student resulting in delays

- Assessment can be undertaken outside of the learning environment (particularly SFE)

- Student has to contact providers
- DAs cannot act
- Providers unaware they are the recommended provider
- Resulting in delays
- Fragmentation of provision
- Student manages changes and appeals

- Multiples suppliers
- UK wide
- Concerns over quality

Disability Advisors feel unable to support the student due to a lack of awareness of how they are progressing through the application process. If the student does not contact student support service, they can experience months of delays in their application process.

4.24   Concerns fall under the following headings:

- generating medical evidence
- completing the application form
- letter of eligibility (DSA1)
- arranging a needs assessment
- letter of entitlement (DSA2) and accessing support.

4.25   The next section discusses these issues from the student perspective in applying for and accessing DSAs support. This is followed by data showing the nature of complaints from SLC. Evidence was drawn from interviews with students and the SLC survey data.

Generating medical evidence

4.26   Data from SLC (see Table 4.2) shows that most students (78.8 per cent in 2016/17) were successful with their applications and managed to provide the right medical evidence regarding their disability. However, even the successful students reported experiencing difficulties in getting the right evidence and in some cases had to spend considerable amounts of money to get the evidence required.

'The only criticism I have is that students with lifelong disabilities shouldn't have to provide evidence of how long it will affect them. I have ADHD and my first piece of evidence was sent back saying it wasn't enough and that it must state how long I will have it, although it is known as a disability that doesn't really go away.' (Student survey respondent)

'I ended up having to spend in excess of £300 just to prove my eligibility. As somebody who has to live with my condition on a daily basis, especially as my condition is so apparent, the whole application process and the actions taken to prove my eligibility really had a negative impact on my mental health as well as my pocket.' (Student survey respondent)

4.27   SLC data show that nearly one third of students disagreed that obtaining medical evidence was easy (see Figure 9 Annex H) and just under one third stated that obtaining medical evidence was too expensive (Figure 10 Annex H). In addition, some students spoke of the lack of understanding from their GPs about how their disability affected them.

'He originally said to me that my illness was not a disability and refused to complete the form. I then went back with more information and eventually he realised what it was for, but it was very upsetting.' (Consultation with a student with dyslexia and depression)

4.28   A significant minority of students were deemed ineligible for DSAs support. Table 4.2 shows the trend in applications for DSAs, those determined as eligible and ineligible and those whose applications were pending.

Table 4.2: Outcome of applications for DSAs (Eligibility)

	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Eligible	83.2%	79.0%	78.8%
Ineligible	1.2%	19.5%	10.8%
Pended	13.5%	1.1%	9.4%
No Answer Given	2.2%	0.4%	1.0%
Base	*2968*	*3667*	*3373*

Source: Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students Allowance Request

4.29   The notable point is the rise of 18.3 percentage points in those applications that were deemed ineligible, from 1.2 per cent in 2014/15 to 19.5 per cent in 2015/16. Ineligibility decreased by 8.7 percentage points in 2016/17 but remains 8.7 percentage points higher than in 2014/15. In addition, the number of pended applications dropped by 12.4 percentage points in 2015/16 and increased by 8.3 percentage points in 2016/17.

4.30   According to needs assessors, possible reasons for the high numbers of applications pending may have been due to the change from local authority administration of DSAs to central administration (SLC) in 2014. However, the number of applications pending was still a cause for concern for some DAs and they expressed frustrations at some of the reasons why applications were pended.

'I have cases where I've known that the students' condition is complex and chronic and their application has been pended because they are asking for more evidence about specific illnesses. Meanwhile the student can't access the support.' (DA)

4.31   The impact of the Equality Act 2010 and changes within DSAs guidance which requests evidence that each disability be approved, was given as a possible reason for additional complexity. There were reports from needs assessors of students who have conditions that are exempt from the definition of disability within the Equality Act 2010 (cancer, HIV, multiple sclerosis, blind or partially sighted) being asked unnecessarily for additional evidence.

4.32   There was anecdotal evidence from needs assessors, that SFW delivers a more 'user friendly' service compared to SFE and that the teams assessing applications tend to use a greater degree of discretion regarding the necessary evidence required.

Completing the application form

4.33   Many practitioners and students reported the application form itself to be difficult to understand and that a paper based application form was unhelpful and outdated.

4.34   Students still felt that the application would be easier if everything could be completed and submitted online. DAs also stated that it would be very helpful to have an online application and tracker that showed the students' progress through the system. This would help understand any delays in the application process.

4.35   There was a general view from students that the application form is particularly difficult for those with SpLDs, such as dyslexia and those with visual impairments. One student with visual impairments stated that the application form should be available in braille. Given that the application is the trigger for support for disabled students, accessibility is paramount.

'As someone who requires a great deal of help filling forms and completing documentation, I think the process needs to be simpler and less time consuming.' (Student survey respondent)

'I had to travel to collect forms in person. I don't have a car of my own and rely on public transport and it soon became a lengthy process.' (Student survey respondent)

4.36   Suggestions were made from a small number of students on how the application process could be modernised with the use of a video tutorial to take applicants through the process, an online platform which could support screen reader software and allow for adjustments to the size of the text and screen colour.

Letter of eligibility (DSA1)

4.37   Once the student applies for DSAs, their application is considered by the SLC and the student is sent an eligibility letter (DSA1). One of the most frequent concerns from DAs was their lack of knowledge of whether the student had received their DSA 1 letter. According to DAs, many students do not know what to do with the letter and the DAs endeavour to contact each student to ensure they understand what they have to do next.

4.38   All disability teams requested whether the tick box giving consent to share the information with students' HEP could be reversed and students tick the box if they **do not** want to share information with the disability service. The majority consensus was that the more disability support services could support the application process, the better the system would operate on behalf of students.

Arranging a needs assessment

4.39   Evidence from the SLC survey and consultations with students showed that, in the majority of cases, booking the needs assessment for students is not problematic. On the whole, students felt their needs were being met in the assessment, with 79 per cent of students surveyed stating they strongly agreed or agreed that they were met (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3: Whether students considered their needs were met in the assessment

Disagree	15%
Neither Agree or Disagree	6%
Agree	79%

4.40　However, a small number of students in the SLC survey stated that they found it difficult to arrange their assessment and questioned its value for money.

> 'For the amount you are paying out for assessments, I think you should expect assessors to be willing to make home visits, it is disabled students allowance, after all.' (Student survey respondent)

> 'I think the assessment booking system is a bit crazy. I would have preferred to have been sent a letter to say go here on this day, or call to rearrange. It took me weeks to get around to booking an appointment and then it took weeks more what with various problems to finally settle on a date for it.' (Student survey respondent)

4.41　Some students interviewed stated that, on reflection, they would have preferred to have had their needs assessment done at their HEP so that any future queries could be dealt with more easily.

> 'Had I known the process and all the problems I've had, I would have loved someone to help me with it all, I've had a wealth of issues with my computer and have just felt helpless with sorting it out.' (Student consulted on the telephone)

4.42　This student eventually gave up on getting her computer fixed and bought her own, but was unable to transfer her software and eventually dropped out of her course.

4.43　Students studying with the OU who are no longer entitled to a home visit (without providing specific evidence and SLC giving permission) gave accounts of the difficulties they experienced.

'I was required to research and book my own assessment from a range of options. I was required to travel a long distance. I am in poor health and struggled to deal with all of this.' (OU student)

'I don't think the assessor really understood my complexities, otherwise she would have come to my house. I found the whole process very difficult to deal with.' (OU student)

Letter of entitlement (DSA2)

4.44   According to DAs and providers of support, many students find it difficult to understand and act on the DSA2 letter.

'The problems is, we are dealing with vision impaired students, students with dyslexia etc. and they are not completely able to be fully independent from our support. DSA2 is a very important document for us to have a copy of, because we are not always aware of students' needs and requirements.' (DA)

4.45   One suggestion for improving the process and ensuring students access support, was to send the DSA2 to all providers to ask them to respond to the student, rather than the student needing to contact providers. Currently, students have to photocopy the letter to send to providers. Concerns were expressed by providers of support (ATS and NMH providers) that they had been recommended to deliver support but had not been contacted by the student and were ultimately not delivering that support.

Complaints and appeals process

4.46   Complaints data provided from SFW show that over a three-year period, from April 2014 to June 2017, 103 complaints were received. This is an average of 2.7 complaints per month. These data include complaints made by both staff and students. There were a number of complaints (37) made relating to timescales of the whole process (although for 26 of these the timeframes fell within the service level agreement). There were 22 complaints regarding the DSA1 process and 11 of these were regarding the medical evidence being rejected. There were nine complaints made regarding the needs assessment but these included a range of issues

including discrepancies regarding equipment allowance (three), non-medical help allowance (two) and travel allowances (two). There were just five complaints regarding correspondence. There were 13 complaints regarding invoice discrepancies made by practitioners. These are summarised in Annex L.

4.47 The small number of complaints suggests that practitioners and students are predominantly happy with the service provided. It could also suggest that few people were motivated to complain and any initial queries were dealt with appropriately by SFW.

4.48 SLC student survey data is somewhat more revealing than complaints data in terms of understanding the nature of dissatisfaction with the DSAs service and the majority of issues raised have been detailed in the paragraphs above.

4.49 In addition to those already raised there were a few concerns expressed by students regarding the difficulties they experienced with communicating with SFW and the level of knowledge and expertise within SFW to respond to appeals.

> 'Communication with Student Finance Wales is a battle, I am hard of hearing and frequently I need a third party to talk to an advisor because I am unable to hear the advisor. Getting an advisor to accept a third-party person is very difficult.' (Student survey respondent)

> 'The call centres are unable to answer anything but the most basic of queries and it is very difficult to explain what is going wrong to SFW as they are not willing to listen.' (Student survey respondent)

4.50 However, there were also a number of comments suggesting that SFW had responded well to queries or issues raised by students.

> 'SFW themselves have been very helpful, even though the phone lines do sometimes go through to Student Finance England, which is very confusing.' (Student consultee)

> 'I have found SFW to be very helpful and polite when I call and they seem to care.' (Student consultee)

4.51   In terms of supporting those who chose to apply in Welsh, it was reported by a few practitioners that the application process was equally accessible but there was a question over whether SFW was equipped to respond as quickly. It was reported that nearly all students choose to apply in English (the SLC survey reported 1.75 per cent of students responding to the SLC survey preferred to communicate in Welsh).

4.52   The following sections deal with broader issues relating to the provision of needs assessment and entitlements and DSAs provision, including the impact of the changes in funding from SFE.

Needs assessments and entitlements

4.53   Evidence for this section was drawn from interviews with needs assessment centre managers, needs assessors, and key stakeholders for England and Wales. Findings are presented under the following headings:

- a marketisation of assessment of need
- impact of divergence in funding between SFW and SFE.

Marketisation of assessment of need

4.54   There were concerns among stakeholders and practitioners regarding the model for delivering needs assessments. Stakeholders and heads of service raised the issue of the rise in the number of needs assessment centres and outreach centres over recent years. The DSA-QAG database shows there are 196 assessment centres in England and Wales (13 in Wales), of which 120 are outreach centres. According to the National Network of Assessment Centres (NNAC), outreach centres, as opposed to assessment centres, do not have to submit the same detailed business case and do not have to participate in a full annual audit. Therefore, setting up outreach centres is an 'easier way of developing the business' (NNAC).

4.55   Some stakeholders and practitioners, had concerns about the model of delivering assessments through external (not attached to HEPs) assessment centres and, with the increase in the numbers of centres and the fees charged, viewed this as 'marketisation of assessments.' Concerns were more related to the English model and for SFE students travelling to Wales or Scotland to study.

4.56   According to heads of disability services, students, both SFE and SFW-funded whose assessments are not undertaken within their HEP can be disadvantaged. Assessors do not always fully understand the learning context and tried to make their best assumptions regarding the demands of the course on a student. For example, understanding field trips in which a student may need to participate or the type of support they may need in the science laboratory. The implications of not fully understanding the campus or the course content, especially for students applying prior to going university has resulted in some students not receiving the support they need. An example of this concern is provided in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4: Illustration of a students' entitlement not meeting her needs

Rachel* was studying fashion at a university and had dyslexia, mental health problems and anxiety. When she got to university she realised how intensive and noisy some of the workshops were and how it impacted on her ability to manage the environment in which she found herself. She became very stressed and struggled to cope.

'The sewing workshops were so noisy and so busy that I found it very difficult to be there. I feel that the needs assessor did not understand how this was going to impact on me and I feel I needed support during these sessions but was not recommended any. My university didn't seem to understand either and assumed that because I hadn't been recommended any support, that I should be able to cope.'

Source: YCL Interview
*All names have been changed to protect anonymity

4.57   Other examples were provided by a practitioner from a Scottish HEP where it was reported that needs assessors sometimes made assumptions regarding the reasonable adjustments provided by the HEP and that this was not always accurate.

   'We have had an inclusive policy for four years now, but it is not fully implemented by all academies. Students can get a very different experience depending on what they are studying. It's very important therefore, that needs assessors understand the landscape.' (Scottish stakeholder)

4.58   Although data from the SLC survey does show that 80 per cent of students agreed with the statement that the assessor fully understood their needs, just under 15 per cent of students disagreed with the statement. A further 6 per cent could neither agree nor disagree.

4.59   Concerns were also expressed by some stakeholders, that the DSAs application and awards process had evolved to such an extent that 'the determination to protect the public purse and to operate a market, was becoming increasingly damaging to students.' (Stakeholder)

4.60   Concerns were expressed that the needs of OU learners (who no longer qualify for a home visit) might not be fully met without the availability of home visits.

> 'Often, students who study with the OU have higher level needs and struggle to access support. In addition, these students don't have close links with disability advisors and so can be quite isolated. Without a proper needs assessment taking into account their learning environment, OU students can be put at a disadvantage.' (Stakeholder)

4.61   There was a view (among needs assessors and HEP heads of student support services) that needs assessors who operate closely with student support services provide well-tailored recommendations for support.

> 'Our Assessment Centre is within the university, so students have a close relationship with us. This helps us align our services better.' (Head of student support)

4.62   Despite these concerns, the Welsh needs assessment service appears to operate well, with many assessment centres being located within HEPs. Some stakeholders argued that in order to provide a 'less clunky and less bureaucratic service' (Stakeholder), assessment centres should become affiliated to, or owned by HEPs, and delivered through student support services. According to practitioners, this would help ensure a good quality service, tailored to students' needs.

4.63   There was little confidence in the functions of DSA-QAG with regards to ensuring the quality of needs assessments. There was a view that audits measured operational functions (for example meeting time frames) rather than the quality of assessments. Relating to this, questions were raised by both practitioners and students regarding the value for money of needs assessments undertaken by centres outside of HEPs at a cost of between £600 and £660 plus VAT per assessment.

4.64 The evidence regarding views on value for money was mixed. Most students reported a positive assessment experience and stated that they received the support they needed. Needs assessment reports were reported to be thorough (although some felt that they were overly long) and the continuation of support that needs assessors are required to provide for students throughout their studies can be substantial. However, there were some students who reported a quick and unsatisfactory needs assessment and questioned its value for money. In addition, there appears to be limited engagement in the requirement by DSA-QAG for needs assessors to gather customer feedback on whether students' needs assessments and recommendations were appropriate or/and met students' needs. This further obfuscates an understanding of the effectiveness of the assessment and take-up of support.

4.65 One or two stakeholders and practitioners suggested a more effective and efficient system would be to utilise the expertise of DAs for those students with lower level needs who work closely with students and understand their needs.

> '[We should] empower disability advisers within institutions to assess individuals' needs and recommend solutions, within a framework that's not too onerous.' (Stakeholder)

> 'Because of the experience we have, we can write the needs assessments and recommendations in half the time. We have a relationship with the student and can talk through exactly what they need.' (DA)

4.66 There were views from one or two DAs that some needs assessors offered equipment that might not be needed. This could potentially be rectified by a more detailed and informed understanding of students' needs regarding course demands and reasonable adjustments.

4.67 Reviewing evidence to show the relationship between needs assessments and student take-up of support was not possible within this study. Data were provided by the SLC to the researchers on student entitlement but appeared to show an anomaly in the recording of the value of entitlement per student, with the majority of students listed as receiving £18,181 for non-medical help

(which was much higher than the typical range of between £1,800 to £5,000) This could not be rectified within the timeframes of this study. Data from England showing patterns of take-up of support[19] show that only 20 per cent of entitlement hours are actually used. This pattern could be mirrored in Wales, but could also be very different.

4.68   The SLC survey provided qualitative responses from 72 students (31 per cent of all those responding to the survey) who stated they did not need all the support provided. The most common support that was not used was software with 15 (22 per cent) students stating they did not use their software and 8 (11 per cent) saying they did not access their training. There were a range of reasons for poor uptake of software, including inappropriate recommendation for the students' needs; a mismatch between course needs and the software; poor quality or absent training; IT-related issues with the software and inadequate IT support; similar software programmes overlapping; outdated or redundant software provided; and a delay in receiving software. Some examples of student quotes are provided below.

 'I already had experience of the specific computer that I was awarded, so I haven't asked for any computer training, or software training, which I did specify in my assessment that I didn't think I needed it.' (Student survey recipient)

'The microphone and recording kit I was given [did not get used] as the university uses Panopto links and therefore records lectures themselves.' (Student survey recipient)

'Support worker - I didn't feel I needed this as I had already undertaken two years of university and had therefore created my own techniques and built a support system. If I had obtained DSAs support in my first year, I would definitely have found this support useful.' (Student survey recipient)

4.69   Others did not use discrete items, for example four students did not use Dictaphones (5.56 per cent) and four did not use learning support (5.56 per cent). Some students provided reasons for non-use.

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[19] Student Support Information Note (SSIN) 03/17 February 2017

4.70   These comments were too few to generalise, but 31 per cent of students not using all their recommendations suggests some improvements and efficiencies in the system can be realised.

4.71   With regards to entitlements more generally, some general comments were made by practitioners of an unnecessary funding ceiling for NMH provision. Most students are recommended well under the maximum and so do not need the full amount available for NMH support (£21,181). However, for a very small number of students with visual or hearing impairments and other higher-level needs, funds ran out and HEPs contributed additional funding.

4.72   Finally, there were concerns regarding the drop in value of the allowance for postgraduates and this was concerning for some students whose needs had not changed. An example is provided in Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5: Funding for postgraduate student

Katie*

Katie is hearing and visually impaired. She has gone on to postgraduate study at her institution, but has struggled with the reduction in funding for postgraduates. According to Katie, this affected her ability to study.

'I felt like for undergrad there was limitless funding, but this year, I only have a set amount and that affects note taking and transport. I'm very wary about going over the limit. Now, I won't visit the library on days when I don't have lectures.'

Source: YCL Interview

*All names have been changed to protect anonymity

4.73   In Scotland, the model for delivering needs assessments appears to be quite different with assessment centres being attached to HEPs. According to the two Scottish stakeholders interviewed this is a more favourable model of delivery and helps ensure students' assessments are based on sound knowledge of course demands, HEPs' reasonable adjustments and the additionality of need to be provided by DSAs. DAs also undertake some of the lower level needs assessments for students and according to one HEP this, 'is a much more cost effective and student-focused way of doing things...and ensures needs assessors do not over recommend.' (Scottish HEP). The average cost for a needs assessment in Scotland is £500, whereas in England it is £700.

4.74 In Northern Ireland, there are six needs assessment centres, three operate from within the HEP and three are independent. According to a government official and local authority administrator, the system is more straight forward with only 300-450 students accessing DSAs each year. Needs assessors are quality assured through service level agreements managed through each of the five local authorities (the DSAs model in Northern Ireland is still locally administered). Local authorities meet regularly to ensure consistency as this has been a challenge in the past. Both the Scottish and Northern Irish systems have not changed their entitlements and operate to the same entitlements as Wales.

Impact of SFE changes on students

4.75 Two concerns were raised regarding the changes to SFE-funded entitlements. These related to the:

- withdrawal of Band One and Band Two support (for roles see Annex J)
- charging for the provision of a computer.

4.76 The divergence in funding between SFE and SFW for Band One and Band Two roles was a concern among Welsh HEPs and needs assessors. The withdrawal of DSAs for SFE students has, according to the needs assessors, reduced the holistic nature of the assessment and resulted in uncertainty around the support students receive.

'We now have to write in a way about need so that the college can understand what their needs are without stating recommendations. But I have colleges contacting me saying, "just tell us what we need to provide because we can't read in-between the lines".' (Head of assessment centre)

4.77 Some assessors reported a form of 'stand-off' with the SFE when completing the needs assessment as a way of ensuring they were writing a needs assessment based on students' needs and not to fit the parameters of the funder. Some needs assessors stated they continued to recommend the full range of roles required to ensure the student receives the support they need and to which they are entitled.

'We don't know if that student is going to be able to access the support when they get to university…assessors are effectively being forced to overlook needs in order to get reports through and this would be negligent.' (Needs assessor)

4.78   In addition, a few HEPs reported noticing a confusion among some needs assessors over what can still be recommended for SFW-funded students and a drop in recommendations for Band One and Band Two roles.

4.79   There was no support from Welsh practitioners to follow the English changes. Concerns were expressed that too much onus could be placed on the student to negotiate their support between DSAs provision and that provided through the disability service. There were concerns that students would go without support.

'Many students do not make the connection with us and their DSAs and we may never see them. So, for the students who may have a computer but not be recommended for any NMH, they might never interact with us, but actually need that little extra support, which is currently funded under Band One and Band Two support roles.' (Head of disability services, Wales)

4.80   Interviews with disability teams in the devolved nations, in particular, from Scotland, reported SFE-funded students being at a disadvantage. This is partly because of the point raised earlier about needs assessors making assumptions regarding reasonable adjustments, but also because SFE-funded students come without Band One and Band Two support.

'Unless they find their way to disability services, they can remain under the radar and without support.' (Head of disability services, Scottish HEP)

4.81   However, the changes that took place in England at the start of the academic year 2015/2016, have, according to three English universities, been a catalyst for change in terms of raising the priority of the inclusive learning agenda.

'We have been given a much larger budget to develop our support and the university is moving forward with its inclusive learning. Our approach is now much more holistic and we are able to provide more of the support

in house and only use DSAs for the higher level of needs.' (Head of disability services, English HEP)

4.82   According to the head of service within one English university, the use of lecture capture, increased investment in hire equipment with assistive technology, investment in support roles, including library assistants and note takers, had removed the need for DSAs funded support for Bands One and Two. The DA also reported feeling in greater control of what the student could and could not receive.

'This change has put our students who would normally have received DSAs on a par with our international students.' (DA)

4.83   The University of Cambridge has moved away from some elements of the DSAs model of provision (specifically the provision of specialist mentoring and study skills) and invested in their own support model for Bands One to Band Four and only use DSAs for some specialist Band Three and Four non-medical help tasks. Students do still apply for DSAs for other (non-human support) elements which they are eligible for.

'We decided with all the changes happening with the system to opt out of some elements of Band Three and Four human support provision via DSAs. This has allowed us to be far more responsive to the requirements of our students and has increased the quality of provision. We continue to deliver human support via our internal pool of specialist support workers and feel that students get a much better service (and this is also reflected in our students' feedback). They can now apply for and access human support within three days at our university.' (Head of disability resource centre)

4.84   In England students contribute to the cost of their own computer but this approach receives very little support from practitioners in Wales. According to needs assessors and DAs, there are so many circumstances that make it difficult for students to access open source computers and some students come with old computers from their parents or with computers that are not powerful enough to operate the software. One ATS provider in England

reported over 650 students had delayed the purchase of their equipment due to affordability issues.

4.85   There were also concerns with students using old laptops and laptops without insurance. This issue would be exacerbated if students had to use their own laptops. Once laptops break, students can be left without a laptop or software.

4.86   Additional concerns regarding the England model related to an ATS 'product list.' SFE ATS products have to be selected from an agreed list of items and this prevents students accessing the most beneficial software. Needs assessors gave examples of being refused certain technologies because they were not on the list. The system in Wales is much more flexible, SFW does not operate a list and students can access new and innovative technology.

Provision of DSAs support

4.87   DSAs provision accessed by students falls primarily in to three areas:

- NMH provision
- ATS support
- general allowances.

NMH provision

4.88   The model for DSAs funded NMH support is based on each NMH provider being commissioned by the SLC to deliver support directly to the student. In Wales, this is more likely to be their HEP disability services, who either contract services with one or more professional NMH providers or have their own staff within the team who can deliver the support 'in-house'.

