



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 8716, 21 October 2019

Support for disabled students in higher education in England

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Summary

The number of students in higher education with a known disability is increasing. In 2017/18 283,000 higher education students said that they had a disability of some kind, this was 15.0% of all home students. The number of students with a known disability has increased by 57,000 or 25% since 2014/15. Much of this increase has been in those reporting a mental health condition.

In 2017/18 the most common type of reported disability was 'specific learning difficulties' - this includes dyslexia, dyspraxia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), the next most common was mental health conditions. The number of students reporting they have a mental health condition has doubled since 2014/15

Support is provided for disabled students by higher education providers (HEPs) through reasonable adjustment and disability services and by the Government through Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs). 56,900 students from England received DSAs in 2016/17.

Disabled people are underrepresented in higher education and disabled students in higher education have somewhat worse outcomes from higher education than non-disabled students. Students with a disability are more likely to drop-out of courses and those that finish their degree tend to have lower degree results; in 2016/17 a lower proportion of UK disabled students were awarded a first or upper second-class degree than those without a reported disability. Employment outcomes are also worse for disabled students than for non-disabled students. These findings hold even after other factors such as prior attainment, gender, age and ethnicity are taken into account.

In 2016 the Government reformed DSAs to improve value for money and rebalance the distribution of responsibility for disabled students between higher education providers and the Government. The reforms included bringing in a £200 contribution to the cost of computer hardware. The changes were controversial, however an evaluation report on the reforms published three years after their implementation found that after the reforms overall DSA support was broadly meeting the needs of students.

The Government aims to improve access and outcomes for disabled students through the work of the Office for Students and the newly established Disabled Students' Commission.



1. Introduction

The number of students in higher education with a known disability is increasing, but disabled students remain an underrepresented group and concerns have been expressed about the support provided for these students.

There is no single definition of disability in the UK.

The *Equality Act 2010* defines people covered by the disability sections of the Act as people with “**physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities**”. 'Substantial' is defined in the Act as 'more than minor or trivial' and an impairment is considered to have a long-term effect if:

- it has lasted for at least 12 months
- it is likely to last for at least 12 months, or
- it is likely to last for the rest of the life of the person.

Students who meet the criteria in the Act may be eligible for disability support.

Disabled students are provided with support from the Government through the **Disabled Students' Allowance** (DSA) and a wide range of assistance is also available from universities and colleges. Despite the availability of support many prospective students are unaware that help is available and only two in five (40%) had heard of DSAs before they started their course.¹

Disabled students have worse outcomes from higher education than non-disabled students. However, the experience of doing a course, and confidence in completing and passing it, have been shown to be influenced by receiving good quality DSAs support and good support from their HEP.²

Information on related subjects is set out in these library briefing papers:

- CBP 8561, [Post-16 Special Educational Needs FAQs](#), 17 May 2018
- CBP 8593, [Support for students with mental health issues in higher education in England](#), 21 August 2019
- CBP 7444, [Reform of the Disabled Students' Allowance in England](#), 5 January 2016

The Office for Students recently published an Insight brief [Beyond the bare minimum: Are universities and colleges doing enough for disabled students?](#). At the same time they also published an in-depth review of support for students in higher education.³

¹ DfE [Evaluation of Disabled Students' Allowances \(DSAs\)](#) January 2019 p9

² *ibid* p97

³ [Review of support for disabled students in higher education in England](#), Report to the Office for Students by the Institute for Employment Studies and Researching Equity, Access and Participation

2. Statistical background

This section uses data from a range of different sources and looks at the numbers of students reporting disabilities, how this varies between different groups of students and at different outcomes for disabled students. It also includes some information on participation rates among young people identified with special educational needs.

Advance HE publishes an [annual statistical report](#) on different groups of students, including those with disabilities. It gives a detailed breakdown of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency including analysis by level, subject and type of disability.

2.1 Numbers of disabled students

The Higher Education Statistics Agency collects data from students on any disability that they have. **In 2017/18 283,000 home students in the UK said they had a disability of some kind. This was 15.0% of all home students.**

The number with a known disability has increased by 57,000 or 25% since 2014/15. The proportion of home students with a disability increased from 13.1% in 2014/15. Much of this increase was in those reporting a mental health condition. It is important to realise that this is a measure of reported disabilities which will be affected by changes in the likelihood of students reporting a disability for whatever reason.