4.89   HEPs' disability support services typically operate from within a fairly small team that includes a head of disability services and a small number of DAs who are dedicated to providing information and advice to students. In Wales, more so than in England (due to the opt out agreement of two quotes for NMH providers) DSAs support is co-ordinated by and delivered through the disability services centre. NMH provision is delivered by dedicated professionals, who are usually employed on a zero hours contract

arrangement. This can include study skills assistant, note-takers, specialist tutors, mental health practitioners and mentors. Other services for example British Sign Language Interpreters (BSL) are utilised as and when required by a student.

4.90   The landscape, particularly for HEPs that support large numbers of SFW and SFE-funded students has become complex. Heads of services endeavoured to maintain a dedicated cohort of professionals with whom the service had developed strong relations and were trusted to deliver high quality work. However, this was not always possible due to the change in nature of provision as a result of the two quotes/cheapest provision operating in England for SFE-funded students. HEPs further away from the borders and with fewer SFE-funded students reported a less disrupted service.

4.91   For SFE students, the landscape can be more complex and provision can be further away. According to some HEPs, national providers find it difficult to deliver a full range of services viably in small HEPs (with lower student numbers), e.g. Aberystwyth and Bangor. This creates problems for SFE-funded students in particular where the provider recommended can be located outside of Wales. Consequently, some students do not accept the support, or in the case of one student spoken to, travel time was deducted from her recommended hours.

4.92   According to one NMH and ATS provider, the DSA-QAG database of providers does not provide sufficient information regarding where providers can deliver support.

> 'We provide ATS and NMH provision, the first is UK-wide and the second is just locally delivered, but the database does not allow us to distinguish between the two and only if the assessor read the comments about our provision, would they know.' (Provider)

4.93   The system operating in Wales where HEPs can be recommended as the sole provider for NMH appears to be a more efficient and effective method of ensuring that students get the support they need. The more local the response, the more tailored to students' needs and the more student support services can be assured that students are accessing the support they need.

4.94   In the event of any delays or difficulties with students accessing DSAs support, HEPs provided the necessary support and claimed back the cost of that support once the student had received their DSAs entitlement. According to Heads of Service not all students are successful with their claims and not all entitlements cover the cost of the support, so putting pressure on the services provided by the disability support service.

4.95   Support commissioned through DSAs can over-simplify disability and, therefore support. Department for Education guidance that suggests students with ASC can receive support from a specialist mentor but students with dyslexia cannot, over simplifies students' needs.

4.96   Disability support teams reported that many students have more than one co-occurring disability that impacts adversely on their abilities to successfully access the curriculum, in comparison to their non-disabled peers. For example, students with SpLD, ASC, mental health conditions, physical and/or medical conditions are presenting with complex disability-related study needs but that these needs are not always fully supported through DSAs. Many students interviewed reported issues with acquiring, recalling and retaining information, both in the written and verbal form, and had difficulties in reflecting and critically analysing their own work. For example, this related to cognitive aspects, including attention, memory (storage, retention and organisation of information); more general time management and organisational difficulties; reading, note-taking and written expression of ideas. Specialist tutors are an essential part of overcoming these challenges, supporting students to develop a range of strategies and skills through tutorials.

4.97   According to practitioners, anxiety and low mood add to the complexity of students' (often changing) study needs and strategies of support. Although students received DSAs, specialist tutors within HEP disability services endeavoured to co-ordinate services with other disability practitioners, and on occasions, academic tutors, to share learners' needs and to provide consistency of support beyond that funded by DSAs.

'We operate a network of academics across the university who are all working around inclusion, looking at need for disabled students in order to get a consistent approach.' (Specialist tutor)

4.98 Disability services do try to actively encourage students to take up their support, to ensure that they can cope with their study demands and that claims can be made by the HEP to the student finance company for services provided. Some frustrations were expressed regarding a long drawn out process when dealing with queries over invoices. There was often confusion over what evidence was needed when students did not attend a support session with no prior notice given to the disability team and a signature proving access to support was not acquired.

4.99 This process can be very time consuming for disability support services and very frustrating when there are disputes over claims, but staff have to be paid and there is constant pressure to retain the experience required by disability support services.

4.100 Some smaller HEPs also reported considerable strain on their services to provide support for students without DSAs.

'Our service is in the red and we get constant pressure from above to only support [SFW] students when they have their DSAs.' (Head of disability services)

4.101 HEPs agreed that if SFW made the same decision to withdraw funding for Bands One and Two that, without providing additional funding to HEPs, services would be put at risk.

4.102 There was some support for a premium based system which would make strategic planning for disabled students/students with additional learning needs (ALN) easier at an institutional level, in terms of their ability to respond and make minor adjustments, without the level of bureaucracy currently involved. There were concerns regarding whether this funding would be secure and interviewees preferred a mixture of ringfenced premium funding and individualised DSAs funding.

4.103 There were considerable concerns regarding the impact of DSA-QAG's professional requirements on the potential availability of certain practitioners, including mentors and specialist tutors.

'I have had to recruit externally rather than use the person I have used for the last four years who has a wealth of experience in working with deaf people but she does not want to go for the qualification.' (English NMH provider)

4.104 Although there were clear reasons given by key stakeholders as to why/how operating criteria for professionals was identified, many NMH providers and disability support teams requested that experience should have been considered.

4.105 Although the Welsh Government does not ask NMH providers to be DSA-QAG registered, this has an impact on their staff as their teams also provide support for SFE-funded students and therefore, do have to be registered. For HEPs in certain areas of Wales that were less populated, this was more of a concern.

4.106 According to HEPs, students who wish to receive NMH support through the medium of Welsh can currently access the support they are entitled to. HEPs stated they have sufficient capacity and expertise to deliver this support. However, the mix of NMH providers on campus has changed due to SFE-funded providers undercutting existing Welsh service providers/HEP arrangements. There are now providers delivering for Welsh funded students who can no longer deliver for SFE-funded students.

'We have a lot of different providers on campus due to a major English provider undercutting our previous provision.' (Head of disability services)

Provision of DSAs support in Scotland and Northern Ireland

4.107 There is a mixed model of NMH provision in Scotland.

- Some HEPs (e.g. Edinburgh and Strathclyde) employ their own bank of NMHs and to ensure quality, staff are subject to a robust recruitment process and have regular supervision with their line manager.
- Some HEPs (e.g. Glasgow and St. Andrews) use external providers, appointed following a procurement process, for some or all NMH roles.

- Some HEPs (currently four) have registered with DSA-QAG for some or all NMH provision for their English domiciled students for whom support costs would not be refundable without being DSA-QAG registered.

4.108   Similarly, in Northern Ireland, a register of NMH providers is held by HEPs and the quality of their provision is monitored through service-level agreements. Both models operating in Scotland and Northern Ireland appear to be more straightforward (possibly because there are fewer HEPs and providers). However, DSA-QAG does impact on their services for SFE-funded students and there is an ongoing dialogue regarding the most appropriate quality assurance procedures in Scotland for NMH provision.

ATS Provision

4.109   ATS providers consulted with who operated UK-wide expressed concerns with the system and their ability to provide services to student finance without also delivering a business to business model. There has been a decline in the number of ATS providers from 21 to 8 because suppliers struggled to make the business work.

> 'Because of the rules about the cheapest quotes, everyone is driving down their costs, but there comes a point when you can't lower them any further and businesses have decided to call it a day.' (ATS provider)

4.110   Providers and disability services were concerned about the impact of the procurement practices on quality and the experience of students. There seems to be a lack of confidence in the DSA-QAG in general in terms of guaranteeing quality of support to students.

4.111   One of the concerns was related to the division of suppliers providing the computers and suppliers providing the training. One ATS supplier stated that they provided an orientation session for students when setting up equipment, which included an introduction to the software loaded on to the machine, but this could not develop into a full training session as a different provider was commissioned to deliver the training. This could be one of the reasons why take up is low for training sessions.

4.112   SLC survey data showed that the majority of students were satisfied with the process with over 70 per cent stating the installation and configuration of

equipment met their expectations, but 12 per cent did not agree. Reasons for it not meeting their expectations centred around poor communication and a lack of care and attention to the specification regarding software and allocating appropriate time for training.

> 'It takes me longer to understand things; I needed more lessons and would have benefitted from regular updates over the course of my studies.' (Student)

4.113 There was a strong suggestion among many practitioners that certain software packages were underutilised because students did know how to use them. One university sought to ensure that mentors and tutors were aware of how assistive software works to help support students in using the software during their studies.

4.114 There were limited, but informed views regarding the parity of AST provision for those who wished to communicate in Welsh. The Texthelp Read and Write software has been problematic for some students, who have not been able to get it to readback in Welsh. Although it is possible, it relies on the assessor specifying additional voices. Assessors should know about this through research and networking, but centres external to Wales and Welsh HEPs may not have received this information. In addition, there were comments made around the lack of a Welsh language version of Dragon Naturally Speaking being available at present.

4.115 One HEP provided an account of their previous AST 'in-house' provision that was able to provide computer setup and software training in Welsh, but they had to terminate their service because it could not compete on price.

Funding for general allowances

4.116 Several students highlighted issues around the process for claiming back items they had purchased. Some students noted delays purchasing items they needed for their studies because they could not afford to be out of pocket. Others described uncertainties about how to make a claim.

> 'I was awarded a funding grant for paper and ink, but I have to purchase the items first and then claim back against this grant. This process takes

five to six weeks. I tend to do bulk orders, but the cost is around £50 for one lot of ink. This means I can be considerably out of pocket for a prolonged period of time.' (Student)

4.117 Students and disability support services also reported the difficulties in students using taxi services, difficulties in setting up a long-term arrangement with taxi firms and then students having to hold on to each individual receipt to claim back the money spent.

Summary of key findings

4.118 This section highlighted the key concerns raised by practitioners and some stakeholders regarding the fragmented nature of the application and awards process. The system, particularly in England is becoming increasingly complex and fragmented and although the process in Wales appears to be more straightforward, the complexities and subsequent frustrations are still apparent. All interviewees valued DSAs and understood how and why the process had evolved in this way, but were concerned that the model of accessing DSAs operated outside of the learning context and outside of disability team's support teams. There is anecdotal evidence that the systems operating in Scotland and Wales are more straightforward.

5. Key Findings: Benefits of DSAs for students with disabilities

5.1 Students consulted as part of the research provided rich data on the range of support they received and the impact this had on their studies. Without exception, the support was highly valued by students when they received it and all stated there would have been a negative impact on their outcomes without it. The issues raised previously regarding process are not covered in this section. This section details students' experiences of the support, what difference this made to their learning experience and ultimately performance.

5.2 The findings are discussed under the following headings:

- overall benefits of support
- use of the general allowance and travel expenses.

Benefits of support

5.3 Figure 5.1 shows that the majority of students who responded to the SLC survey agreed that without DSAs support, they would not have been able to complete their study commitments (68 per cent). Just less than two fifths neither agreed nor disagreed (17 per cent).

Figure 5.1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your DSAs support on your current course? Without DSAs support, I would not be able to complete my study commitments.
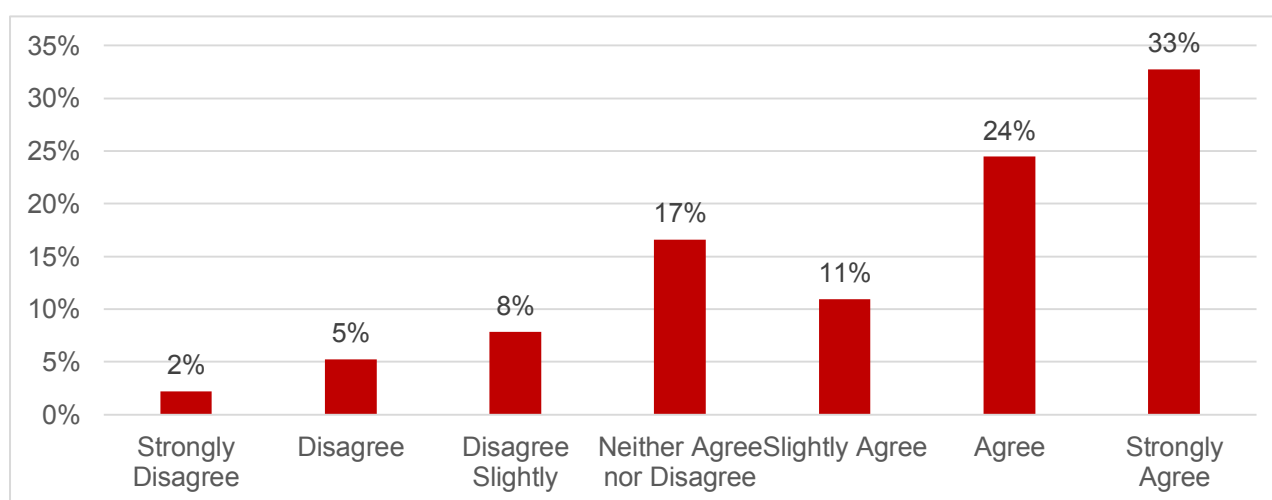
Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17
Base: 229

5.4 The majority of students (84 per cent) agreed that the DSAs support had a made significant positive impact on their overall performance (see Figure 5.2)

Figure 5.2: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your DSAs support on your current course? I feel the support is having a significant positive impact on my overall performance on my course.
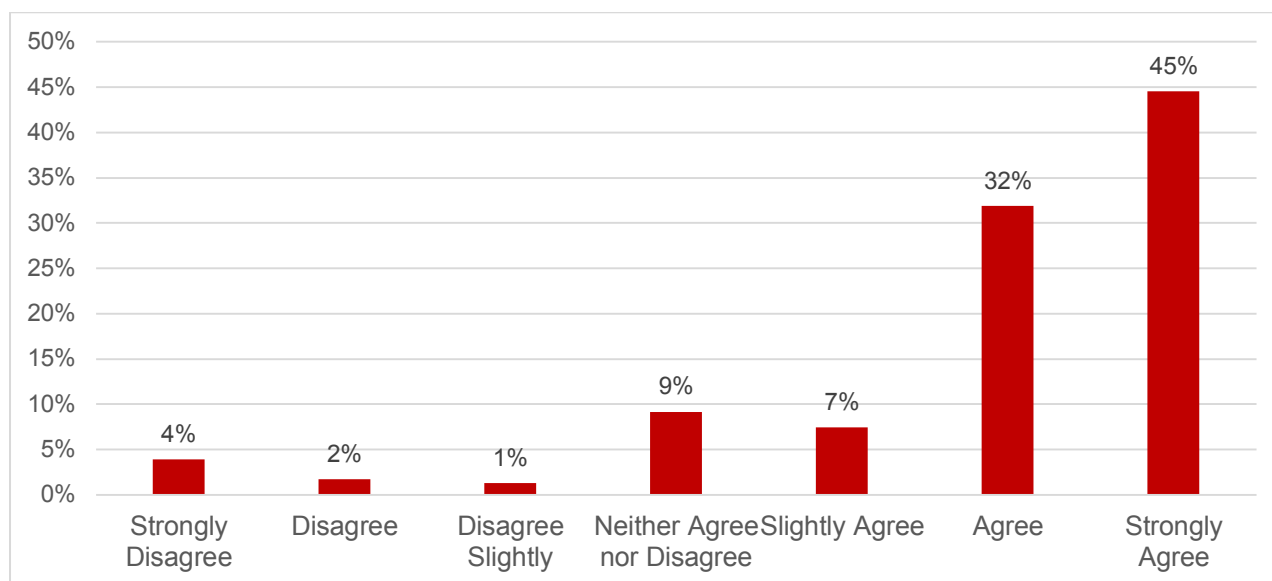
5.5   This was echoed in the qualitative interviews, where performance was the biggest factor that students perceived DSAs to have an impacted on.

Figure 5.3: Students' views of the impact of DSAs on their performance

'My highest grade on an assignment prior to support was 48%; my lowest grade on an assignment since the support was introduced has been 54%. The proof is in my grades.'

'The support allowed me to succeed. I got a good degree classification and this allowed me to go into postgraduate study.'

'I can now leave with a First because of the support of my tutor.'

'From my first year to last year, the changes in my grades, you can see an ongoing, continuous improvement.'

'I perform better because of DSAs. If I didn't have it, I'd be much more behind; I'm behind now, but would be so much further behind without it. It would be harder to catch up without DSAs.'

'

5.6   In the SLC survey, students were asked to comment about the type of support and impact this support had on their learning experience. The breakdown of support is shown in Figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4: What type of DSAs support have you been funded for?

Category	Percentage
Equipment (e.g. computer, printer, dictaphone etc.)	92%
Learning support software to assist learning	72%
IT training to support the use of software	70%
Non-medical help (e.g. note taker, one-to-one support)	64%
General allowance for stationery / materials	54%
Travel expenses	14%
can't remember	2%
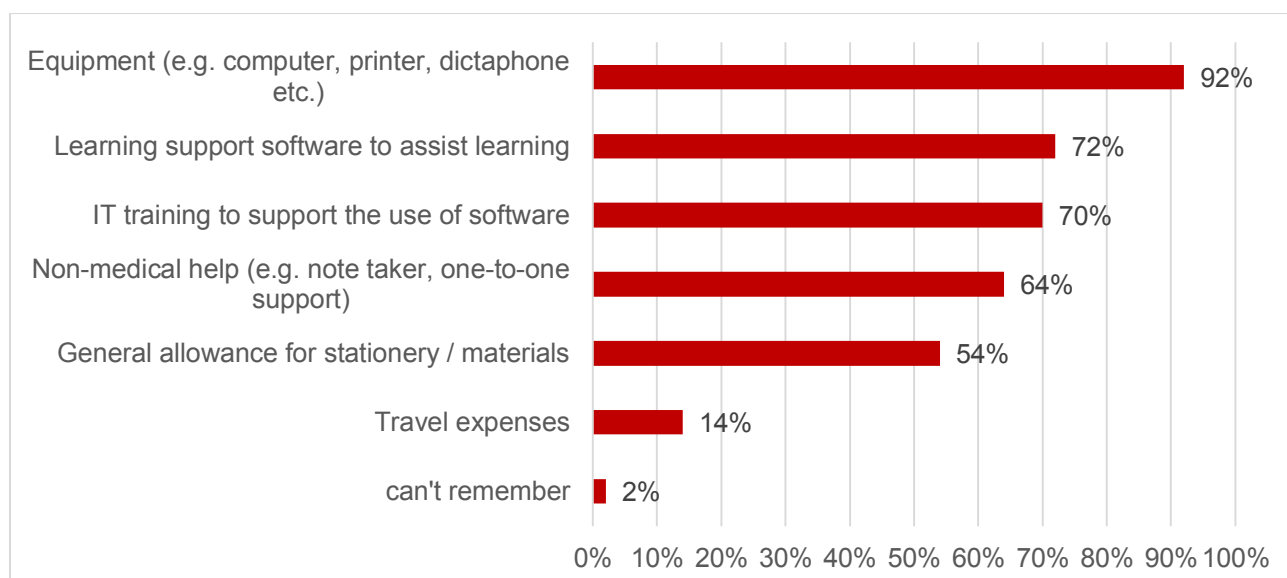
Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17
Base: 229

5.7   The majority of students received equipment (92 per cent), 72 per cent received software and a further 70 per cent received the training to support the use of software. Sixty-four per cent received non-medical help and 54 per cent received a general allowance. Less than one fifth of students were awarded funding for travel expenses (14 per cent).

5.8   Students received a range of equipment to help with their studies. These included:

- Dictaphones
- laptops with a range of software including, speech recognition software, screen readers, mind mapping software, split screen note-taking software
- coloured overlays and specific precision tinted spectacles.

5.9   Students with a range of needs, but particularly SpLD, used assistive technology to help them make lecture notes, structure their thoughts and compile evidence for essays. In conjunction with support from a study skills tutor or study assistant, students noted a significant impact on their performance.

5.10   Assistive technology was important for students with a wide range of disabilities (see figure 5.5 for an example).

Figure: 5.5: Impact of ATS on student's ability to continue her course

Bryony*

Bryony has dyslexia, ADHD and anxiety. Her high-level needs presented challenges for Bryony in terms of her ability to organise her work, critically reflect on her outputs and to meet deadlines.

Bryony was recommended a laptop and software, which she found invaluable. The provision of the laptop with assistive technology helped her complete her coursework. She was recommended a range of software including Mind Map and Dragon. This helped her organise her thoughts and get her ideas down on paper.

'I struggle to write to the same speed that I think and both of these tools have been a god send to me. I love Mind Map, it suits how I think and I can see the links between my thinking. I love Dragon too, it's helped me in showing my ideas to my study assistant.' (Bryony)

Bryony had support from a study assistant and specialist one-to-one study skills tutor who also knew how to use the software and could help Bryony in using the tool to her best advantage.

'This has meant that when I return home, having been through everything with my tutor, I am more able to work on it all at home. It's been truly amazing and I would not have been here without all of this support.' (Bryony)

Source: YCL Interview

*All names have been changed to protect anonymity

5.11 Over three fifths of students received support from non-medical help providers. Students interviewed through the qualitative consultations (one to one interviews and focus groups) who received support from non-medical providers received a range of support from study skills tutors, specialist tutors and mentors. The majority of students interviewed accessed non-medical help from Band One, Band Two and Band Four roles, although one student who was visually and hearing impaired accessed a Band Three role. The value of some of the roles within these bands is discussed in more detail below.

Specialist one-to-one study skills support workers

5.12 Students reported that specialist one-to-one study skills support workers helped them to learn about how to manage their disability, how to improve their self-study skills and general management of their studies. Students reported learning skills to address their specific needs which, in many cases, resulted in longer-term impacts. Figure 5.6 details some of their comments.

Figure 5.6: Students' views of the value of NMH support

'Because of the tutor, my work is now more "polished"; the tutor has supported me to reframe my mindset.'

'I have gone from chaotic and disorganised to organised and aware of time management. I learnt these skills. The 18-year-old me would not be capable of real life work. I'm now doing my Masters in psychology and working at the university, mentoring students.'

'I meet with my tutor weekly. Our initial meeting involved putting my assignments and assessments into her diary, and subsequently, we have been planning how to break down the assignments and structure them together.'

'My tutor is helping me with expanding my vocabulary, referencing, punctuation, grammar and structure.'

<div align="right">Source: YCL Interviews</div>

5.13   Developing these skills, and consequently, improving grades, improved students' confidence. A number of the students interviewed were uncertain that they would be capable of studying at a higher education level, but DSAs had given them the tools to achieve.

> 'It's given me something to fall back on. It makes me feel safe when I am struggling. In college, I just accepted I wasn't good at essays and wouldn't get good grades, but then I worried that my knowledge and skills were not going to be good enough for university. The support has given me confidence and stopped me worrying. Without it, my grades would be worse and I would have scraped through, rather than doing well.' (Student with dyslexia)

Specialist mentors

5.14   A number of students interviewed had mental health issues, which were affecting their ability to engage in their studies. Mentors provided someone to turn to during difficult times, and someone who could encourage them to continue to engage in their studies, when they may not feel like they can. Mentors made a significant difference to a number of individuals.

> 'The support keeps me on track and motivates me. Sometimes, it's the only contact I have with a human being in the week. I'm very much on my own.' (Student with anxiety, depression and osteoarthritis)

'The mentor has been good in tough times, especially when I changed courses last year. I feel less isolated when I'm isolating myself.' (Student with borderline personality disorder [BPD], depression and anxiety)

Mobility trainer

5.15   One of the students interviewed was provided with a mobility trainer to support her navigating around the campus and to lectures. This has allowed the student to participate in higher education in the same way that any other student would, thus supporting equality and inclusivity.

'It's been everything. I couldn't have gone to university without the support I've had'. (Student with visual and hearing impairments)

Note takers, readers and scribes

5.16   A number of students talked about the value of note takers, readers and scribes in both lectures and exams.

5.17   Note takers and scribes were essential to students with visual impairments and also conditions such as fibromyalgia and osteoarthritis, who may find it difficult to write for a long period of time.

'Due to my osteoarthritis, I find handwriting very hard going. My reader-scribe has been so important.' (Student with a range of complex physical disabilities)

5.18   For some students, note takers have been of greater value than a Dictaphone, particularly for those with SpLDs, such as dyslexia. There is also a feeling that, for some courses, where sensitive information may be discussed in lectures, note-takers are more appropriate than a Dictaphone.

'The Assessor recommended a Dictaphone, but this doesn't fit with the context and delivery of our course. In lectures, we are sharing confidential, sensitive information. It's not appropriate for it to be recorded. The note taker in our lectures takes notes for another student and has been emailing them to me. She would send me the relevant information. It's too difficult for me to pick out the relevant bits from a three hour

recording.' (Student with dyslexia, dyspraxia, anxiety, visual stress and query high functioning ASD)

5.19   Readers have been highlighted as essential for many students with a range of needs, including SpLDs and visual impairments. Those with SpLDs can find it difficult to interpret questions from reading them and find it easier to digest when they are read to them.

'I find it much easier to understand when things are read to me.' (Student with dyslexia)

Practical support assistants

5.20   One of the students interviewed, who was a wheelchair user, was provided with a practical support assistant. The student developed a good relationship with their assistant and felt that their support made a significant difference to their university experience. This is outlined in figure 5.7

Figure: 5.7: Impact of a practical support assistant on a student's experience

Jean*

Jean is a mature student who has fibromyalgia and other complex health needs and uses a wheelchair.

Jean was provided with a range of non-medical help, including a practical support assistant. The practical support assistant accompanies Jean around the university, opening doors for her, carrying her equipment and moving tables and chairs in lecture theatres to make room for the wheelchair.

'He has been so helpful. He is brilliant. I have asked to have him again next year.'

Source: YCL Interview

*All names have been changed to protect anonymity

Use of the general allowance and travel expenses

5.21　Students with SpLD who were awarded a general allowance reported it was useful for them, particularly in helping to manage the cost of printing. It was particularly beneficial for OU students who are isolated from central services and lack equipment, such as printers. Students spoken to used their general allowance to purchase ink cartridges, printers, printing paper and books, which enabled them to study at home. The use of printers and scanners were particularly important for students such as those with SpLD like dyslexia, who wanted to print and highlight their notes to organise their thoughts.

> 'My printer has been very useful – I have been able to print out all of my work and highlight it so it is easier for me to digest the information.' (Student who has dyslexia)

5.22　Students who struggled to attend university regularly used the allowance to purchase books that helped them during their course, specifically if they could not access the library so often. Without the allowance, many agreed they would have struggled to complete their course.

5.23　A number of students noted the value of travel expenses in supporting them to get to university, particularly those with visual impairments and long-term illnesses, such as osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia.

> 'I couldn't have even got to university without the transport DSAs paid for.' (A student with visual and hearing impairments)

Summary

5.24　DSAs was a vital form of support for the students interviewed. The benefits of the support can be seen in student engagement, performance, attendance, confidence, skills and inclusion.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

6.1 DSAs in Wales is a devolved issue which means that decisions to change DSAs in any way can be taken by the Welsh Government. The changes in England in AY 2015/16 were introduced as a way of modernising DSAs, rebalancing responsibility for disabled students in HEPs and improving cost effectiveness. The Welsh Government commissioned a review of the provision of DSAs for SFW-funded students, including the arrangement for providing financial support for students with a recognised disability. This review aimed to identify opportunities for improving effectiveness and efficiencies in the process and making recommendations for targeting DSAs more effectively.

6.2 The findings are primarily drawn from evidence given by practitioners (heads of disability support services, DAs, needs assessors and providers) and students. Interviews with stakeholders provided important context and a backdrop against which the system through which DSAs are delivered can be compared.

6.3 The key findings fall into four areas:

- awareness of DSAs
- the effectiveness of the DSAs application and awards system
- the impact of the SFE changes in the Welsh context
- the benefits of DSAs for students.

6.4 Any decisions regarding the future of DSAs need to be made within the context of current developments regarding the inclusive learning agenda. This is touched on in brief at the end of this section, drawing from the issues set out in the context section.

Awareness of DSAs

6.5 Upon arrival at university, practitioners reported that many students were unaware of DSAs and many did not realise they could access support for their SpLD or medical conditions. Students often arrived at university not realising they had a disability and were often diagnosed at university. HESA

data for 2015/16 showed that under one half of all students who claimed to have a disability actually received DSA. A greater proportion of part-time students were not in receipt of DSAs than full-time students. Access to DSAs declined as the age of students increased.

6.6   Findings suggest a lack of understanding among schools and colleges and possibly a lack of willingness to support students to access DSAs due to capacity. In addition, low level awareness within the health profession (GPs) was reported by some students who had difficulties in accessing medical evidence.

6.7   The capacity of SFW to respond to those who wish to communicate in Welsh was questioned by a small number of DAs.

Effectiveness of the DSAs application and awards system

6.8   According to practitioners and students, the DSAs application and awards process has become fragmented, complex and time consuming. The frequency and commonality of issues reported by all practitioners, suggests the problem is real and there are opportunities to improve the service.

6.9   There is too great an onus on the student to manage the process and the number of 'players' involved has, according to practitioners, resulted in an overly complex system operating from outside the learning environment and not in the best interests of the student.

6.10   Issues relating to the DSA1 letter of eligibility, accessing medical evidence and the letter of entitlement going direct to the student were seen as barriers to disability teams supporting students effectively. There was evidence from practitioners and students that this resulted in delays in the process and, in some cases, students not accessing support.

6.11   There were concerns regarding the large number of pended applications and requests for greater clarification on why applications were pended. Data that could have shown the flow of eligible students through the application process were not provided by the SLC due to a lack of capacity within SFW to respond to this request within the short timeframe.

6.12   Due to an apparent 'marketisation' of needs assessment centres (this is more so in England) not all needs assessments are completed within the

learning environment (at the HEP). Needs assessors, may or may not liaise with the HEP to understand provision, or demands on the learner. There is evidence of this affecting SFE and SFW-funded students travelling outside of Wales to study.

6.13   Particular concerns were raised about the closure of the OU Access Centre and the loss of home-based needs assessments, resulting in a lack of support for students.

6.14   There was a low level of confidence amongst practitioners that DSA-QAG guarantees a quality service to the student. This review did not look at the quality of needs assessments or of provision. All needs assessors and providers spoken to as part of this research were committed to and passionate about their role and in ensuring the needs of students were met.

6.15   However, stakeholders and some practitioners considered there was a case for an affiliated HEP assessment centre model to ensure that assessment centres have strong relations with, and understanding of, the HEP environment.

6.16   In Scotland, the model for delivering needs assessments appears to be quite different with assessment centres being attached to HEPs. According to the two Scottish stakeholders interviewed this is a more favourable model of delivery. DAs also undertake some of the lower-level needs assessments for students and according to one HEP representative, this is a much more cost-effective way of assessing need. The average cost for a needs assessment in Scotland is £500 compared to £700 in England.

6.17   With regards to accessing NMH support, the system operating in Wales is favourable to that operating in England. The opt-out agreement for Welsh HEPs helps to ensure that students get the support from practitioners within the HEP disability team. Support from these teams can be co-ordinated and although practitioners are predominantly on zero-hours contracts, their relationship with the disability team helps to provide a more comprehensive and positive support network around the student. This is not always the case for SFE-funded students who sometimes had NMH providers travelling long distances to support them, resulting in less joined-up support.

6.18 NMH provision for those who wish to communicate in Welsh is meeting need. However, there were examples of AST services being withdrawn due to competition in the market from England and examples of software not fully supporting students who wish to be supported in Welsh.

Impact of SFE changes to DSAs

6.19 Changes brought in by England, most notably, the withdrawal of funding for the Band One and Band Two roles and the charging of students for computers, have effectively introduced a two-tier system for SFW and SFE students. This has caused some confusion and uncertainties around entitlement among needs assessors. The impact of the two-quotes system operating in England is being felt in Wales and HEPs have reported a myriad of providers operating on their campus.

6.20 For SFE students travelling to Wales, HEPs are required to respond to some of their needs from their core funding. For some of the smaller HEPs, this places a burden on their resources, which was keenly felt by the heads of disability support teams.

6.21 Students with high level needs required support from across the range of bands. DSAs cannot always flex in the way that is required. In particular, for students with SpLD, Asperger's, ASC and other physical disabilities, the withdrawal of Band One and Band Two support from their DSAs places a burden on students to negotiate their own support needs. This research identified students, including Welsh students in HEPs and OU students, who had never been in contact with disability support services, but had a DSAs entitlement. Therefore, any withdrawal of funds needs to be accompanied with a deepening of the support from disability teams.

6.22 The HEPs' response to the changes in DSAs in England is varied. The three English HEPs engaged in this review had developed their own response to the changes. Two reported an increased emphasis on reasonable adjustments, and more broadly on their inclusive learning agenda, albeit with much progress still to be made. One disability team reported increased funding and greater autonomy and control with meeting students' needs.

6.23 The third, the University of Cambridge had moved away from DSAs provision to provide an 'in-house' response for most of their students, only using DSAs

for equipment or other higher-level needs. However, this case should be viewed as somewhat a-typical due to its unique status and privileged position.

6.24   However, with HEPs adopting their own approaches and moving forward with inclusive teaching and learning practices at different paces, as DSAs entitlements reduce, it is possible to predict that a complex and uneven level of support could develop in England.

6.25   The system currently operating in Wales that provides support for students from across the bands is the preferred option. HEPs agreed that if SFW made the same decision to withdraw funding for Bands One and Two that, without providing additional (ring-fenced) funding to HEPs, services would be put at risk.

6.26   Due to the low confidence in DSA-QAG's quality assurance procedures (in measuring the quality of support) it seems important to ensure that services are delivered locally by organisations that have a strong and trusted reputation to deliver good quality support. The system operating in Wales appears to be providing those assurances, due to its local network of assessors and providers. However, HEPs in Wales reported experiencing challenges due to DSA-QAG's professional membership requirements. Although Wales does not require NMH providers to be DSA-QAG registered, their practitioners are required to operate to English accreditation standards in order to support their English students.

6.27   There was little support for charging students £200 for a computer, as there were many accounts of students coming to HEPs with old computers or computers not designed to run appropriate software.

Benefits of DSAs on students

6.28   DSAs have been an essential form of support for students attending HE. SLC data showed that over 55 per cent of students agreed that DSAs had an impact on their course completion and over 80 per cent agreed it impacted on their performance.

6.29   NMH providers worked to improve the skills of students to help them be less dependent upon their support as they progressed through their courses. As a result, students developed greater confidence in their studies and many reported that their academic grades now reflected what they considered to be their true ability.

6.30   There was clear evidence of the portfolio of support including ATS, NMH and general allowances providing a comprehensive package of support for students.

The need for DSA

6.31   Support for students with disabilities is best conceived as a three-tiered system consisting of inclusive learning strategies, reasonable adjustments and DSAs.

6.32   In the three HEPs included in the review sample in England, there was some evidence that the removal of Band One and Band Two support had been a catalyst for change. However, HEPs admitted they needed considerable time to implement changes within their institution.

6.33   The HEP landscape appears very mixed regarding progress in embedding inclusive learning practices. HEPs are diverse institutions, offering different specialisms to a diverse student population and with differing funding levels. In England, HEFCE provided additional funds for HEPs to develop their practice. However, without any 'minimum' expectation being agreed, or formal monitoring of progress, students with disabilities have no guarantee of consistency of support.

6.34   Therefore, DSAs are an essential form of support for students with disabilities. There was evidence that the more DSAs as a model of support is integrated into HEP disability teams, the more seamless the support provided to the student. The three-tiered system depicted in the DFE

guidance[20] is, therefore, better seen as an integrated, holistic response to all students, including those with disabilities, rather than a system constructed of separate building blocks.

6.35 Disability teams work within HEPs on behalf of students with disabilities. Their obvious expertise and support should be harnessed by students accessing DSAs and not working separately from it, as currently seems the case for SFE funded students in particular. This is due to the operation of the DSA-QAG database and the two quotes for NMH provision resulting in support being delivered outside of HEPs' disability services.

6.36 There was some support for a premium-based type funding model, where funding would be provided to the HEP to cover all eligible pupils enabling improved strategic planning and the opportunity to respond to minor adjustments without the level of bureaucracy currently involved. However, DSAs are valued for the guarantee of support to the individual and this should not be overlooked.

6.37 There was an appreciation of how the DSAs application and awards system had evolved, but this was more than matched by a level of frustration regarding the barriers inherent in the system. Although it was acknowledged that Wales runs a better and more flexible service than in England, these frustrations remain.

Concluding remarks

6.38 Few concerns were expressed directly about the Welsh DSAs policy, in the main because Wales has not followed England and implemented similar changes that reduced entitlement to a number of aspects of DSAs. However, the findings set out above suggest there are real concerns with how DSAs are administered and the direction of travel, particularly in England with the increasing marketisation of provision and the impact of the policy changes in England. Therefore, this review provides the Welsh Government with an opportunity to protect what works well in Wales and to reflect on whether the current model for accessing DSAs in Wales, largely inherited from the English system, is the most efficient system. Longer term, there may be a

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[20]   Department for Education (January 2017) Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence. Reference: DFE-00044-2017.

need to consider the wider role and responsibilities of HEPs in supporting students with disabilities.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Welsh Government

6.39   The system that operates in Wales is preferable to that in England. The Welsh model helps students access the support they need from local providers. The following three recommendations are provided as a way of protecting the advantages of the current model and improving access to support.

6.40   **Recommendation One**: the Welsh Government should resist the proliferation of needs assessment and outreach centres that has occurred in England by remodelling the current system along the Scottish model. Needs assessment centres should be affiliated with HEPs and support students applying to that HEP who are entitled to DSAs. This will limit marketisation of assessments and will help ensure assessors take the student's learning environment and course demands in to account. Where HEPs (including the OU) do not host an assessment centre, they should be encouraged to do so and to promote their services to new under-graduates.

6.41   **Recommendation Two**: to minimise the potential impact on availability of NMH providers, Welsh Government should resist adopting DSA-QAG's NMH professional requirements on professionals working within Welsh HEPs. HEPs should be responsible for ensuring the quality of provision.

6.42   **Recommendation Three**: to ensure that Welsh students do not suffer from a lack of support, the Welsh Government should continue to provide funds for DSAs for individual students where needs assessors have evidenced need. This should include Band One and Band Two funding. Any future decisions regarding the funding of DSAs should draw on evidence from Welsh HEPs' progress with their inclusive learning practices. HEPs should be encouraged to share effective practice including with HEPs in England who have improved strategies and adapted support.

6.43 **Recommendation Four**: to improve efficiencies within the system as well as support for students, the Welsh Government should instruct SFW to share the letter of eligibility and letter of entitlement with HEPs' disability services who should be able to liaise with service providers on behalf of students with disabilities. Students who do not wish to share this information should be given a choice to opt out.

6.44 **Recommendation Five**: to encourage take-up and smooth transition of students with disabilities from schools and colleges, the DSAs policy lead should liaise with policy leads for pre-16 and post-16 education to raise awareness of DSAs for pupils with a recognised need in school.

6.45 **Recommendation Six**: to ensure no students are disadvantaged, the Welsh Government should review the relevancy of having an upper limit of entitlement for NMH provision for those students with certain disabilities for whom the upper limit is not sufficient. [Most students only use a fraction of the total entitlement.]

Recommendations for Student Finance Wales

6.46 **Recommendation Seven**: to improve the DSAs application process, SFW should review the accessibility of the application process and consider improvements, including the use of a video tutorial to take applicants through the process of applying for DSAs and providing an online platform evidencing progress through the process for both students and DAs supporting them.

6.47 **Recommendation Eight**: to ensure the DSAs support is targeted effectively, the SFW should provide evidence to the Welsh Government of the population of students' DSAs entitlements and take-up of support. This would indicate whether the system currently operating is fit for purpose and meeting the needs of the Welsh Government and students.

6.48 **Recommendation Nine:** to promote confidence in the system**,** the Welsh Government and SFW should review reasons for pended applications and provide this information to HEPs to aid understanding of the causes of pended applications.

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Annex A: HESA and Student Loans Company Data Tables

This annex provides information showing the demographics of Welsh domiciled students receiving DSA.

HESA supplied student data for 2015/16 for Welsh domiciled students enrolled into HE. The SLC provided data on the complete population of students accessing DSA from SFW from 2014/15 to 2016/17.

HESA data shows 5,304 students accessing DSA who were Welsh domiciled. The SLC data shows 3,667 students accessing DSA funded through SFW for the same year. Some of the Welsh domiciled students captured in the HESA data may not have had their DSA funded by SFW, which would account for the difference in numbers. As an example, some students may access disabled students' support through the provisions of the NHS Bursary Scheme.

The HESA data was used to show how many students declared a disability and accessed DSA and the SLC data was used to analyse the demographics of students in more detail.

HESA Data

The majority of students enrolled on an HE course in academic year (AY) 2015/16, (87 per cent), stated that they had 'no known disability'. Just under 13 per cent declared a disability.

Table 1 shows the proportions and number of self-assessed disabilities by Welsh domiciled students enrolled in HE for the 2015/16 academic year. It should be emphasised that these disabilities are based on the student's self-assessment and not by medical professionals.

Of those students who listed a disability, 43.5 per cent stated they had 'a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or ADHD'. Just under one fifth stated that they had 'mental health difficulties' (17.4 per cent), 10.36 per cent had two or more impairments or disabling medical condition and 10.13 per cent had longstanding illnesses or health conditions.

Table 1: Proportion of Welsh Domiciled Students with a Self-Assessed Disability (2015/16)

	Count	Population Percentage	Percentage of those with a disability
No Known Disability	84,971	87.08%	/
A specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D	5,489	5.62%	43.52%
Mental health difficulties	2,193	2.25%	17.39%
Two or more impairments and/or disabling medical conditions	1,306	1.34%	10.36%
A longstanding illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy	1,277	1.31%	10.13%
A disability, impairment or medical condition that is not listed above	970	0.99%	7.69%
A physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using arms or using a wheelchair or crutches	470	0.48%	3.73%
A social/communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder	427	0.44%	3.39%
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment	331	0.34%	2.62%
Blind or a serious visual impairment uncorrected by glasses	146	0.15%	1.16%
An unseen disability, e.g. diabetes, epilepsy, asthma	2	0.00%	0.02%
Not Known	1	0.00%	0.01%
Total	97,583	100.00%	100.00%

HESA Data – 2015/16 Welsh Domiciled Students Entering HE

Table 2 shows the proportion of Welsh domiciled students who claimed DSA for the AY 2015/16. Over 5,300, or 5.4 per cent of students who enrolled into HE claimed DSA. The difference between the number with a self-assessed disability and the number in receipt of DSA can be explained by students not applying or not being eligible for DSA.

Table 2: Proportion of Welsh Domiciled Students Claiming DSA (2015/16)

	Count	Percentage
Not in receipt of DSA	6,517	6.68%
In receipt of DSA	5,304	5.44%
Information about DSA is not known/not sought	793	0.81%
No response	84,969	87.07%
Total	97,583	100.00%

HESA Data – 2015/16 Welsh Domiciled Students Entering HE

Table 3 outlines the characteristics of those not in receipt of DSA, but having stated that they have a self-assessed disability. The third column gives the percentage of those not in receipt, but with a self-assessed disability by all those with a self-assessed disability for each characteristic. The final column provides the base number (or 100 per cent). This analysis has highlighted some important areas for consideration.

When comparing full-time to part-time, the table shows that there is a greater proportion of part-time students not in receipt of DSA, in comparison to full-time students. A number of these part-time students could potentially be OU students. The fact that there is a larger proportion of part-time students not in receipt of DSA, suggests that there may be issues around knowledge, awareness and the challenges of the application for students who may not be on campus.

As may be expected, a larger proportion of first year students are not in receipt of DSA when compared with those in other year groups. This perhaps highlights issues around information, advice and guidance provided to students at FE level.

The statistics show that between the ages of 18 and 21, there is a decline in the proportion of students not in receipt of DSA. However, between age 21 and the 26-29 age band, there is an increase in the proportion not in receipt of DSA. This appears to decrease again between the 26-29 age band and the 30-39 age band, and then plateaus until the 40-49 age band, before increasing from the 40-49 age band to aged 60 and over. This is shown clearly in Figure 1.

Younger students may have less motivation or understanding of the need to be proactive and take responsibility for making their application for DSA to ensure that they have adequate support to complete their studies at their chosen HEI, while mature students may be studying part-time outside of the university environment, unaware of the support available to them or feel that they have developed mechanisms to cope without accessing support.

Reflecting on qualification classifications, there is a decrease in the number of students not in receipt of DSA as level of degree classification increases. This is shown in Figure 2. This represents a compelling argument for the value of DSA to students, in terms of achieving the best degree outcomes and allowing them to perform to the best of their abilities.

There appear to be no trends in terms of gender, ethnicity and Welsh language.

Table 3: Characteristics of Those Not in Receipt of DSA

		Percentage not in receipt with a self-assessed disability by all with a self-assessed disability	Count all with self-assessed disability (100%)
Mode	Full-time	43.18%	8866
	Part-time	71.73%	3746
Gender	Male	52.44%	4994
	Female	51.12%	7610
	Other	75.00%	8
First year?	First year	55.73%	4972
	Other	49.01%	7640
Age	14-15	100.00%	1
	16	66.67%	15
	17	73.68%	19
	18	51.11%	988
	19	47.03%	1499
	20	45.35%	1698

	21	44.80%	1212
	22	45.22%	816
	23	47.42%	639
	24	50.54%	465
	25	53.35%	358
	26-29	57.42%	1132
	30-39	55.27%	1612
	40-49	55.63%	1199
	50-59	66.36%	651
	60 and over	74.51%	306
	Unknown	50.00%	2
Ethnicity	Non-White	52.87%	698
	Ethnicity Unknown	56.14%	228
	White	51.50%	11686
Classification	Classification not applicable	53.48%	10613
	FE level qual	100.00%	1
	Unclassified	47.14%	140
	Third class honours/pass	48.11%	106
	Lower second class honours	43.06%	483
	Upper second class honours	41.29%	913
	First class honours	38.20%	356
Language	Fluent	52.31%	1061
	Welsh not fluent	50.65%	1469
	Not Welsh speaker	51.52%	5808
	Not known	73.21%	642
	Blank	48.29%	3632

HESA Data – 2015/16 Welsh Domiciled Students Entering HE

Figure 1: Age by Proportion Not in Receipt of DSA
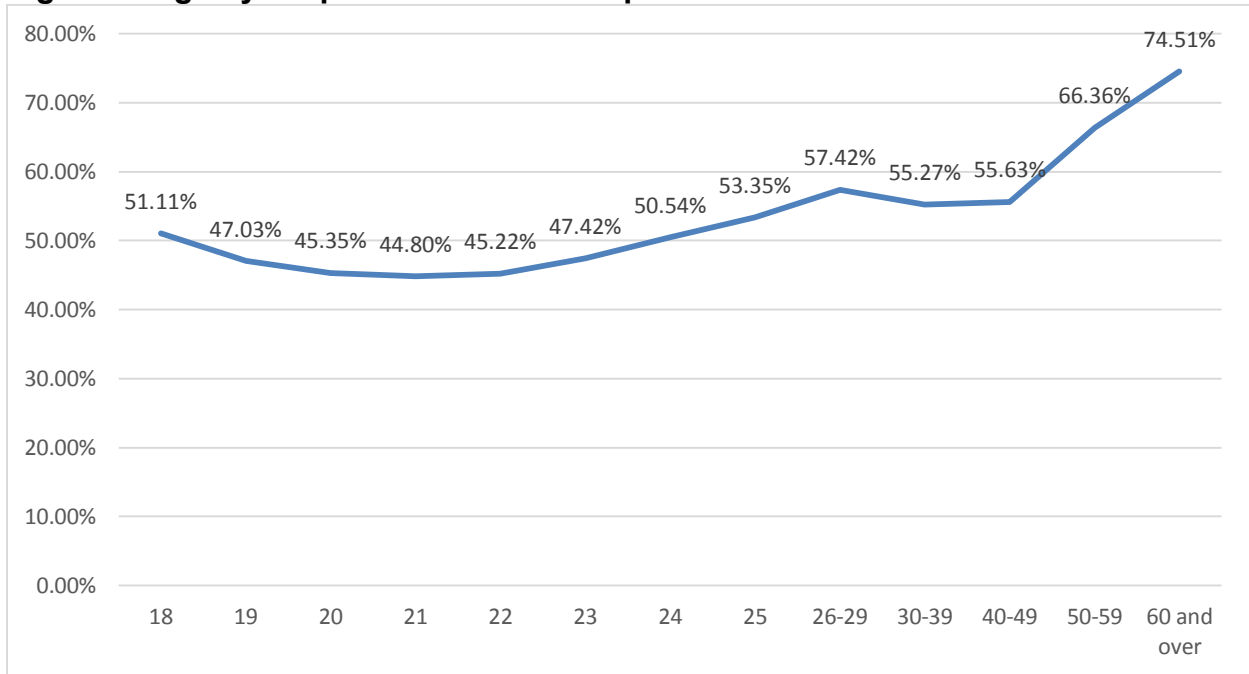
Source: HESA Data – 2015/16 Welsh Domiciled Students Entering HE

Figure 2: Degree Classification by Proportion Not in Receipt of DSA
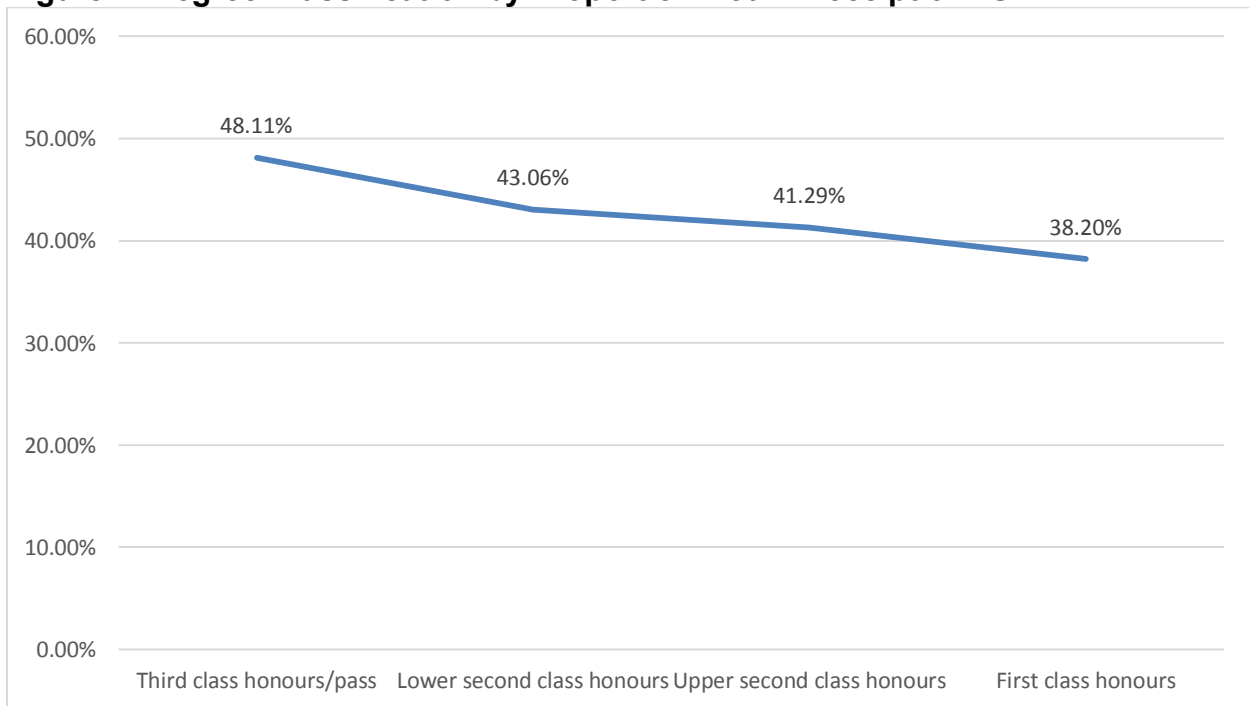
Source: HESA Data – 2015/16 Welsh Domiciled Students Entering HE

Student Loans Company Ltd Data

Table 4 shows that the University of South Wales has the largest proportion of students attending with DSA, although the percentage has dropped slightly from 15.1 per cent in 2015/16 to 12.9 per cent in 2016/17. This shows that nearly 40 per cent of SFW-funded students study outside of Welsh HEPs (shown as Other University, and including the two English universities listed).

Table 4: Proportion of Students Accessing DSA through SFW by University

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Cardiff University	4.6%	5.7%	6.4%
Cardiff Metropolitan University	6.1%	6.4%	6.1%
University of South Wales	14.9%	15.1%	12.9%
University of Wales, Trinity Saint David (UWTSD)	8.5%	11.9%	11.6%
The Open University in Wales	3.4%	4.3%	6.1%
Glyndŵr University	8.9%	7.9%	7.9%
Liverpool University	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%
University of the West of England	2.2%	2.3%	2.0%
Coleg Sir Gâr	-	2.8%	3.5%
Aberystwyth University	3.1%	2.7%	2.5%
Bangor University	5.2%	3.6%	3.6%
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai	0.5%	0.7%	1.0%
Swansea University	5.1%	5.3%	5.0%
Other University	36.6%	30.5%	30.7%
Total	2,968	3,667	3,373

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Table 5 shows that there has been a swing of two percentage points towards females claiming DSA. The greater number of females claiming DSA is relative to the higher number attending HE, roughly a 60/40 split.

Table 5: Proportion of Students Accessing DSA through SFW by Sex

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Female	59.1%	60.2%	61.0%
Male	39.8%	39.1%	38.2%
No Answer Given	1.1%	0.7%	0.8%
Base	2,968	3,667	3,373

Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request

Table 6 shows that there has been a considerable increase in the proportion of students aged 18-21 accessing DSA by 20.5 percentage points. There has been a considerable decrease in the proportion of students aged 22-24 accessing DSA from 31.8 per cent to 17.3 per cent, a drop of 14.5 per cent. The number of people entering higher education aged 21 and over (mature students) fell 44 per cent between 2010/11 and 2015/16 (from 308,875 in 2010/11 to 173,225 in 2015/16) according to the HESA widening participation performance indicators.

Table 6: Proportion of Students Accessing DSA through SFW by Age

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
17	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
18-21	20.8%	31.3%	41.3%
22-24	31.8%	25.1%	17.3%
25-30	18.8%	16.1%	12.9%
31-40	12.2%	12.2%	12.9%
41-50	9.1%	8.5%	9.0%
51-60	4.5%	5.0%	4.6%
61-70	1.3%	0.9%	1.1%
71 or over	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%
No Answer Given	1.1%	0.7%	0.8%
Base	2,968	3,667	3,373

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Table 7 shows that the proportion of full-time and postgraduate students accessing DSA has declined year on year, while the proportion of part-time students accessing DSA has increased. However, HESA data shows that there has been a decreasing trend in part-time numbers since 2009/10; between 2011/12 and 2015/16 there was an overall 30% decrease[21].

Table 7: Proportion of Students Accessing DSA through SFW by Application Type

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Full-Time	81.0%	79.8%	77.7%
Part-Time	8.8%	10.1%	12.8%
Postgraduate	9.1%	9.4%	8.7%
No Answer Given	1.1%	0.7%	0.8%
Base	2,968	3,667	3,373

Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request

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[21] Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Data (January 2017) Higher education student enrolments and qualifications obtained at higher education providers in the United Kingdom 2015/16.

Table 8 shows that the proportion of students accessing DSA in their first year has decreased by 10 percentage points, while there has been an increase in the proportion of students that access DSA in their foundation year, second years and third years.

Table 8: Proportion of SFW funded Students Accessing DSA by Year of Study

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Foundation	2.7%	4.1%	4.7%
First	73.8%	64.4%	63.4%
Second	14.2%	17.9%	18.8%
Third	7.1%	10.5%	10.1%
Fourth	0.9%	2.0%	1.6%
Fifth	0.1%	0.3%	0.4%
Sixth	0.1%	0.1%	0.2%
No Answer Given	1.1%	0.7%	0.8%
Base	2,968	3,667	3,373

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Table 9 shows that, year on year, the proportion of students eligible to receive DSA has decreased. Interestingly, there was a spike in ineligibility in 2015/16, with a low number of pended applications. This was the opposite to the previous year 2014/15, when there was a spike in pended applications and a low number of ineligible applications.

Table 9: Proportion of Students Accessing DSA through SFW by Eligibility

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Eligible	83.2%	79.0%	78.8%
Ineligible	1.2%	19.5%	10.8%
Pended	13.5%	1.1%	9.4%
No Answer Given	2.2%	0.4%	1.0%
Base	2,968	3,667	3,373

Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request

Table 10 shows that a considerable proportion of DSA is accessed for students with SpLD, although there has been a decline of 3.8 percentage points. The proportion of students claiming DSA for mental health issues has increased slightly by 1.9 percentage points. It should be noted that a considerable proportion do not provide an answer.

Table 10: Proportion of Students Accessing DSA through SFW by Disability Type

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Autistic Disorder	2.9%	2.6%	3.4%
Blind/Partial Sight	0.8%	0.9%	1.2%
Deaf/Partial Hearing	1.3%	1.1%	1.5%
Learning Difficulty	43.7%	37.9%	39.9%
Longstanding Illness	9.6%	8.3%	8.9%
Mental Health	10.4%	11.7%	12.2%
Multiple Disabilities	13.9%	9.6%	9.9%
Other Disability – Not listed Above	1.0%	0.7%	0.7%
Wheelchair/Mobility	2.2%	1.6%	1.5%
No Answer Given	14.2%	25.5%	20.9%
Base	2,968	3,667	3,373

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Table 11 shows those that are yet to receive their DSA2 by eligibility. There was a notable shift in applications pended and in applications deemed ineligible. This may be linked to the move from local authority administration to centralised administration. There was an increase in the overall percentage eligible, which suggests increased efficiencies, although two fifths were still ineligible.

Table 11: Those Yet to Receive Their DSA2 by Eligibility

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Eligible	46.6%	46.3%	56.6%
Ineligible	3.5%	50.8%	22.9%
Pended	49.2%	2.7%	19.9%
No Answer Given	0.8%	0.1%	0.5%
Base	663	1,356	1,504

Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request

Annex B: List of Stakeholders Consulted

The Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE)

Cheltenham Assessment Centre (CHACE)

Department for Education DSA Policy Advisor

Disabled Students Stakeholder Group

Education Authority Ballymena

Head of Student Support, Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland

Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW)

National Association of Disability Practitioners

National Deaf Children's Society Cymru

National Network of Assessment Centres (NNAC) (England and Wales)

North Wales DSA Forum

Professional association of teachers of students with specific learning difficulties (PATOSS)

SNAP Cymru (Registered Welsh charity that provides information, advice and support for parents, children and young people (0-25), who have or may have special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities.)

South Wales DSA Forum

Student Support and Participation, Scottish Government

University of Cambridge

University of Edinburgh, Disabled Student Leadership Group

Senior Research Fellow, University of Southampton

The Welsh Government DSA working group – two members

Annex C: Stakeholder Topic Guide

The Welsh Government is undertaking a review of the effectiveness of the Disabled Students' Allowances and has commissioned York Consulting to deliver the study. As part of the review, we would like to interview key stakeholders to gain a wider view of the effectiveness of DSA. Interviews will take around 30-40 minutes depending on how much you wish to say.

Confidentiality: Any information you provide will be treated confidentially and you won't be named or identifiable in any reports. The information you provide will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). Your details will not be passed on to anyone outside of this research study or used for any purposes other than this research.

Do you wish to proceed?

General	Stakeholders
1. Clarification of Roles and Responsibilities 2. Knowledge of DSA 3. Engagement in the review/consultation processes to date	All
DSA Effectiveness	
4. How effective do you feel the SFW funded DSA application and awards system is? 5. Do you feel it provides sufficient opportunity for students with a range of disabilities to access support? 6. Are there particular elements of the process that you feel could be improved? 7. Is there an opportunity to learn from other processes	All

operating across the UK? 8. Are there any lessons to be learned regarding the changes that have taken place in England?	
Awareness	
9. Do you feel there is sufficient awareness and understanding of DSA entitlement across the range of organisations that support people with disabilities? 10. How could this be improved if needed?	All and specific to charities
Study Needs Assessments	
11. Is the assessment process fit for purpose? 12. Do you think the assessment process is, efficient, or could it be improved? 13. Do any assessment centres struggle to meet the service delivery agreements or is there spare capacity among assessment centres? 14. Do assessment centres provide a sufficiently wide range of solutions for students? 15. Do you feel assessment centres understand the full range of software and support aids on offer for students with a range of disabilities?	All
Service providers	
16. What is your view of NMH for students with a	All

disability?	
17. Do you feel this area of support is under-utilised by students?	
18. Do you feel NMH provides value for money?	
19. Do you feel the awards made through DSA provide sufficient support for students?	
20. Do you feel there are any gaps in support for students including NMH or equipment/resources that students with disabilities would benefit from but currently cannot access?	
21. Do you feel the assistive technology available for students meets their needs?	
22. Does this align with students who prefer to communicate/study in Welsh?	
23. Do students get the most out of the assistive technology they receive?	
UK Comparisons	
24. What are the key drivers influencing DSA in your country?	Government Officials
25. Are there any key differences to the SFW funded model in either process or entitlement that you feel are important for the study to be aware of?	
26. Do you think there are any opportunities to improve DSA policy in practice?	
Catch All	

27. Are there any other comments you wish to make or key considerations you feel the research should include?	All

Thank and Close and provide details of expected publication of the research.

Annex D: Higher Education Providers Consulted

KEY: Ftf = face to face, Tf= telephone

Institution	Practitioners Interviewed
Aberystwyth Ftf	Additional Learning Needs Manager Director of Student Support Services Assistant Director of Student Support Services Accessibility Adviser
Bangor Ftf	Head of Disability Services Dyslexia Team Manager Senior Adviser
Cardiff University Ftf	Head of Disability Needs Assessor Mental Health Practitioner Disability Advisor
Coleg Sir Gâr Ftf	Head of Service Disability Advisor Specialist Tutor Mentor
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai Ftf	Team Leader Learning Support, Bangor Learning Support Coordinator at Llandrillo Learning Support Office at Llandrillo
Liverpool University	Head of Service

Ftf	Disability Advisor
The Open University in Wales Tf	Disability Advisor
University of South Wales Tf	Head of Service
University of the West of England Ftf	Head of Disability Disability Advice Team Manager Needs Assessment Manager
University of Wales Trinity, Saint David (UWTSD) Tf	Head of Service, 2 Disability Advisors (Swansea campus and Carmarthen campus)
Swansea University FtF	Disability Office Manager Wellbeing Manager Needs Assessor
Wrexham Glyndwr University Ftf	Head of Service Disability Advisor Learning Support Mentor Needs Assessor

Annex E: Practitioner Topic Guide

INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed to explore the application process, the use of DSA and if DSA could be better targeted.

- Introduce yourself

- Describe the purpose of the research

- Inform participants that their participation is voluntary and they have the right to withdraw at any time

SECTION ONE: AWARENESS OF DSA

1. Do you feel that students have a good knowledge of the support available to them?

2. Typically, when do students apply for DSA? Does it make a difference for students who apply later on in their time at university?

3. Are there students missing out because of a lack of knowledge? Another reason?

4. Does awareness need to be improved?

5. How could it be improved?

SECTION TWO: DSA APPLICANTS

6. Have you seen any changes in the number of applications for DSA at this institution?

7. Do students have a good awareness of how to apply?

8. How do students find the application process?

9. Could the application process be improved? In what way?

10. Does the application process support those who wish to communicate in Welsh?

SECTION THREE NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND ENTITLEMENTS

11. How do students find the Needs Assessment?

12. Do you feel that the entitlement meets students' needs?

13. Do you feel the process supports those students who wish to communicate in Welsh?

14. Have you noticed any changes in DSA entitlement?

15. Do you feel that the process is as efficient as it could be? In what ways could it be improved?

16. Do you feel that the current method of allocating funds is the most effective? How could this be improved?

17. If the proposal was to allow HEIs to allocate the funding or a portion of the funding, would you support this?

SECTION FOUR: SUPPORT RECEIVED

18. Are students receiving all the support they need throughout their studies?

19. Is support being put into place at the time they need it?

20. Is the HEI able to respond to all their support needs? Are there any gaps or challenges?

21. Which aspects of support are most useful to the students?

22. Is there a pattern of non-use of support across students?

23. Could DSA be better targeted?

24. Are there particular areas where savings could be made?

25. Can support cover all aspects of needs for those who wish to communicate in Welsh.

SECTION SIX: IMPACT AND VALUE

26. What has been the impact of the support on the students' experiences?

27. Has it made a difference to them?

28. Can you provide any specific examples?

SECTION SEVEN

29. What recommendations would you make to the Welsh Government to improve the process and outcomes for students accessing support?

SECTION EIGHT – ENGLISH HEIs ONLY

30. The entitlement for students funded by SFW is different from students funded by SFE. Does this present any issues in terms of how you can provide support for Welsh students?

31. What, in particular, is challenging?

32. Do you think that SFW funded students with DSA entitlement experience a different outcome in relation to their academic studies than the students funded through SFE? In what way?

33. In your experience, does the difference in funding cause any problems students?

34. In your opinion, do changes in funding in England, put SFE funded students at a disadvantage academically? If not, why not?

35. In your experience, does the current system of applying for and receiving DSA funding operate effectively for Welsh students

36. What recommendations would you make to the Welsh Government regarding the management of DSA, the application process, the funding allocation and support for students?

Thank and close. Explain what happens next and the approximate date of publication.

Annex F: Student Loans Company Ltd Survey

Language Choice

Please indicate below which language you would like to complete the survey in. Please select one response only.

- English
- Welsh

Route respondent through preferred language choice.

1. Have you applied for DSA for the academic year 2016/17? The 2016/17 academic year runs 1st September 2016 - 31st July 2017. Please select one response only.
- Yes
- No
- I can't remember

Include: q1_screener IN ONE OF {[No],[I can't remember]}

TERMINATE:

This survey aims to gather information from those that have submitted an application for DSA. You have indicated you have not applied for DSA therefore this survey will not be relevant to you. Thank you for wishing to participate.

Redirect to: http://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/

END INTERVIEW with status: Disqualified

2. Which option below best describes you in 2016/17? Please select one response only.
- I am a new undergraduate
- I am a returning undergraduate
- I am a postgraduate

3. How did you first hear about DSA? (Tick all that apply)
    a. School/College
    b. GP/Medical Specialist
    c. Parents/Guardians
    d. Friend
    e. University/College Student Services
    f. University/College website
    g. University/College publicity material
    h. Social media e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube
    i. Student Finance Wales
    j. Other (please specify)

4. Do you think awareness of DSA needs to be improved in general to ensure those with disabilities get the opportunity to apply?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't Know

5. Why do you think this? (Optional text response)

6. When did you make your **first** DSA application? (Single response)
    a. Prior to starting my current course
    b. During the first year of my current course
    c. During the second year of my current course.
    d. During the third year or further year of my current course.

7. Taking your higher education experience as a whole, do you prefer to communicate through the medium of Welsh or English? (single response)
    a. Welsh
    b. English
    c. Both

Completing the DSA application form

The questions that follow are about the application process for DSA

8. Thinking about your experience of applying for DSA how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Please select one response.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Disagree Slightly

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Slightly Agree

Agree

Strongly Agree

- Overall I am satisfied with the DSA application service provided by Student Finance Wales (SFW)

 Include: Satisfaction_0 IN ONE OF {[Strongly Disagree], [Disagree], [Slightly Disagree]}

9. Can you please explain why you are dissatisfied with the DSA service you received from SFW? Please be as specific as possible. Optional

10. Did you need help to complete the DSA application form? Please select one response only.
- Yes
- No
- I can't remember

Include: Help_with_form IS Yes

11. Can you please tell us why you needed help to complete your DSA application form? Please select all that apply.
   a. I didn't understand some of the questions on the form
   b. I needed help to understand what evidence SFW needed
   c. It was unclear what level of detail to provide
   d. I find paper forms difficult
   e. Other, please specify

12. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
- "Obtaining the required medical evidence for my application was easy."
- "I felt the financial cost of obtaining the required medical evidence was too expensive"
- "It was clear what medical evidence SFW would accept."

   Please select one response for each item.

(Strongly Disagree Disagree Slightly Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Slightly Agree Agree Strongly Agree)

Include: MEdical_evidence_statement_0 IN ONE OF {[Strongly Disagree],[Disagree],[Slightly Disagree]}

13. Can you please tell us why it was not easy to obtain your medical evidence? Please select all that apply.
   a. Length of time to get an appointment with the medical professional
   b. Had to cover costs
   c. It is not clear what to provide
   d. Evidence was rejected by SFW
   e. Have to post original evidence to SFW
   f. Other, please specify

Impact of the DSA Support

14. What type of DSA support have you been funded for? (Please select all that apply.)
    a. Non-medical help (e.g. note taker, one-to-one support)
    b. Equipment (for example, computer, printer, Dictaphone etc.)
    c. Learning support software to assist learning
    d. IT training to support the use of software
    e. General allowance for stationery/materials
    f. Travel expenses
    g. Other (please specify)

15. Were you awarded all the DSA support you needed? (Single response)
    a. Yes
    b. No

If answer is 'No' then ask
                i. What DSA support was missing and what impact has this had on your studies? (Text, open question)

16. Which aspects, if any, of the DSA support you have been awarded will you probably not use or need? Please explain why you probably won't use them. Optional

17. Which aspects of the support / equipment / services have you found to be most useful? Please explain how they have been useful. Be as specific as possible. Optional

18. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your DSA support on your current course
    a. The DSA funded support made a significant difference to my learning experience
    b. Without DSA support, I would not be able to complete my study commitments
    c. I feel the support is having a significant positive impact on my overall performance on my course
    d. The support I received from DSA did not fully meet my needs
    e. I did not receive the DSA support when I needed it.
    (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Slightly Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Slightly Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

19. Please leave any comments you have, whether positive or negative, about the impact the DSA support has had on your studies. (Optional, open text)

The Needs Assessment

The questions that follow ask about your experience of the Needs Assessment

20. After submitting your DSA application SFW sends you a letter to confirm you are eligible for DSA funding and advises you to book a needs assessment. This is called the Eligibility Letter.

How long after submitting your DSA application did you......?
- Expect to wait to get this letter
- Actually wait to get this letter

Please select one response for each item.

Up to a week

Between 2 – 3 weeks

Between 4 – 5 weeks

Between 6 – 7 weeks

More than 8 weeks

I don't know

21. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the needs assessment? Please select one response for each item.
    a. The assessor fully understood my needs
    b. All of my needs were taken into consideration

(Strongly Disagree Disagree Slightly Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Slightly Agree Agree Strongly Agree)

Suppliers

The questions that follow will ask about the service from suppliers and the equipment received

22. After attending your needs assessment, SFW sends an entitlement letter to tell you what DSA support you could receive. This may be equipment, human support or extra funding. How long after attending your needs assessment did you......?
- Expect to wait to get this letter
- Actually wait to get this letter

Please select one response for each item.

A week after my needs assessment

2 weeks after my needs assessment

3 weeks after my needs assessment

4 weeks after my needs assessment

5 or more weeks after my needs assessment

I don't know

23. Have you received your equipment? Please select one response only.
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. I can't remember
    d. N/A

Include: Equipment received IS Yes
24. Who supplied your equipment? Please select all that apply. (LIST OF SUPPLIERS HERE)

25. Thinking about your experience of ordering and receiving equipment how much do you agree or disagree with the following? Please select one response for each item.
- The installation and configuration of equipment met your expectations
- The training provided met your needs
- Overall the service from the supplier was excellent (supply, delivery and installation of equipment)

  (Strongly Disagree Disagree Slightly Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Slightly Agree Agree Strongly Agree)

Include: Equipment_statements_5 IN ONE OF {[Strongly Disagree],[Disagree],[Slightly Disagree]}
26. Can you please tell us how the supplier process could be improved? Please be as specific as possible. Optional

Contact

This last section covers any contact you have had with SFW

27. Have you needed to contact SFW in relation to your DSA application? Please select one response only.
- Yes
- No

28. What was the reason for your most recent DSA contact with SFW? Please select all that apply.
- To find out more information about DSA before applying
- To ask for a DSA application form
- To ask if I would be eligible for DSA
- To find out what DSA evidence SFW required
- To get help with the DSA application form
- To find out the progress of my DSA application
- To ask how to book a Needs Assessment appointment
- To ask about my DSA entitlement letter
- To find out how to order my DSA equipment / support / services
- To ask for more DSA support
- Other, please specify

29. How many times have you contacted SFW for this DSA query? Please select one response only.
- Once
- Twice
- 3 times
- 4 or more times

30. Has this DSA query been resolved? Please select one response only.
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don't know

31. Finally, do you have any further comments or suggestions about the DSA process that you would like to share with SFW? Please be as specific as possible. Optional

Silent complete

Have your say!

As part of its review of Disabled Students Allowances' the Welsh Government would like to interview you, to talk about your experiences of the DSA. Interviews are being conducted by York Consulting. They are entirely voluntary and are conducted by telephone (or adapted calling). There is a compensatory payment of £10 for each completed interview. (These will be provided in the form of an Amazon voucher sent to each recipient by email upon completion of the interview.)

32. Please indicate below if you consent to be contacted for interview:

(tick box)
- Yes
- No

[routing, where respondents consent:]

33. Please provide your contact details:
    a. Name,
    b. email,
    c. telephone no.

Any information you share will be treated confidentially and you won't be identifiable in any reports. The information you provide will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) and will not be passed on to anyone outside of this research study or used for any purposes other than this research.

For further information, please contact Louise Starks at York Consulting on 0113 222 3545 or at louise.starks@yorkconsulting.co.uk. You can find out more about York Consulting here: www.yorkconsulting.co.uk

Finished

Thank you very much for your time, your feedback is appreciated and will be used to improve the DSA service that SFW and DSA QAG deliver.

Best Wishes, Student Finance Wales

Redirect to: http://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/

END INTERVIEW with status: Completed

Annex G: Student Loans Company Survey Sample and Representativeness

The tables below present the Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request 2016/17 (population) in comparison to the Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17 (sample) in order to establish the representativeness of the sample against the population.

Overall, the sample shows good representativeness of the population. However, there is an over-representation of part-time, postgraduate and mature students in the sample. There is also an over-representation of those with longstanding illnesses, multiple disabilities and wheelchair/mobility-related disabilities. More females are represented in the sample, in comparison to the population. On the other hand, the sample by year of study shows very good representation of the population.

Table 1: Application Type

|	Sample		Population	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Full-Time	154	*67.3%*	2622	*77.7%*
Part-Time	45	*19.7%*	431	*12.8%*
Postgraduate	28	*12.2%*	293	*8.7%*
No Answer Given	2	*0.9%*	27	*0.8%*
Total	229	*100.0%*	3373	*100.0%*

Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17 (Sample) and Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request 2016/17 (Population)

Table 2: Age Bands

	Sample		Population	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
17	0	*0.0%*	1	*0.0%*
18-21	64	*27.9%*	1393	*41.3%*
22-24	29	*12.7%*	582	*17.3%*
25-30	23	*10.0%*	435	*12.9%*
31-40	37	*16.2%*	436	*12.9%*
41-50	40	*17.5%*	302	*9.0%*
51-60	28	*12.2%*	155	*4.6%*
61-70	5	*2.2%*	38	*1.1%*
71 or Over	1	*0.4%*	4	*0.1%*
No Answer Given	2	*0.9%*	27	*0.8%*
Total	229	*100.0%*	3373	*100.0%*

Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17 (Sample) and Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request 2016/17 (Population)

Table 3: Disability Type

	Sample		Population	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Autistic Disorder	8	*3.5%*	115	*3.4%*
Blind/Partial Sight	3	*1.3%*	40	*1.2%*
Deaf/Partial Hearing	5	*2.2%*	49	*1.5%*
Learning Difficulty	87	*38.0%*	1346	*39.9%*
Longstanding Illness	30	*13.1%*	299	*8.9%*
Mental Health	30	*13.1%*	411	*12.2%*
Multiple Disabilities	40	*17.5%*	335	*9.9%*
Other Disability – Not Listed Above	2	*0.9%*	23	*0.7%*
Wheelchair/Mobility	7	*3.1%*	50	*1.5%*
Unknown	15	*6.6%*	0	*0.0%*
No Answer Given	2	*0.9%*	705	*20.9%*
Base	229	*100.0%*	3373	*100.0%*

Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17 (Sample) and Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request 2016/17 (Population)

Table 4: Sex

	Sample		Population	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Female	161	*70.3%*	2058	*61.0%*
Male	66	*28.8%*	1288	*38.2%*
No Answer Given	2	*0.9%*	27	*0.8%*
Base	229	*100.0%*	3373	*100.0%*

Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17 (Sample) and Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request 2016/17 (Population)

Table 5: Year of Study

	Sample		Population	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Foundation	10	*4.4%*	160	*4.7%*
First	143	*62.5%*	2137	*63.4%*
Second	43	*18.8%*	634	*18.8%*
Third	26	*11.4%*	341	*10.1%*
Fourth	4	*1.8%*	54	*1.6%*
Fifth	0	*0.0%*	12	*0.4%*
Sixth	1	*0.4%*	8	*0.2%*
No Answer Given	2	*0.9%*	27	*0.8%*
Base	229	*100.0%*	3373	*100.0%*

Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17 (Sample) and Student Loans Company Ltd - Student Finance Wales - Disabled Students' Allowance Request 2016/17 (Population)

Annex H: Student Loans Company Survey Graphs

These graphs are generated from data provided by the Student Loans Company on a cohort of students receiving DSA who responded to an online survey. Two hundred and twenty-nine students provided full responses and an analysis of the responses is presented below.

Figure 1 shows that the majority of respondents were new undergraduates, followed by returning undergraduates, and then postgraduates.

Figure 1: Which option below best describes you in 2016/17?
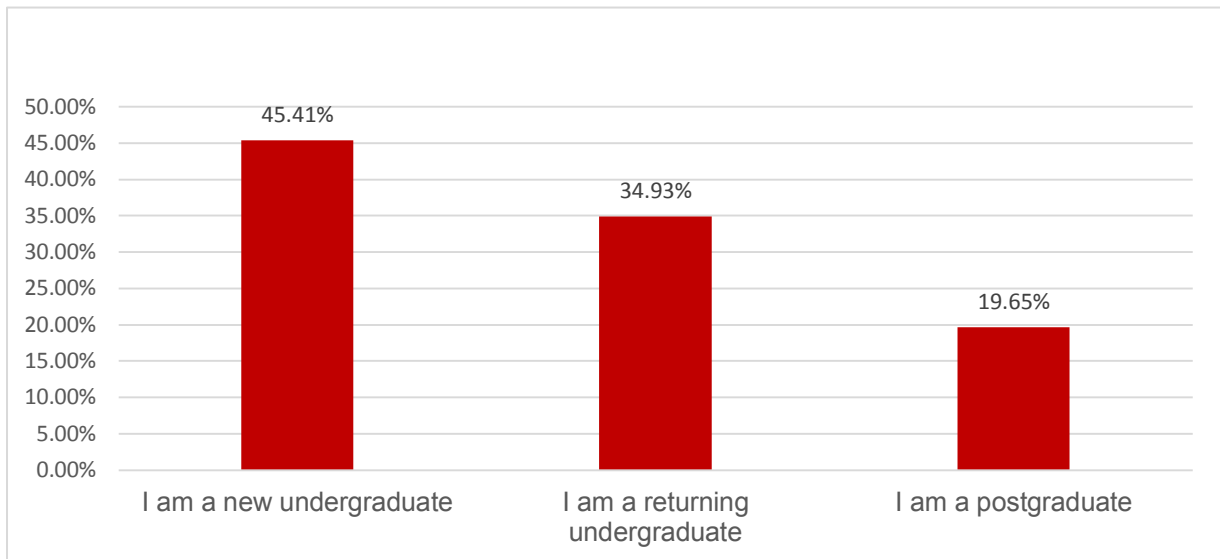
Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17

Base: 229

Figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents feel that the awareness of DSA needs to be improved to ensure those with disabilities get the opportunity to apply.

Figure 2: Do you think awareness of DSA needs to be improved in general to ensure those with disabilities get the opportunity to apply?
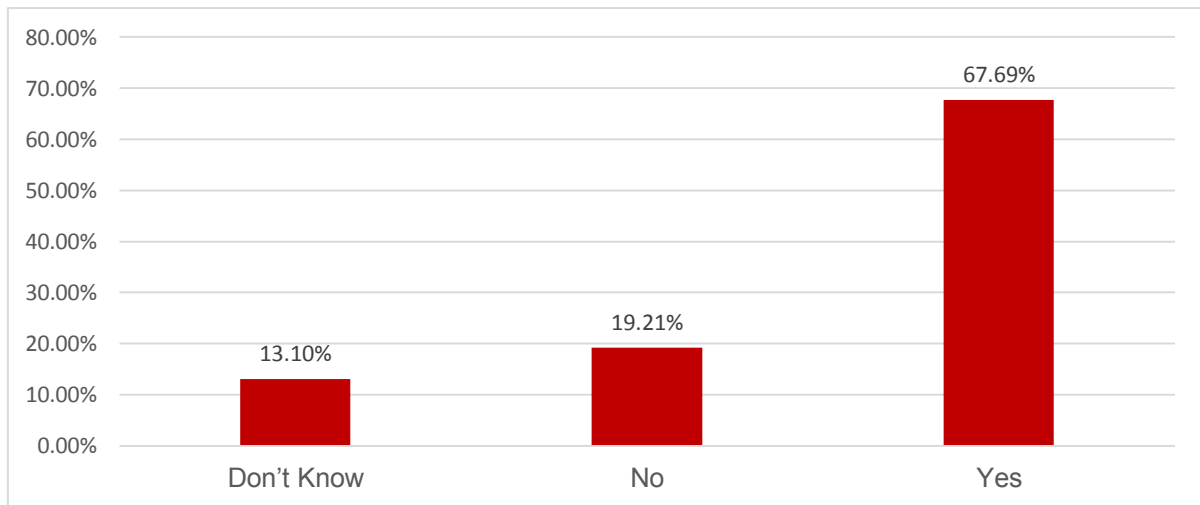
Source: Student Loans Company Survey 2016/17

Base: 229

Figure 3 shows that almost half of the respondents first heard about DSA through university or college student services.

Figure 3: How did you first hear about DSA?
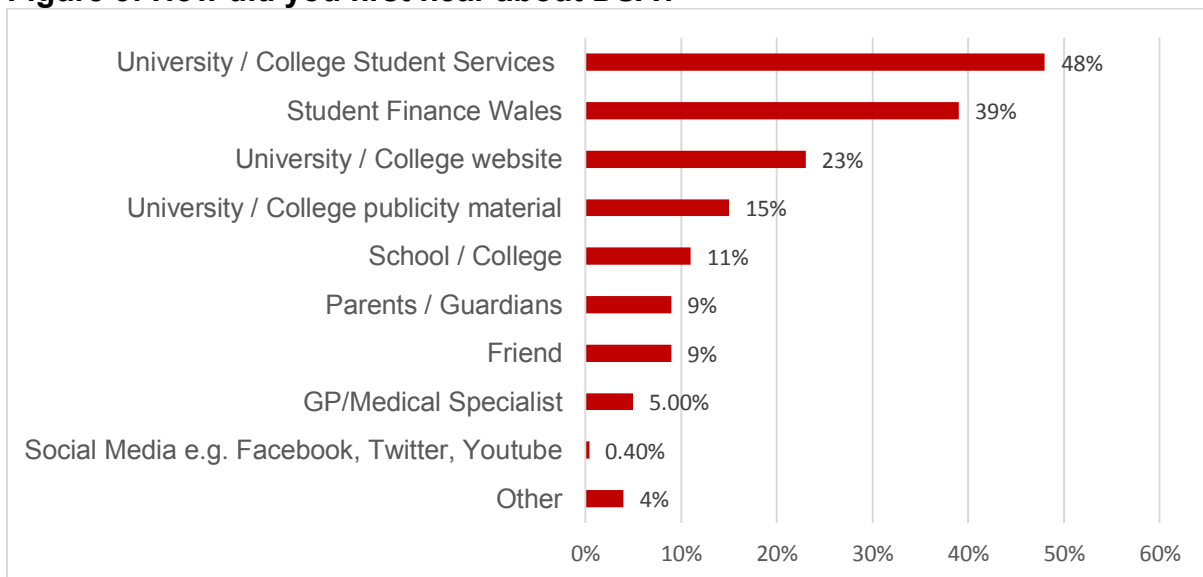
Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17

Base: 229

Figure 4 shows that half of the respondents made their application prior to starting their current course and a further third made their application in their first year.

Figure 4: When did you make your first DSA application?
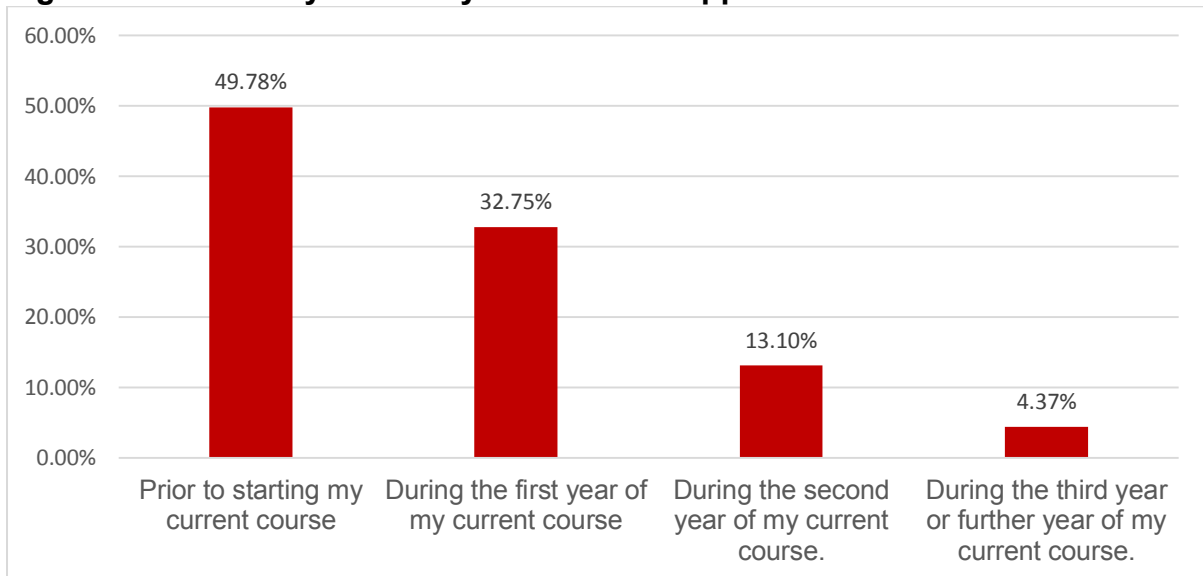
Figure 5 shows that the majority of respondents prefer to communicate through English.

Figure 5: Do you prefer to communicate through the medium of Welsh or English?
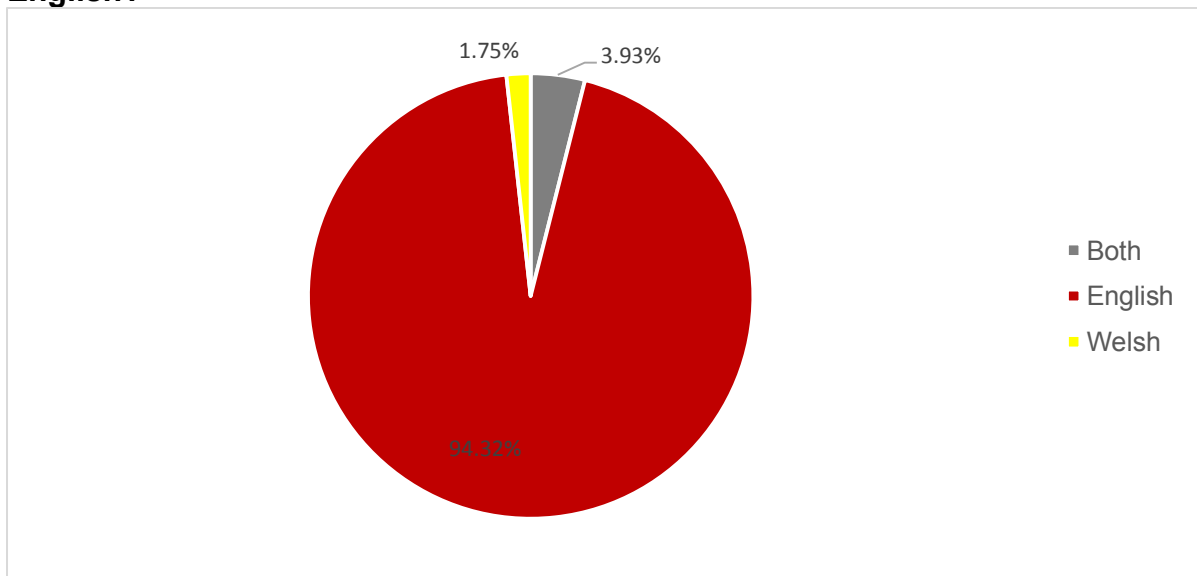
Figure 6 shows that the majority of respondents agree that they are satisfied with the DSA application service provided by SFW.

Figure 6: Thinking about your experience of applying for DSA how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Overall, I am satisfied with the DSA application service provided by Student Finance Wales.
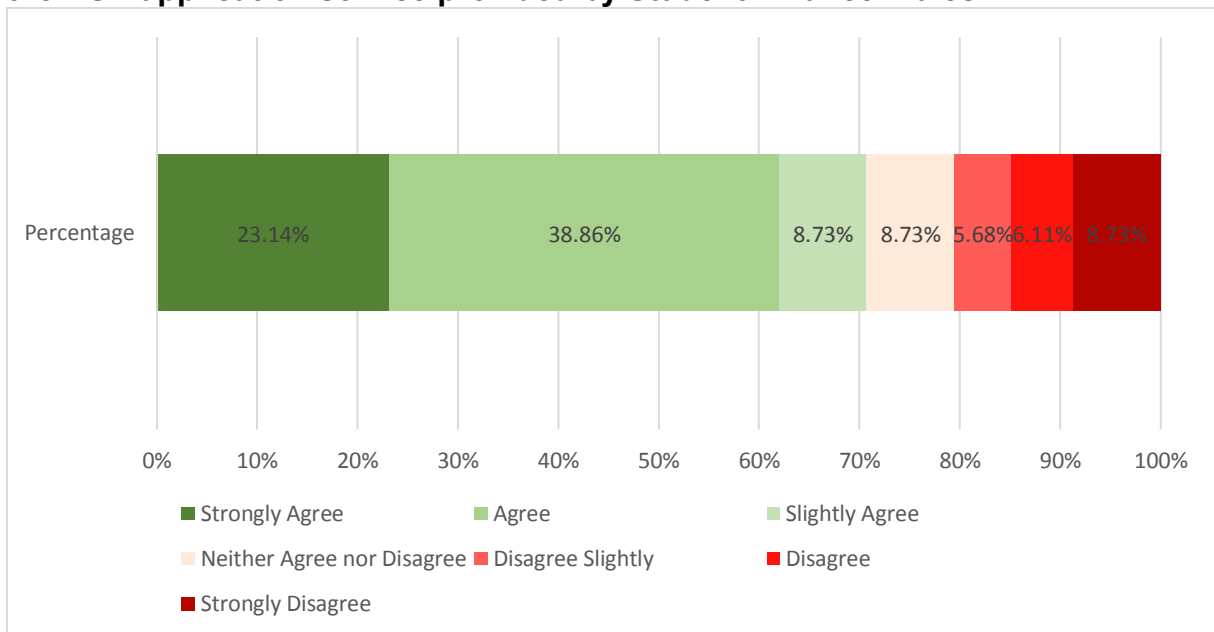
Figure 7 shows a fairly even split between the respondents needing help to complete their application form and those not needing help.

Figure 7: Did you need help to complete the DSA application form?
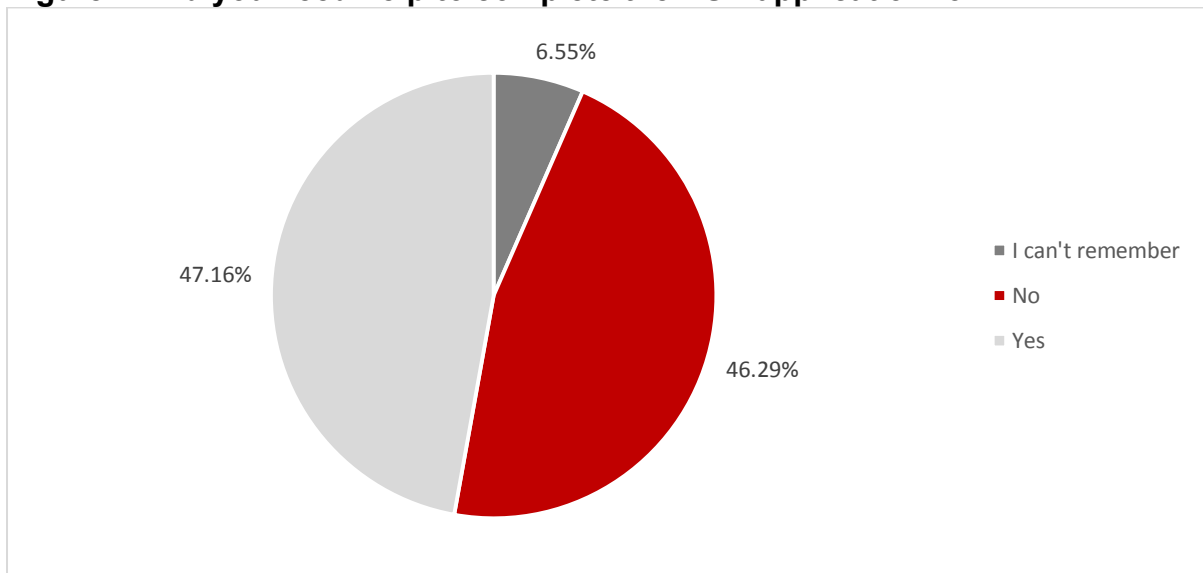
Figure 8 shows that, of those that needed help to complete their application form, nearly three fifths needed help to understand what evidence SFW needed.

Figure 8: Can you please tell us why you needed help to complete your DSAs application form?
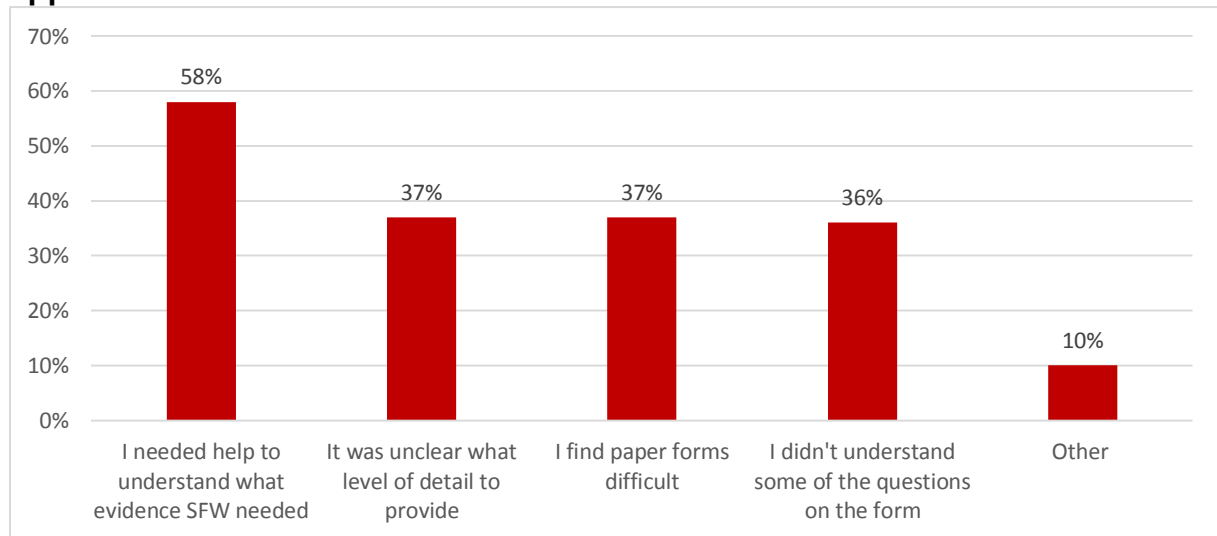
Figure 9 shows that just over one half of respondents agreed that obtaining the required medical evidence for their application was easy (53.72 per cent). Just under a third disagreed (31.87 per cent).

Figure 9: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Obtaining the required medical evidence for my application was easy.
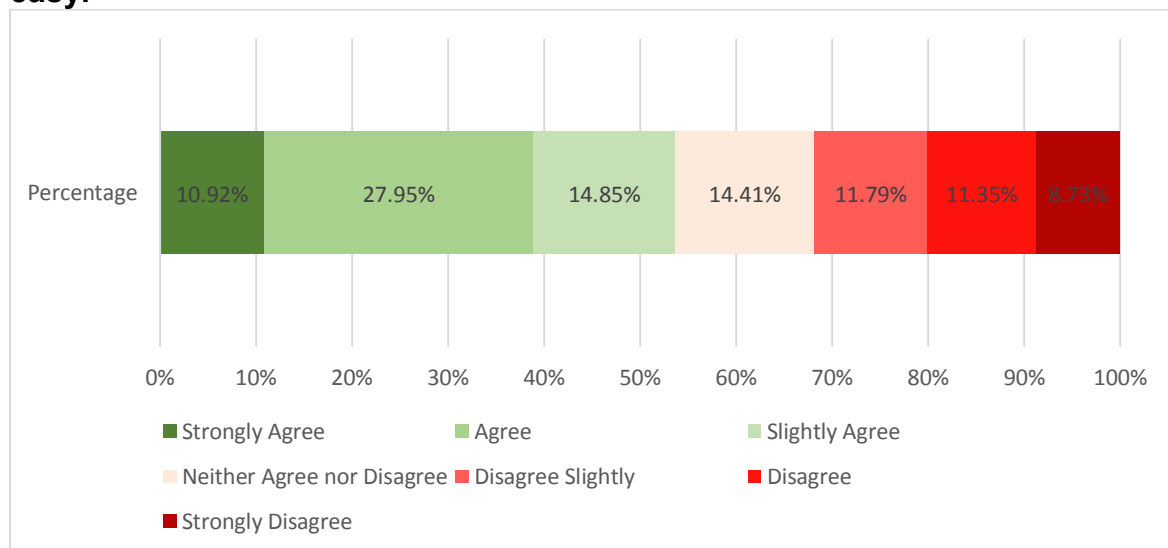
Figure 10 shows that just under a third felt that the financial cost of obtaining the required medical evidence was too expensive (32.31 per cent).

Figure 10: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I felt the financial cost of obtaining the required medical evidence was too expensive.
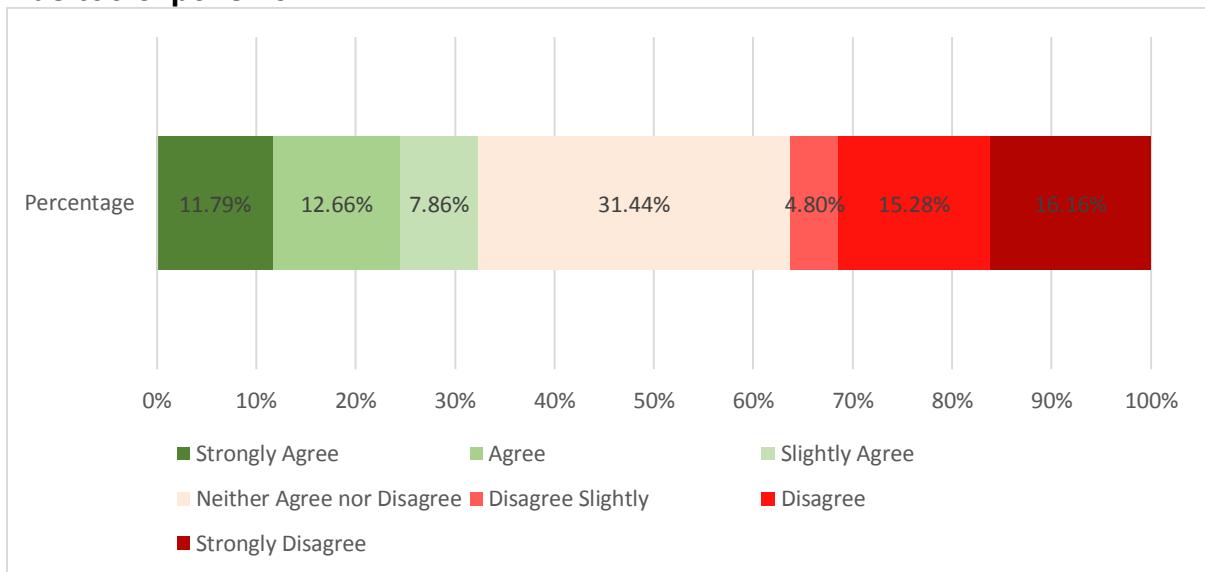
Figure 11 shows that just over half agree that it was clear what medical evidence SFW would accept (53.71 per cent). Just under a third disagreed (30.13 per cent).

Figure 11: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? It was clear what medical evidence SFW would accept.
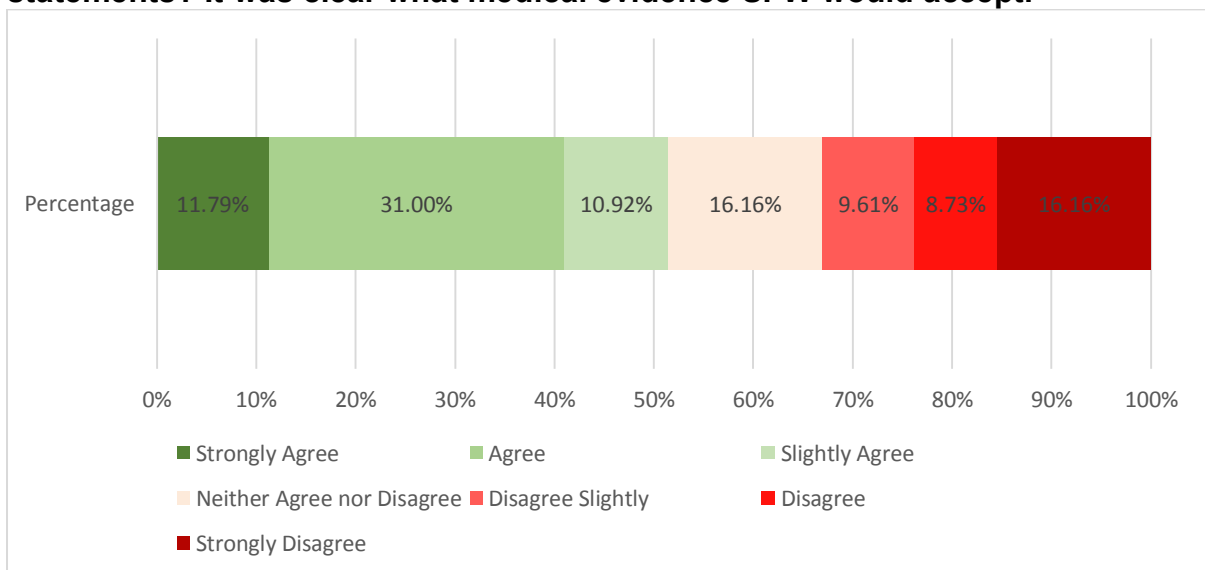
Figure 12 shows that three fifths of respondents felt that the length of time to get an appointment with a medical professional made it difficult to obtain medical evidence (60 per cent). Just over half felt it was not clear what to provide (51 per cent), while just over two-fifths felt it was difficult because they had to cover the costs (41 per cent).

Figure 12: Can you please tell us why it was not easy to obtain your medical evidence?
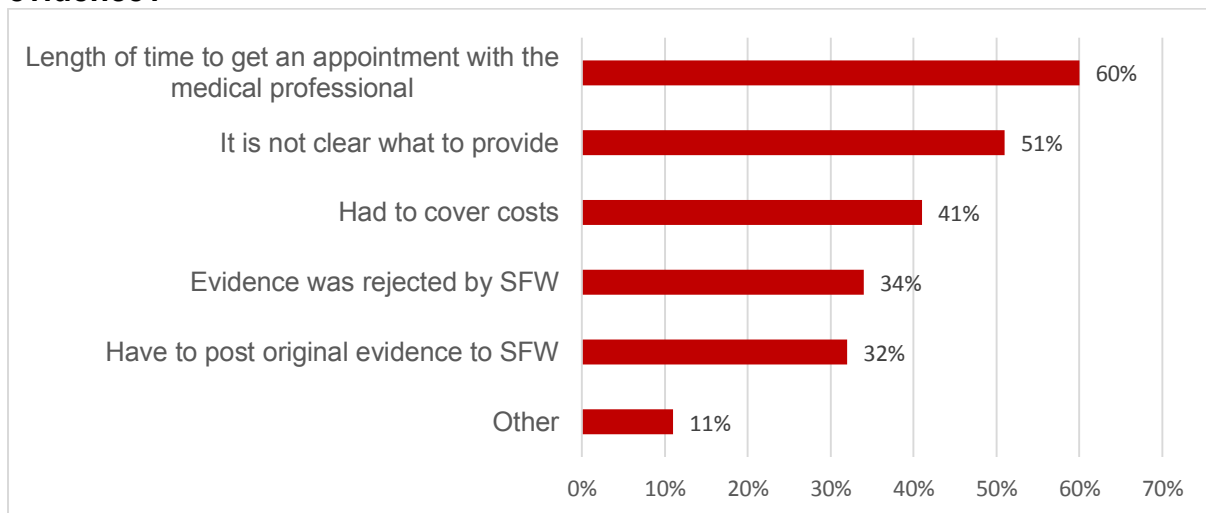
Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17
Base: 73

Figure 13 shows that the majority of students were funded for equipment (92 per cent). Just under three quarters had learning support software (72 per cent) and seven in ten had IT training (70 per cent). Over three fifths had non-medical help (64 per cent), while over a half had a general allowance (54 per cent). Just over one in ten had travel expenses (14 per cent).

Figure 13: What type of DSAs support have you been funded for?

Category	Percentage
Equipment (e.g. computer, printer, dictaphone etc.)	92%
Learning support software to assist learning	72%
IT training to support the use of software	70%
Non-medical help (e.g. note taker, one-to-one support)	64%
General allowance for stationery / materials	54%
Travel expenses	14%
can't remember	2%
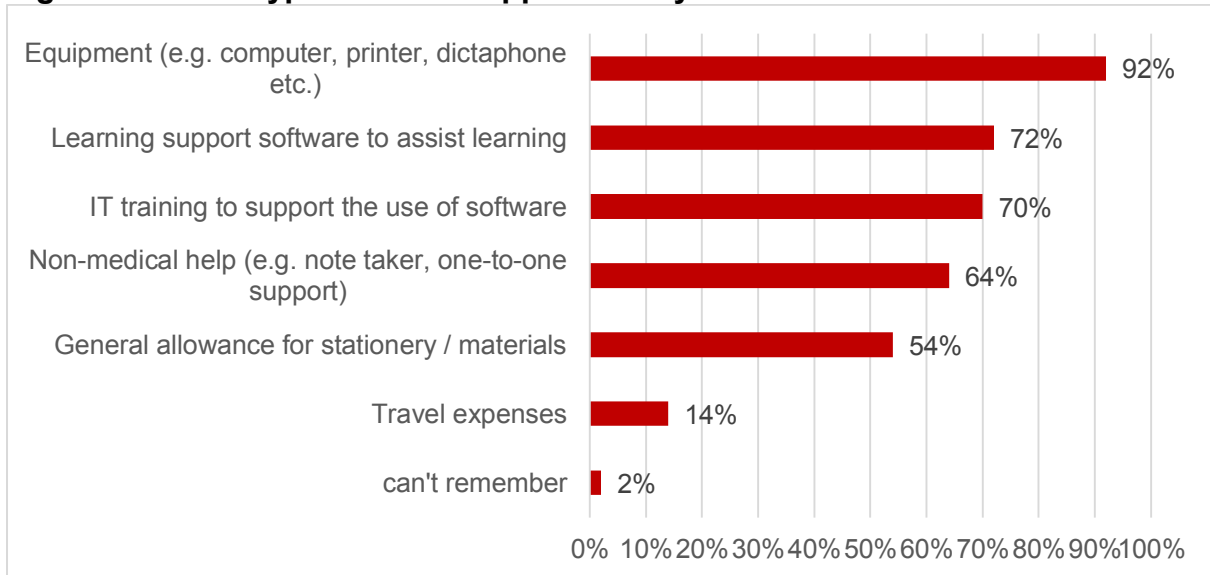
Figure 14 shows that nearly four-fifths felt they were awarded all the support they needed.

Figure 14: Were you awarded all the DSA support you needed?

No: 21.40%
Yes: 78.60%
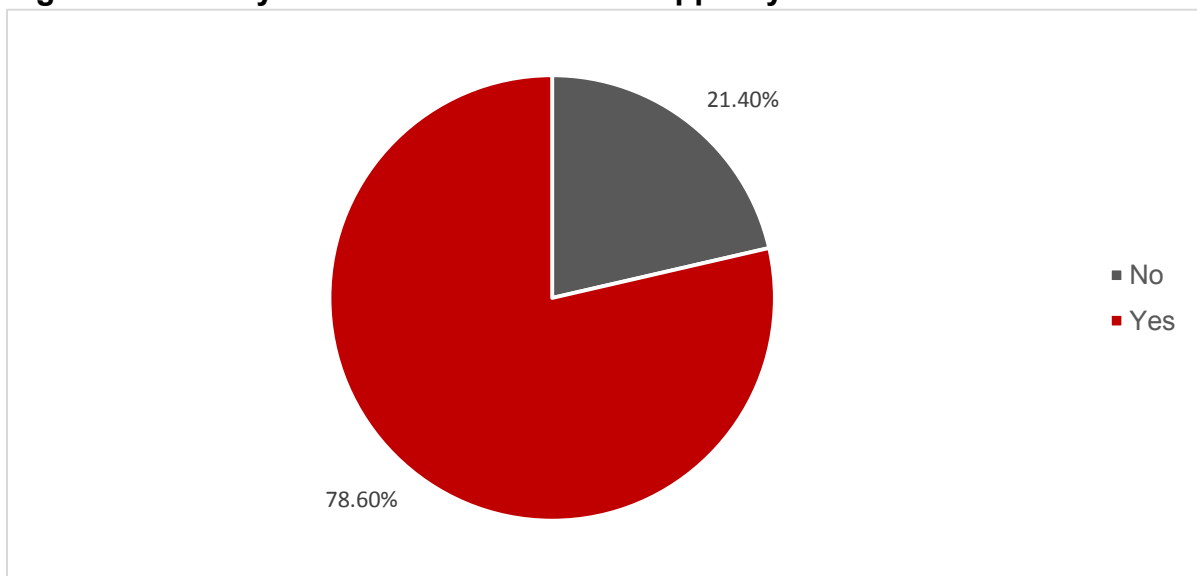
Figure 15 shows that nearly 90 per cent of respondents feel that the DSA funded support made a significant difference to their learning experience (86.9 per cent).

Figure 15: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your DSA support on your current course? The DSAs funded support made a significant difference to my learning experience.
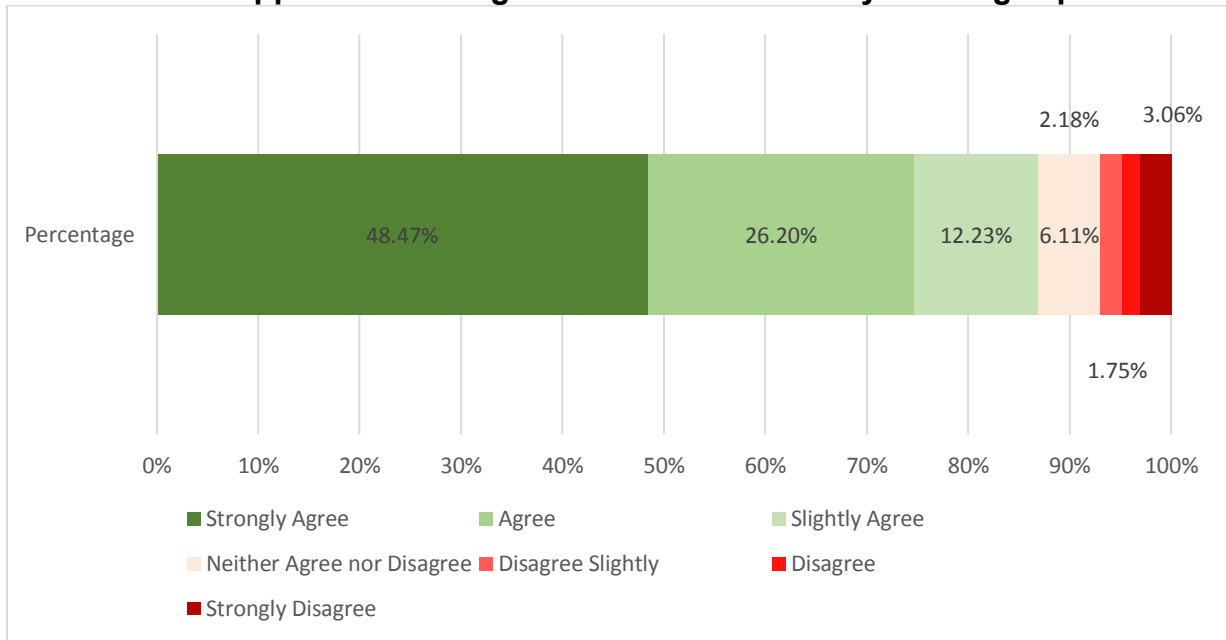
Figure 16 shows that just under 70 per cent feel that without DSA support, they would not have been able to complete their study commitments (68.12 per cent).
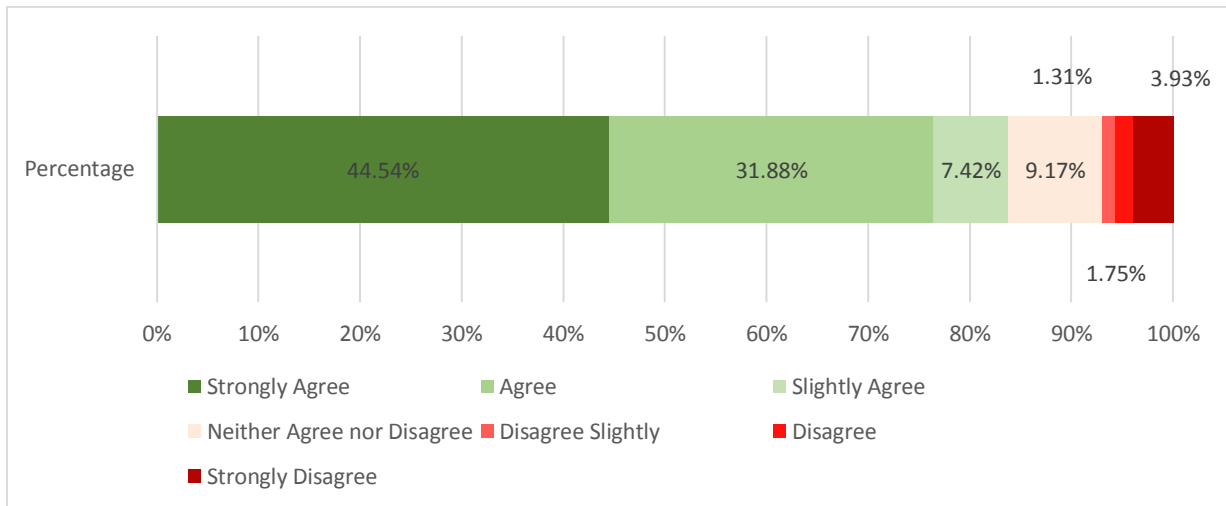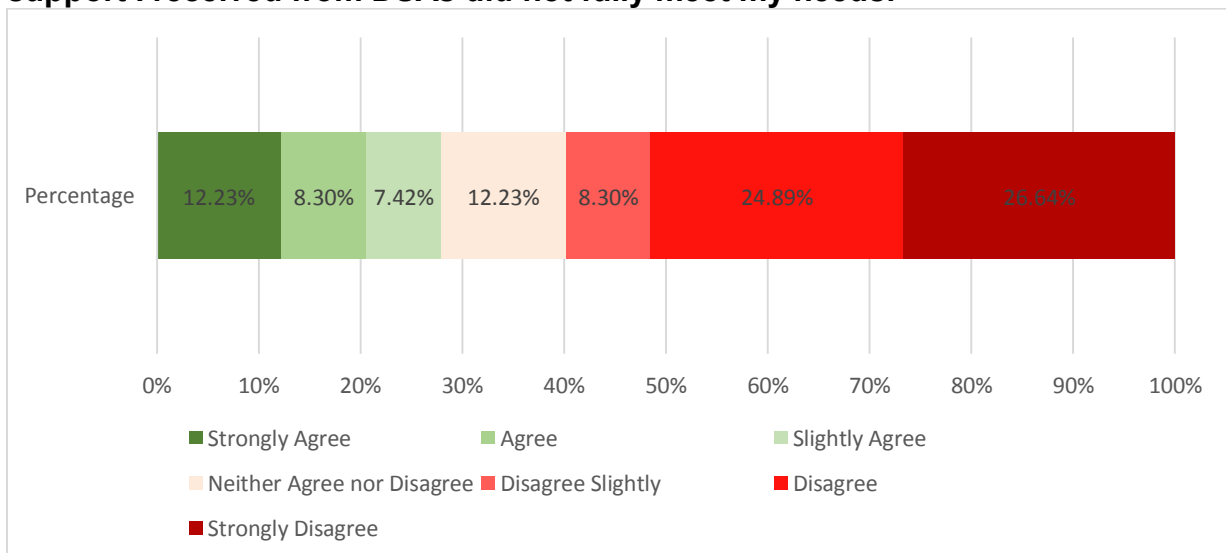
Figure 16: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your DSA support on your current course? Without DSAs support, I would not be able to complete my study commitments.
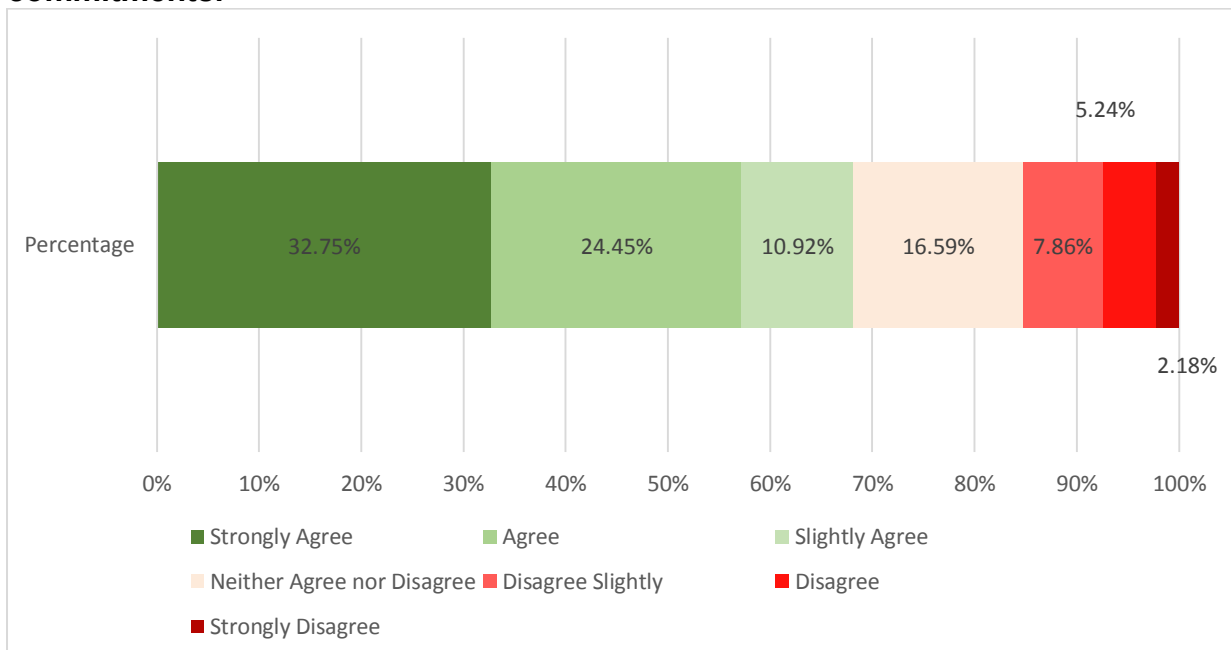
Figure 17 shows that over four fifths of respondents feel that the support is having a significant positive impact on their overall performance on their course (83.84 per cent).

Figure 17: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your DSA support on your current course? I feel the support is having a significant positive impact on my overall performance on my course.

Figure 18 shows that just over a quarter feel that the support they received from DSA did not fully meet their needs (27.95 per cent).

Figure 18: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your DSA support on your current course? The support I received from DSAs did not fully meet my needs.

Figure 19 shows that nearly a third did not receive the DSA support when they needed it (30.14 per cent).

Figure 19: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact of your DSAs support on your current course? I did not receive the DSAs support when I needed it.
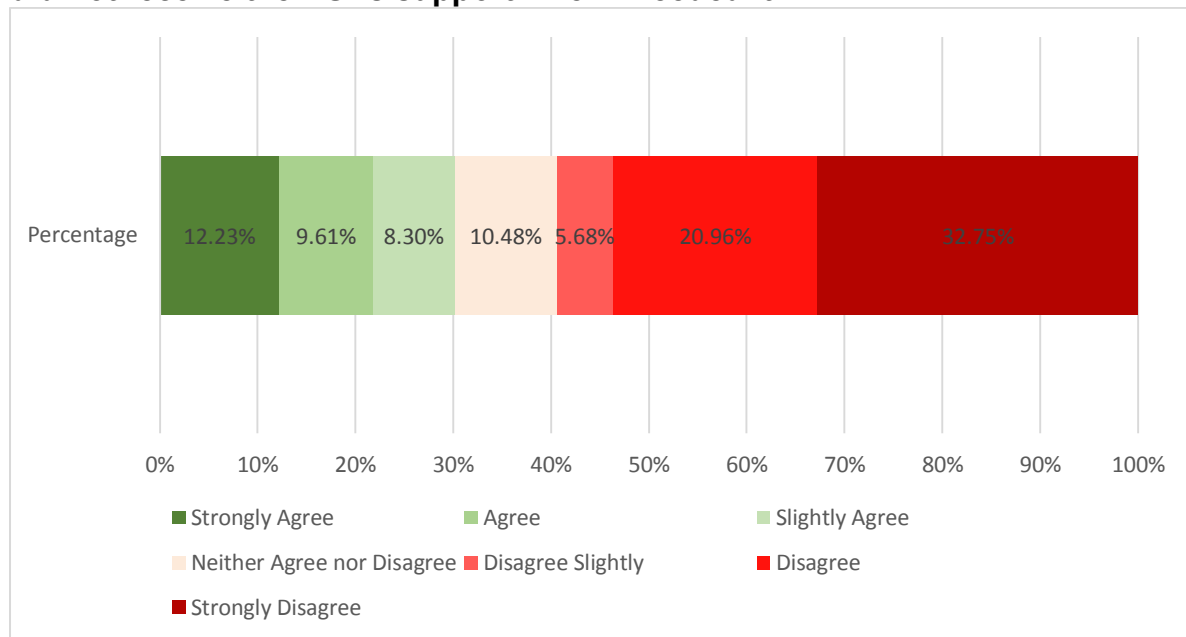
Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17

Base: 229

Figure 20 shows that just over two fifths of respondents expected to wait between 2-3 weeks to receive their Eligibility Letter (44.98 per cent).

Figure 20: After submitting your DSA application SFW sends you a letter to confirm you are eligible for DSAs funding and advises you to book a needs assessment. This is called the Eligibility Letter. How long after submitting your DSA application did you expect to wait to get this letter?
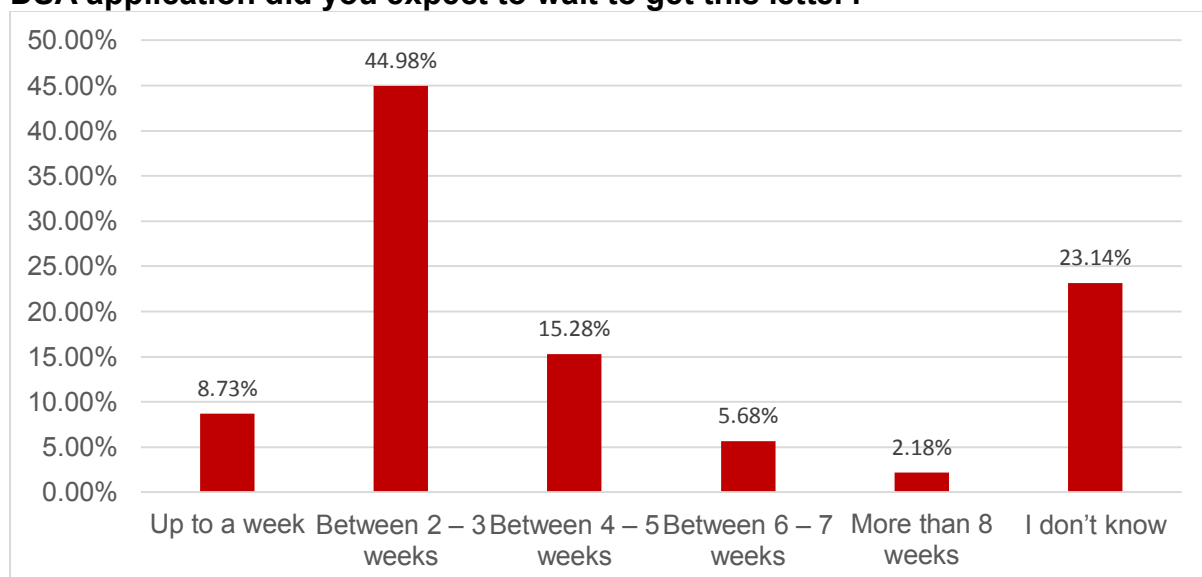
Figure 21 shows that nearly a third of students waited between 2-3 weeks for their Eligibility Letter (29.26 per cent), while a similar proportion did not know how long they had waited (29.69 per cent). Over 15 per cent had waited between 4-5 weeks (15.72 per cent).

Figure 21: After submitting your DSAs application SFW sends you a letter to confirm you are eligible for DSAs funding and advises you to book a needs assessment. This is called the Eligibility Letter. How long after submitting your DSA application did you actually wait to get this letter?
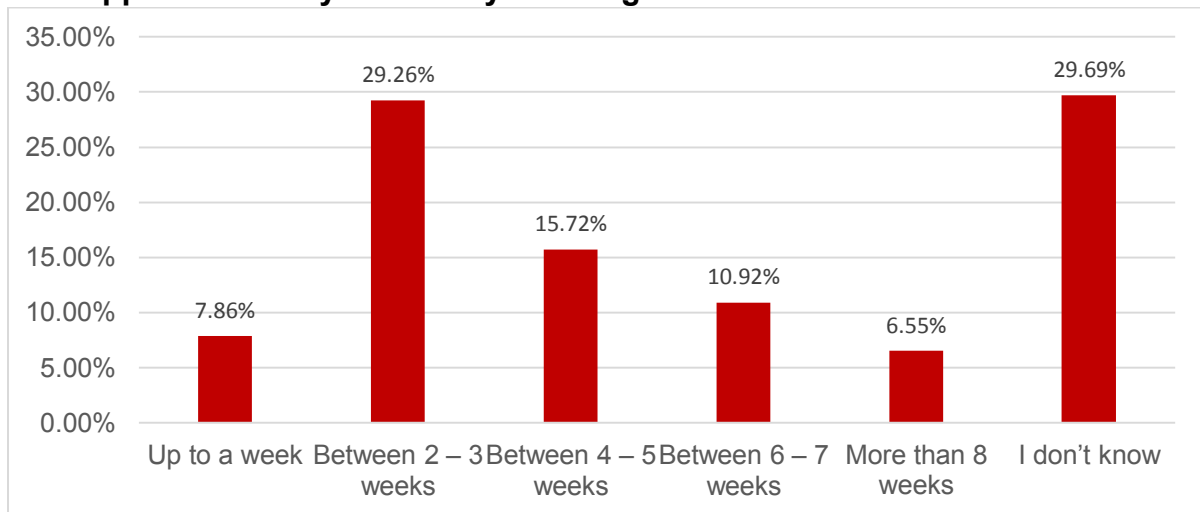

Source: Student Loans Company Survey Data 2016/17
Base: 229

Figure 22 shows that almost four fifths feel that the assessor fully understood their needs (79.04 per cent).

Figure 22: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the needs assessment? The assessor fully understood my needs.
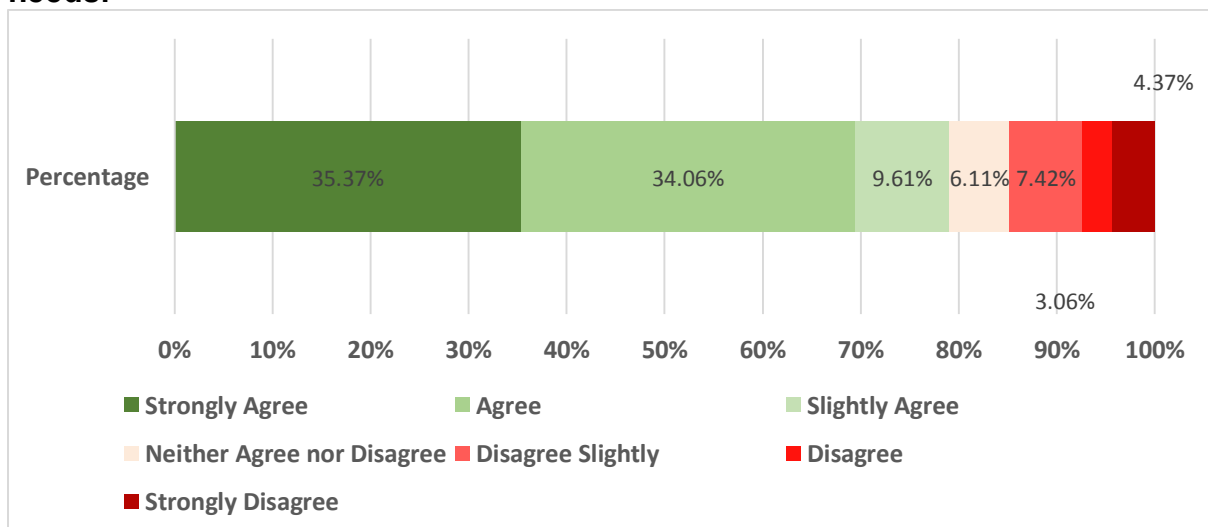

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Figure 23 shows that nearly four fifths feel that all of their needs were taken into consideration (87.77 per cent).

Figure 23: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the needs assessment? All of my needs were taken into consideration.
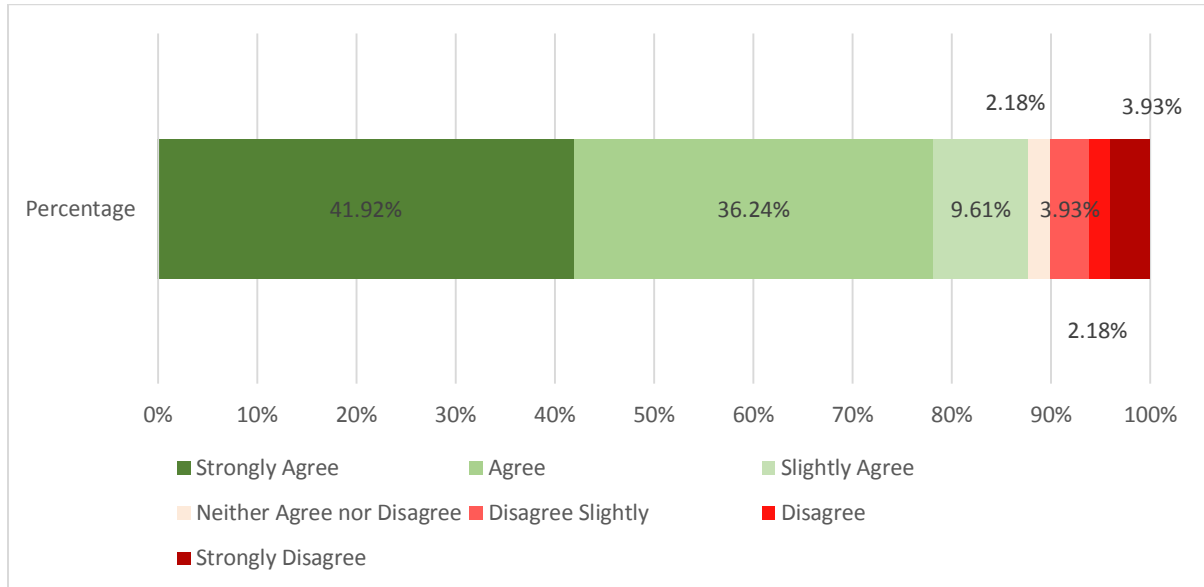
Figure 24 shows that the majority of respondents expected to wait two weeks to receive their entitlement letter after their needs assessment (31.44 per cent).

Figure 24: After attending your needs assessment, SFW sends an entitlement letter to tell you what DSA support you could receive. This may be equipment, human support or extra funding.
**How long after attending your needs assessment did you expect to wait to get this letter?**
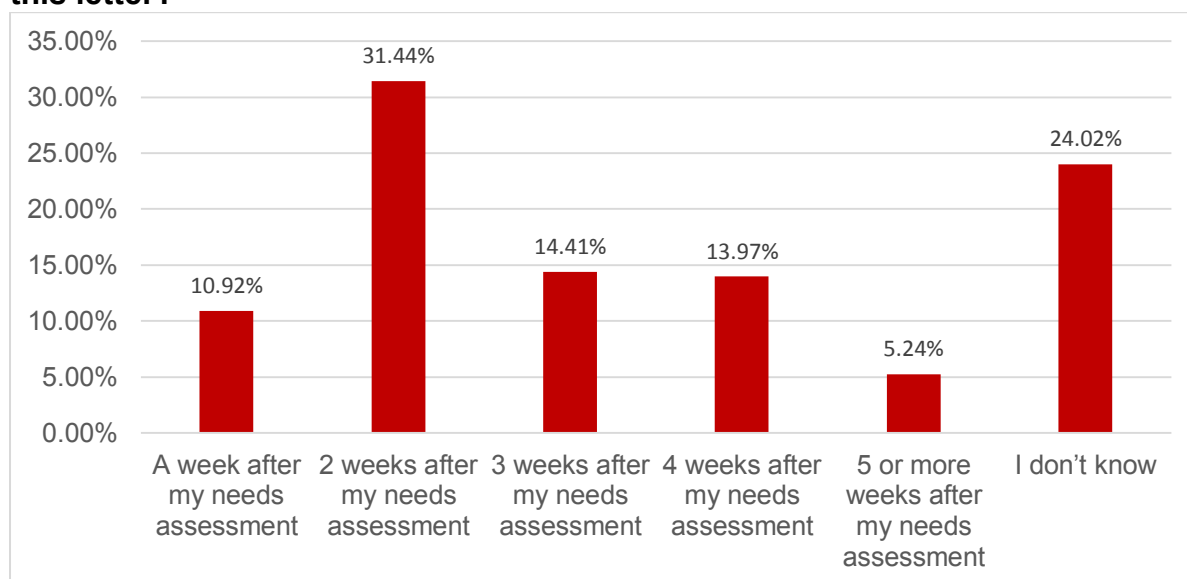
Figure 25 shows that just over one fifth of students waited two weeks for their entitlement letter (21.40 per cent), while over a quarter did not know how long they had waited (29.69 per cent). Over 16 per cent had waited four weeks (16.59 per cent).

Figure 25: After attending your needs assessment, SFW sends an entitlement letter to tell you what DSA support you could receive. This may be equipment, human support or extra funding.
How long after attending your needs assessment did you actually wait to get this letter?
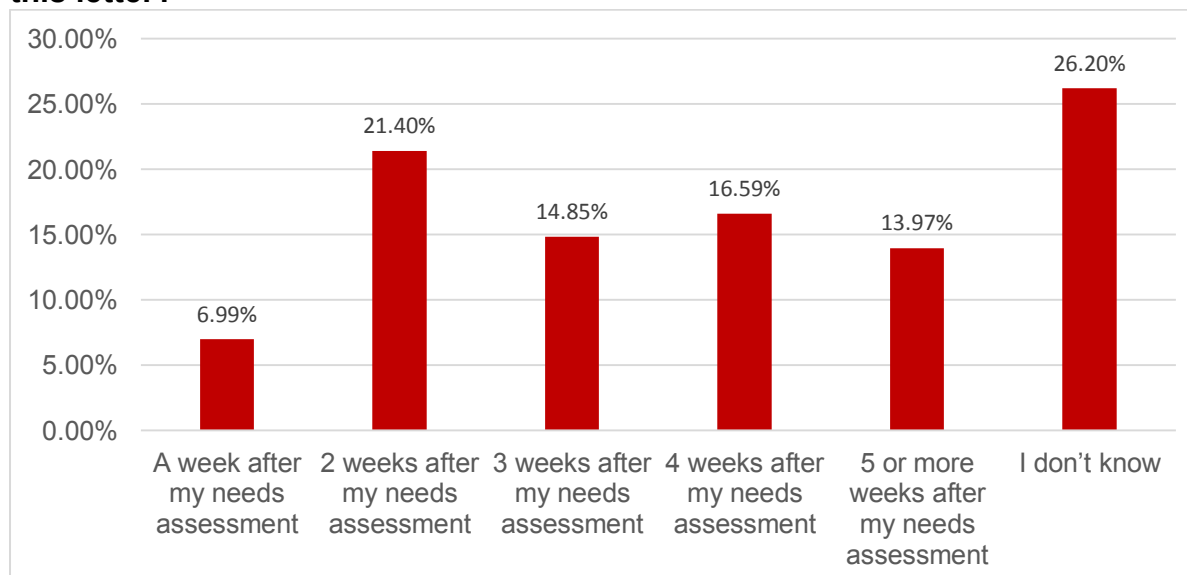
Figure 26 shows that the majority of respondents had received their equipment (88.21 per cent).

Figure 26: Have you received your equipment?
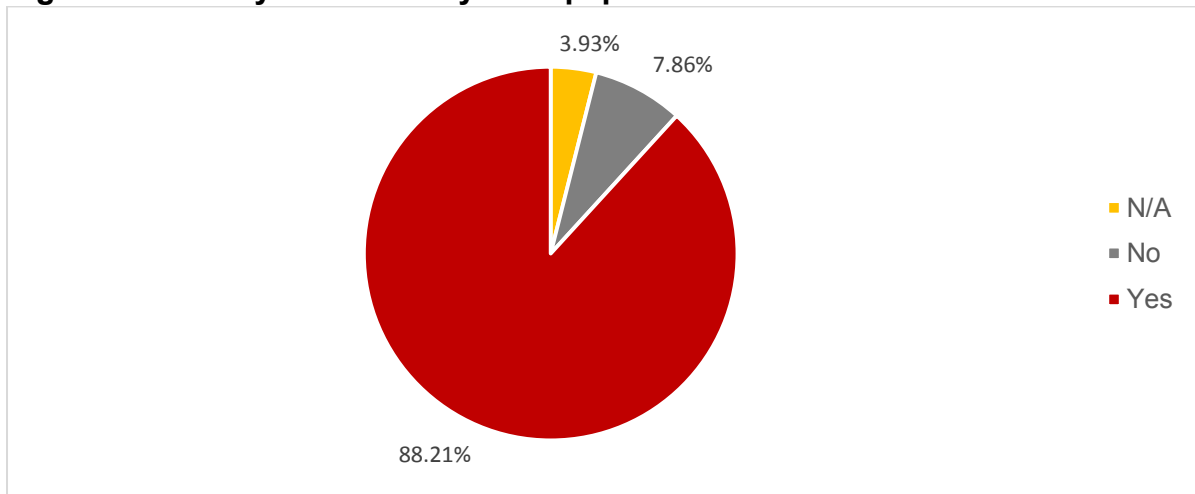
Figure 27 shows that Remtek Ltd (21.29 per cent), Wyvern (20.30 per cent) and Barry Bennett Ltd (17.82 per cent) were the top three providers of equipment to this sample.

Figure 27: Who supplied your equipment?

Supplier	Percentage
Osmond Group Ltd	0%
Connevans	0%
Sight And Sound	0%
Vocendi	0.50%
Vision Aid Technologies	0.50%
Sheffield Hallam University	0.50%
Daisy Training	0.50%
Clear Links Support Ltd	0.50%
Glyndwr University	1%
Dyslexia Foundation	1%
Hybrid Coaching Ltd	1.49%
Ergolife Seating Ltd	1.49%
University Of Wales Trinity Saint David	2.50%
Coleg Sir Gar	2.50%
Hamer Technology	2.97%
Microlink	2.97%
E-Quality Learning	2.97%
Cardiff Metropolitan University	3.96%
Chace	4.95%
Healthy Workstations	6.44%
Not Listed	7.43%
Iansyst Ltd	8.42%
Invate Ltd	14.85%
Barry Bennett Ltd	17.82%
Wyvern	20.30%
Remtek Ltd	21.29%

Figure 28 shows that three-quarters of respondents agree that the installation and configuration of equipment met their expectations (75.25 per cent).
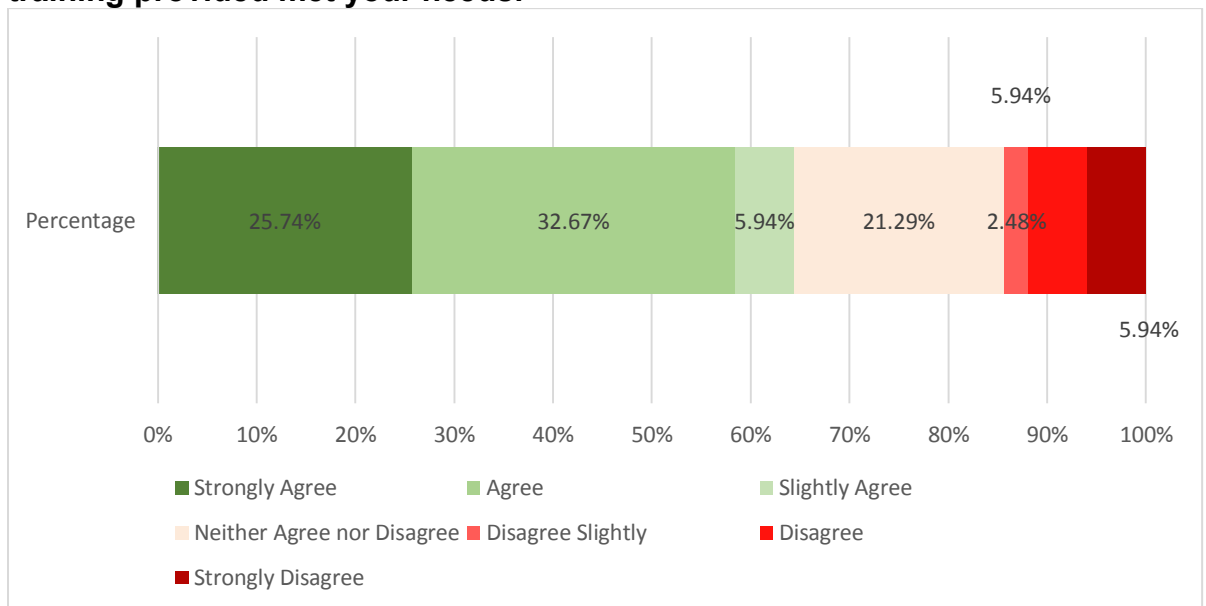
Figure 28: Thinking about your experience of ordering and receiving equipment how much do you agree or disagree with the following? The installation and configuration of equipment met your expectations.
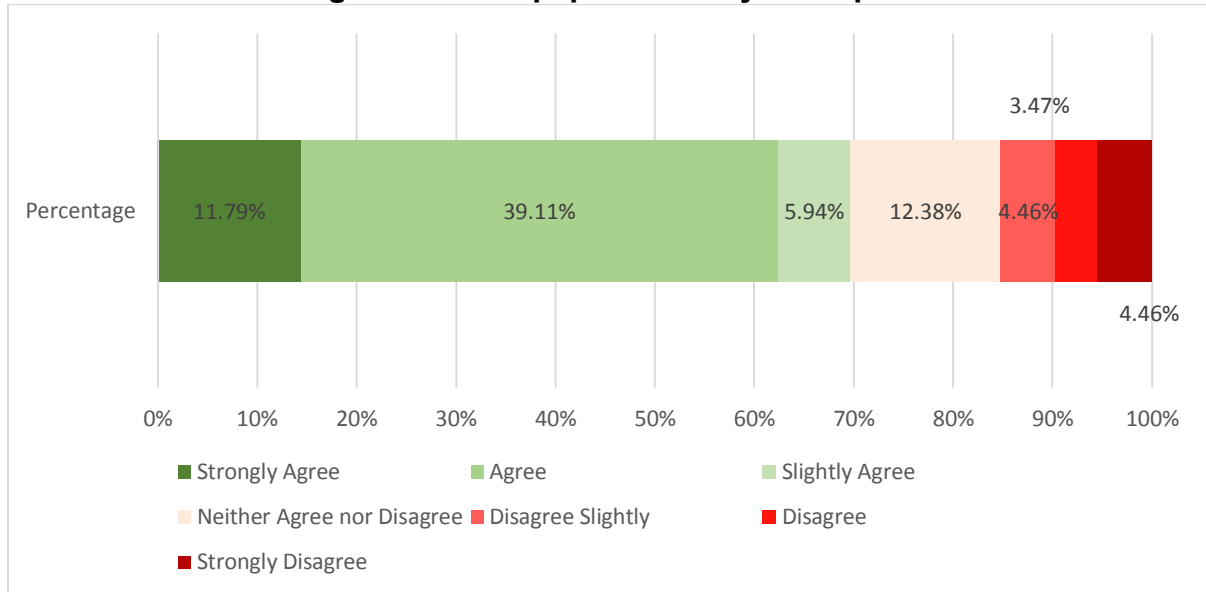
Figure 29 shows that just over three fifths of respondents agree that the training provided met their needs (64.35 per cent).

Figure 29: Thinking about your experience of ordering and receiving equipment how much do you agree or disagree with the following? The training provided met your needs.

Figure 30 shows that nearly four fifths feel that the service from the supplier was excellent (78.71 per cent).

Figure 30: Thinking about your experience of ordering and receiving equipment how much do you agree or disagree with the following? Overall, the service from the supplier was excellent (supply, delivery and installation of equipment).
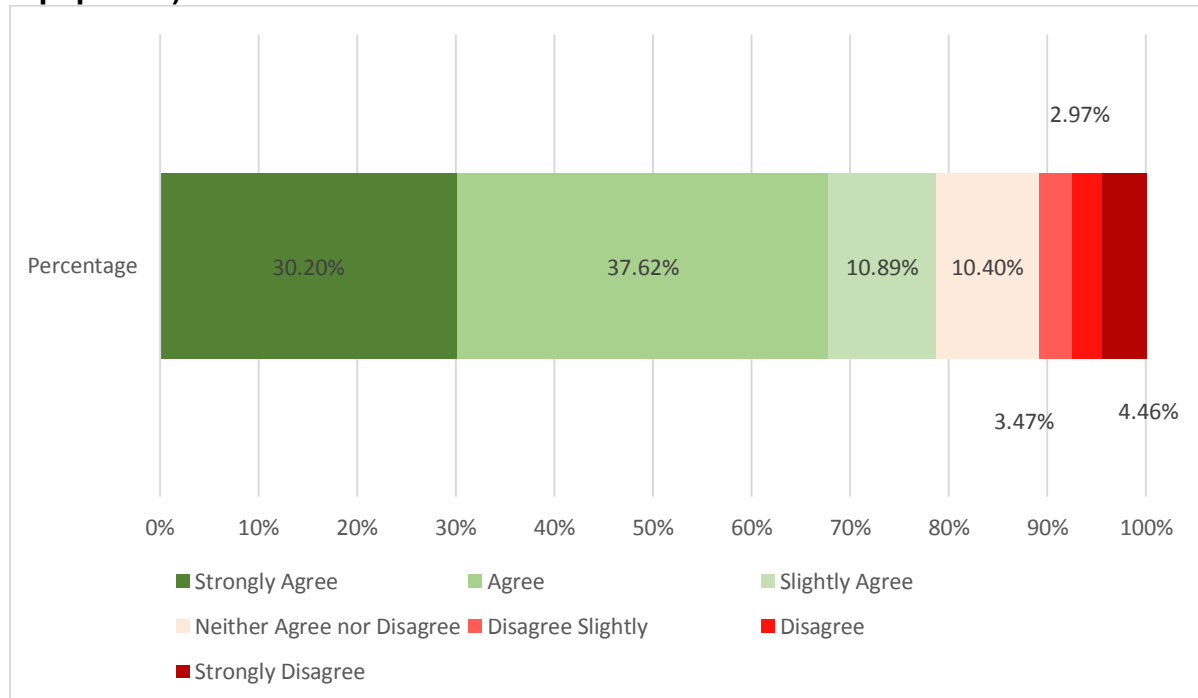
One half of the respondents have needed to contact SFW in relation to their DSA application (49.78 per cent).

Figure 31 shows that the majority of respondents needed to contact SFW to find out the progress of their application (41.23 per cent). Just under a third needed to contact SFW to find out what DSA evidence SFW required (32.46 per cent). Over a quarter needed to ask about their DSA entitlement letter (28.95 per cent) or find out how to order DSA equipment/support/services (26.32 per cent).

Figure 31: What was the reason for your most recent DSA contact with SFW?
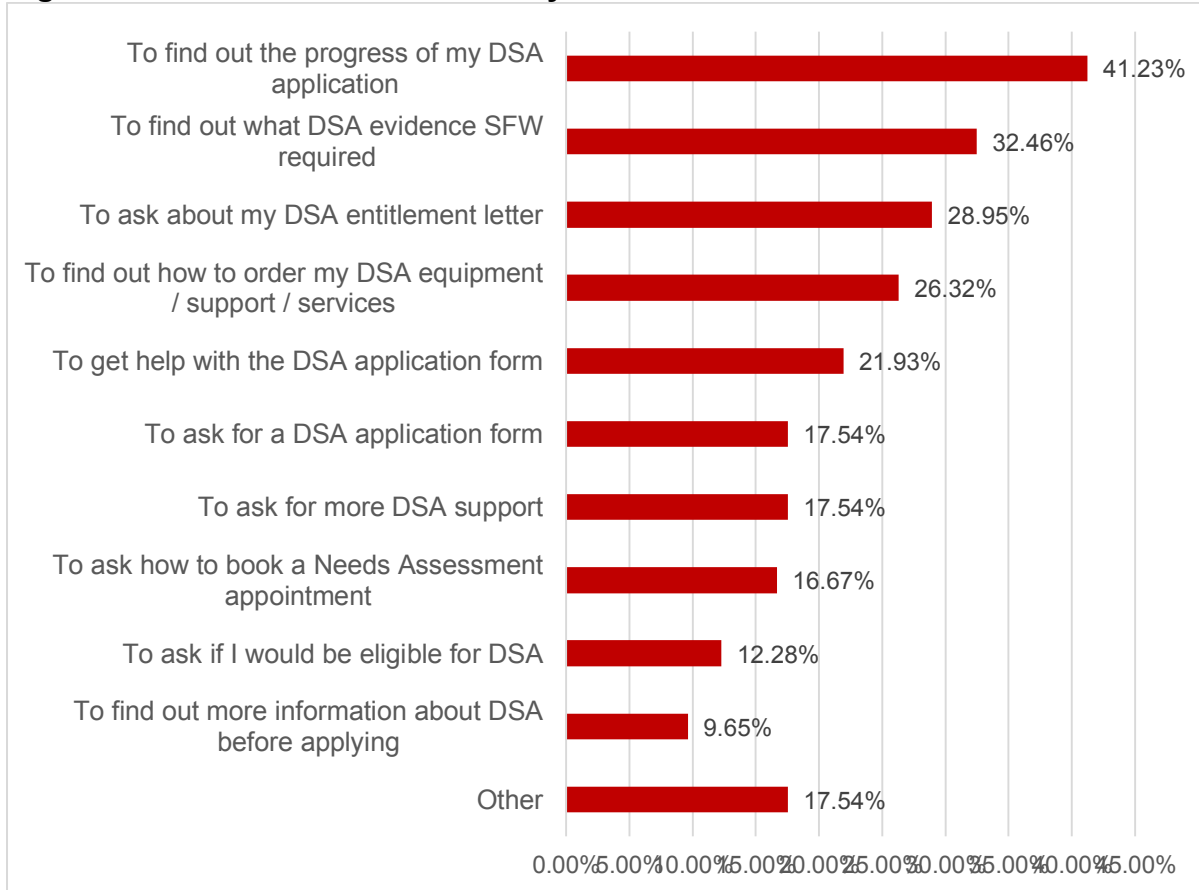
| Reason	Percentage
To find out the progress of my DSA application	41.23%
To find out what DSA evidence SFW required	32.46%
To ask about my DSA entitlement letter	28.95%
To find out how to order my DSA equipment / support / services	26.32%
To get help with the DSA application form	21.93%
To ask for a DSA application form	17.54%
To ask for more DSA support	17.54%
To ask how to book a Needs Assessment appointment	16.67%
To ask if I would be eligible for DSA	12.28%
To find out more information about DSA before applying	9.65%
Other	17.54%

Figure 32 shows that the majority of respondents have had to contact SFW for their DSA query once (31.58 per cent) or twice (28.95 per cent). However, a quarter have had to contact SFW four or more times (24.56 per cent).

Figure 32: How many times have you contacted SFW for this DSA query?

Number of times	Percentage
Once	31.58%
Twice	28.95%
3 times	14.91%
4 or more times	24.56%

123
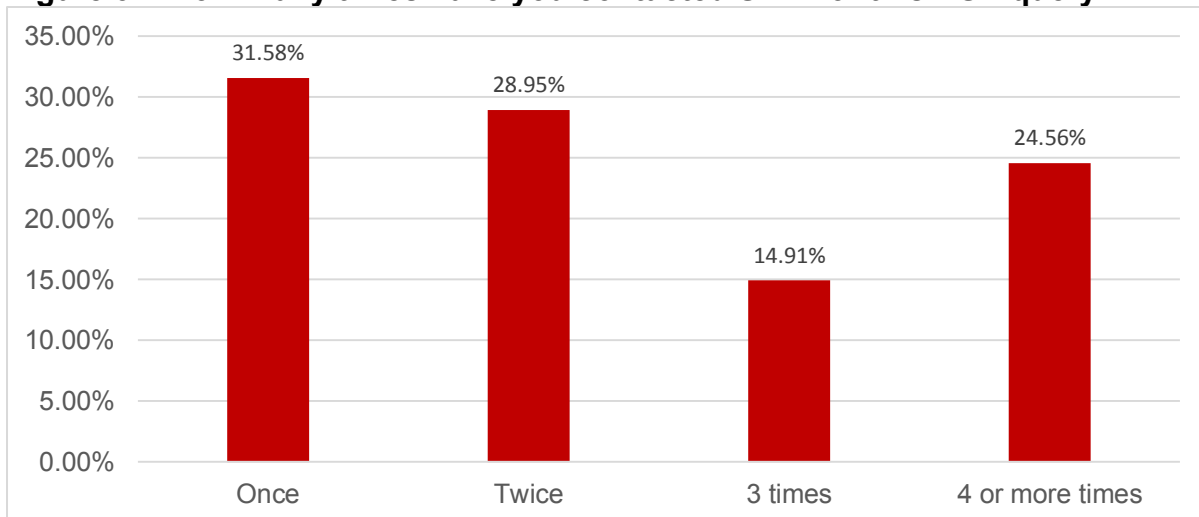
Figure 33 shows that four fifths have had their query resolved (80.70 per cent). However, this means that one in five do not know or have not had their query resolved (19.29 per cent).

Figure 33: Has this DSA query been resolved?
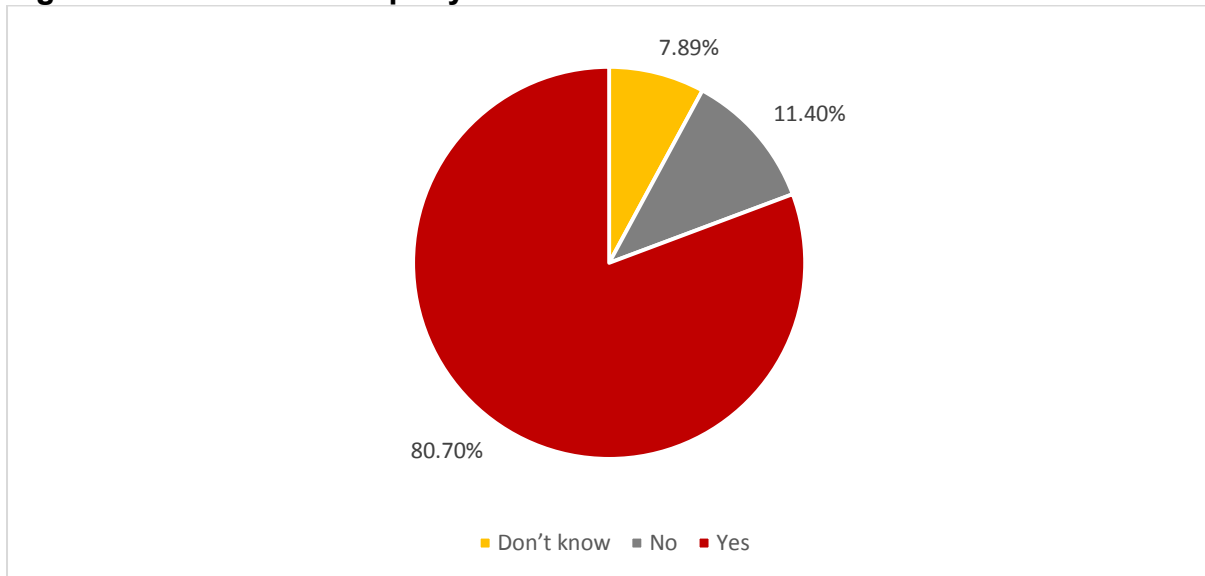
Annex I: Student Topic Guide

INTRODUCTION

This is a guide for the research interviews with students. Some students may want to be interviewed one-to-one which we can accommodate. The emphasis around particular questions may vary depending on students' characteristics.

We will ensure that any support needs prior to the visit are identified and that we can adapt the model of interviewing to meet students' needs.

Note: Introduce yourself

- Describe the purpose of the research

- Explain how the focus group will work

- Inform participants that their participation is voluntary and they have the right to withdraw at any time

- Explain incentive

Completion of Student Details

Ask students to complete a proforma to log:

- Key Information

    o Institution

    o Full time/part time

    o Postgraduate/undergraduate

    o Course name

    o Nationality (if British, please specify whether English, Scottish, Irish or Welsh)

    o How long have you received DSA (number of academic years)

    o Whether they prefer to communicate in Welsh

- o Whether they are studying in Welsh

- o Type of support received (Non-medical help/Specialist equipment/General allowance/Travel expenses)

SECTION ONE: AWARENESS OF DSA

37. How well promoted do you feel DSA is?

38. Were you aware of your disability prior to starting HE?

39. How and when did you find out about DSA?

40. Was this in time for the start of your studies?

41. How knowledgeable do you feel about the range of support available?

42. Are there students missing out because of a lack of knowledge? Another reason?

43. Does awareness need to be improved? Was DSA signposted during your time doing Level 3 qualifications?

SECTION TWO: THE DSA APPLICATION

44. How easy is the application process?

45. Did you receive sufficient support to complete it if you needed it?

46. Did you know whom to ask if you needed help?

47. Did you find the form clear?

48. How did you find the process of providing medical evidence for your application?

49. What were the strengths/weaknesses of the application processes?

50. If you wish to communicate in Welsh, did this meet your expectations?

SECTION THREE: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

51. When did you receive your eligibility letter? Did this take longer than you had expected it to? Were you informed how long it would take?

52. How did you find the process of booking a Needs Assessment at the Assessment Centre?

53. When you had your Needs Assessment, how did you find the process? Were all your needs taken into consideration? Did the assessor understand your needs?

54. Have you uncovered more needs since the assessment?

55. What was the outcome of the Needs Assessment?

56. Do you feel that some of your needs were not identified? Did you discover more needs as a result of the assessment?

57. Did you need to make an official appeal to Student Finance Wales, and if so, what was the outcome?

58. If you wish to communicate in Welsh, did this meet your expectations?

SECTION FOUR: SUPPORT RECEIVED

59. How long did it take to receive your entitlement letter? Did this take longer than expected? Were you told how long the process would take?

60. How long did it take for the support you needed to be put into place?

61. Do you feel well informed of the range of support that is available?

62. Are you receiving all the support you were recommended? If not, why not and in what areas?

63. Have you been advised how to request or revise support?

64. If you were provided with equipment, did you sign off the agreement for it being correctly installed and configured?

65. Were you trained how to use this equipment?

66. Which aspects of support have been most useful to you? Is there anything you aren't using and why is this?

67. Overall, how did you find this stage of the process?

SECTION FIVE: COMMUNICATION THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

68. How has communication been throughout the process? Could anything be improved?

69. Have you had to make any complaints? Are you aware of how to go about doing this?

70. Have you had any queries that have not been resolved to your satisfaction?

SECTION SIX: IMPACT AND VALUE

71. What has been the impact of the support on your student experience?

72. Has it made a difference to you?

    a. Participation in HE (would they be there without it?)

    b. Experience of HE (ability to complete assignments; attend lectures, participate in workshops?

    c. Performance throughout their studies?

73. Can you provide any specific examples?

Thank and close

Provide details of what will happen with the information and approximate date of publication.

Annex J: Table of Bands

Band 1 Roles	
Support Assistants	
Staff that carry out these activities must have the skills and competence to work effectively, at the direction of the student, in their own particular context. **The role of a support assistant is generally to provide support in the following areas:** **• Providing practical support around the campus** **• Providing practical support in the library, laboratory or workshop/studio etc.** **• Reading aloud** **• Scribing** **• Text checking (pointing out errors but not providing corrections)** **Roles which might provide this support include:**	
• Practical Support Assistant	£15-£24
• Library Support Assistant	£15-£24
• Reader	£15-£25
• Scribe	£15-£27
• Workshop/Laboratory Assistant	£15-£26
• Sighted Guide	£15-£25
• Proof Reader	£15-£28

Band 2 Roles	
Enhanced Support Assistants	
These are activities which demand an enhanced level of skill, knowledge and training to Band One activities. **The role of an enhanced support assistant is generally to provide support in the following areas:** **• Supporting students to develop their independence and autonomy in HE, for example by providing support with issues such as time keeping; organisational skills etc. and can be supplemented by practical support e.g. library support, workshop support etc.** **• Supporting a disabled student during examinations** **Roles which might provide this support include:**	
• Study Assistant	£20-£29
• Examination Support Worker	£20-£28
• Notetaker	£20-£28

Band 3 Roles	
Specialist Enabling Support	
These are activities which demand specific expertise and specialist training in a particular access area. **The role of a specialist enabler is generally to provide support in the following areas:** **• Making use of specialist expertise and training in a particular access area in order to facilitate a student's access to learning using specialist skills and/or equipment to represent the language of delivery into another more accessible format** **• Using specialist skills to enable students to navigate themselves independently around the educational environment** **Roles which might provide this support include:**	
• Communication Support Worker & Lip Speaker	£35-£44
• Electronic Notetaker	£35-£40
• Specialist Transcription Services	£25-£32
• Mobility Trainer	£35-£42

Band 4 Roles	
Specialist Access and Learning Support	
These activities require advanced specialist skills, training and/or qualifications concerning how particular disabilities affect a student's access to learning and how to address these access issues. These support workers will make use of specialist skills and training in order to: understand the particular barriers to learning experienced by individual disabled students, work with the student in order to identify strategies to help address these barriers, monitor the effectiveness of these strategies, work to enhance student's autonomy within their learning context and interpret the language of delivery, giving real-time access, into another language accessible to the student. **Functions undertaken by Specialist Access and Learning Support Workers require the use of specialist skills and training in order to:** **• Understand the particular barriers to learning experienced by individual disabled students** **• Work with the student in order to identify strategies to help address these barriers** **• Work with the student to continually monitor the effectiveness of these strategies** **• Work to enhance student's autonomy within their learning context** **• Interpret the language of delivery, giving real time access, into another language accessible to the student** **Roles which might provide this support include:**	
• Specialist Mentor	£50-£66
• Specialist One to One Study Skills Support	£50-£72
• BSL Interpreter	£50-£57

• Language Support Tutor for deaf students	£50-£72
• Assistive Technology Trainer	£50-£65

Annex K: An Example of a Student's Experience of the Complexities in the Application and Awards System

Section One: Awareness of DSA

Adam (not his real name) was an SFW-funded music student and had just finished his first year at a Welsh University. He was a mature student. Adam had dyslexia and scotopic sensitivity syndrome (SSS). Adam's dyslexia affected his organisational skills, understanding, memory and ability to read. The SSS meant that Adam needed to use light filters for certain sources of light.

Adam originally applied for DSA because he needed some equipment to enable him to study and could not afford to purchase this himself. Adam applied for DSA initially in 2009, during a previous course. He was sent a letter by the university and applied after this. As he had previously received DSA, Adam was aware of the support he could get and so applied for his current study at the same time as he made his student finance application.

Section Two: The DSA Application

Adam could not recall his DSA application, but had a number of complaints about the application for student finance, including:

- not being able to change the font or colour of the screen

- ambiguous questions – 'they knew what they were asking, they catered to their own internal systems, it wasn't user friendly'

- easy to skim over things – particularly 'upload file here' options

- the screen reader didn't help – it just reads headings.

Adam recalled that he found providing medical evidence challenging because of the lack of reminders if something was missing. 'They don't seem to tell you if you don't provide the evidence they need; they just pend your application and then you wonder where it is. It would be useful for them to tell you instead of you chasing them.' (Adam)

Section Three: Needs Assessment

Adam had an initial assessment on campus, which he said 'seemed fine at the time, but in hindsight, the assessor didn't know what they were talking about in terms of the software, the location of providers and there were no choices [of providers]'.

Adam had difficulty getting funding for his glasses and explained that it took 'a lot of convincing' for the funding body to believe he had this disability because of the difficulties in getting the correct medical evidence. When they did agree to fund the glasses, he had to pay £120 towards the cost of the prescription for these tinted glasses; he would have paid around £30 elsewhere, but had to use the prescribed provider.

Adam also noted that when he came to choose a provider for his glasses, the only options he could find online were based in Rhyl and Liverpool, which was of concern to him. He then received details of a local provider, but they had no online presence so he could not investigate them any further. When he visited the provider, Adam felt they were very unprofessional and described them 'bodging the glasses with paint to make them work'.

Section Four: Support Received

Adam noted that he was provided with a powerful laptop, which should have been adequate, but the laptop does not allow him to run two pieces of software at the same time, which he needs to do in order to aid him with his studies. Adam described the 'principle software' as a 'white elephant' because it 'piggy backs on Windows and is rubbish'. Adam went on to say that his mind mapping and organisational software is not compatible with the screen readers or audio typing. In addition, the laptop operates on Windows 10 and Adam stated that the font used is inaccessible and cannot be changed. Adam's original keyboard also caused his RSI in his hand and his mouse broke.

Due to the issues with his software and hardware, Adam had to re-apply to extend his entitlement. Adam was provided with an ergonomic keyboard and was given software that works, but actually cost considerably less than what he was originally given. Adam stated that the providers are 'selling useless stuff at ridiculous prices'.

Adam also had issues with funding for printing paper. The disability office at Adam's university had to contact the funding body to argue that his printing paper was not stationery and should be funded. Eventually the funding body agreed to fund a certain amount of paper, but this only covered half of what Adam needed and he had to fund the rest. Due to paying for this, he could not afford to engage with other elements of his degree, which would have been of benefit to him – such as workshops with an orchestra in South Wales.

Adam had one-to-one support from a tutor. He noted that the tutor had told him he was not allowed to proof read Adam's work, although this is what Adam needed. Adam stated that 'this highlights that the system is flawed if he cannot adapt his skills.'

Section Five: Communication

Adam feels that he was always chasing the funding body, calling them to confirm that progress was being made. He felt that he had 'dropped off the end of their to do list.'

Section Six: Impact and Value

Adam stated: 'I couldn't have studied without the support. It has been the difference between A and E grades. I would have failed without it. It's been very necessary and very helpful.'

Adam said: 'It enabled me to show my academic ability to the level that my intellectual ability is, without being hindered by my disability.'

Adam stated that his tutor 'made the world of difference to me'.

Annex L: Complaints Data

The table below gives an overview of the number of complaints received by SLC in relation to various sub areas. The sub areas are then broken down by primary route cause.

The table shows that over one third of complaints related to timescales/workflow. In particular, applicants were not happy with the timescale to process evidence. Over one fifth of complaints related to DSA1 assessment errors. In particular, applicants complained about medical evidence being rejected.

Table 1: Complaints Data

Primary Sub Area	Primary Root Cause	Total	Primary Sub Area Total	Primary Sub Area Percentage
Correspondence	Evidence received insufficient/not acceptable	1		
Correspondence	Manual Letter content	2		
Correspondence	Manual Letter not received	3	6	5.83%
DSA1 Assessment Error	Application not fully complete/incorrect	3		
DSA1 Assessment Error	Entitlement	5		
DSA1 Assessment Error	Incorrect form requested	2		
DSA1 Assessment Error	Medical Evidence Rejected	11		
DSA1 Assessment Error	Section 5 error (HEI confirmation)	1	22	21.36%
Invoice Discrepancy	Allowance discrepancy	1		
Invoice Discrepancy	Hours/allowance discrepancy	2		
Invoice Discrepancy	Invoice payment discrepancy	5		
Invoice Discrepancy	Poor/lack of communication	1		
Invoice Discrepancy	Supplier discrepancy	2		
Invoice Discrepancy	Support not agreed	2	13	12.62%
Needs Assessment	Entitlement supplier discrepancy	1		

Report (NAR)				
Needs Assessment Report (NAR)	Equipment allowance discrepancy	3		
Needs Assessment Report (NAR)	Non-medical helper Allowance discrepancy	2		
Needs Assessment Report (NAR)	Poor/lack of communication	1		
Needs Assessment Report (NAR)	Travel Allowance discrepancy	2	9	8.74%
Student Claim Discrepancy	Allowance discrepancy	1		
Student Claim Discrepancy	Incorrect amount	1		
Student Claim Discrepancy	Insufficient evidence provided	3		
Student Claim Discrepancy	Payment discrepancy	4		
Student Claim Discrepancy	Support not agreed	7	16	15.53%
Timescales/Workflow	Other	1		
Timescales/Workflow	SLA met - customer unhappy with timescale to process application	12		
Timescales/Workflow	SLA met - customer unhappy with timescale to process evidence	14		
Timescales/Workflow	SLA not met	10	37	35.92%
Total		103	103	100.00%

Source: Student Loans Company Ltd