Female students are slightly more likely to have reported a disability; 16.1% compared with 13.6% of male students. There was a small difference by mode of study with 15.4% of full-time and 13.8% of part-time students reporting a disability. There were higher rates of disability among undergraduate students at 15.6% compared with 12.8% of postgraduates.⁴

The following table breaks down the types of disabilities reported in the past few years.

Types of disabilities reported by HE students						
All modes and levels of study						
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	% of all disabilities	Increase 14/15 to 17/18
A specific learning difficulty	105,550	107,945	109,915	109,395	39%	4%
Mental health condition	33,045	41,645	53,045	66,660	24%	102%
Two or more conditions	21,095	24,240	26,705	30,075	11%	43%
A long-standing illness or health condition	22,425	23,600	25,420	27,190	10%	21%
Another disability, impairment or medical condition	21,580	20,800	21,235	21,960	8%	2%
Social communication/Autistic spectrum disorder	6,755	7,950	9,440	11,015	4%	63%
A physical impairment or mobility issues	7,480	7,675	8,110	8,415	3%	13%
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment	5,065	5,110	5,160	5,275	2%	4%
Blind or a serious visual impairment	2,840	2,865	3,010	3,045	1%	7%
Any disability	225,835	241,830	262,040	283,030	100%	25%

Source: HESA, [Who's studying in HE?](#)

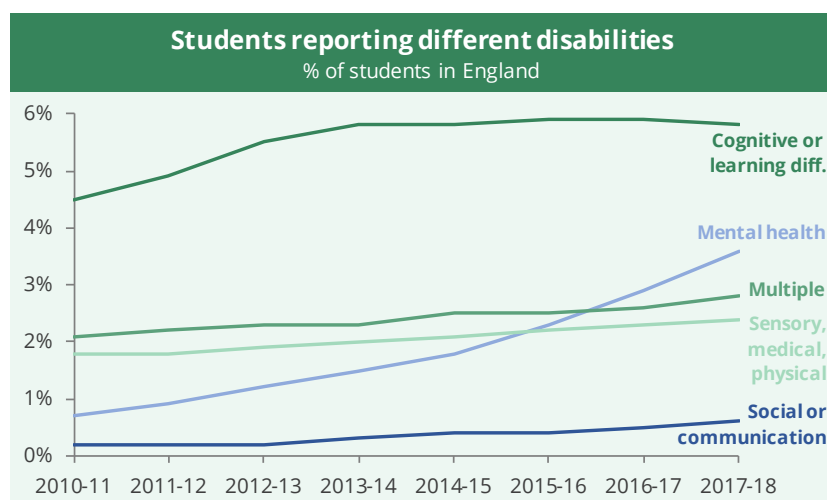
⁴ HESA, [Who's studying in HE?](#)

In 2017/18 the most common type of reported disabilities were 'specific learning difficulties' this includes dyslexia, dyspraxia and AD(H)D. They made up almost 40% of the total. The next most common were mental health conditions which were reported by almost 67,000 home students or 24% of those with known disabilities. This number has more than doubled since 2014/15; the largest increase of any type of disability. This increase accounts for more than half of the overall increase in students with disabilities since 2014/15. It is possible that some of the increase is due to students with mental health conditions being more likely to report this. This could be due to various reasons including greater awareness, and less (perceived) stigma associated with mental ill health.

The chart opposite looks at a longer series on students in England which uses slightly different categories for types of disability. This particularly highlights the increase in reported mental health conditions among students.

The number of home accepted applicants to full-time undergraduate courses with a declared disability has increased steadily from 26,100 in 2010 to 47,400 in 2018. The exception was 2012 when acceptances fell overall after the introduction of higher fees. The proportion of accepted applicants with a declared disability increased from 6.4% in 2010 to 11.4% in 2018.⁵ Again this rise could be partly due to an increased likelihood of students reporting that they have a disability.

UCAS has reported an increase in home applicants who declared they had a mental health condition on their application between 2014 and 2018. This was up by nearly 10,000 to around 17,000.



Source: OfS [Equality and diversity data](#)

2.2 Access to higher education, continuation rates and outcomes

Participation rates

The Government has estimated the proportion of 15 year olds from England with Special Educational Needs (SEN) who go on to higher education by age 19. These are new 'experimental' data. Definitions of disability and SEN are not exactly the same, but it can be seen as a proxy for disability.

⁵ [UCAS end of cycle data resources](#), 2018

In 2016/17 an estimated 17.2% of pupils with identified SEN at age 15 had started higher education compared to 46.8% of those without SEN. The higher education participation rate was considerably lower for those in the SEN group with the most severe needs⁶ at 8.3%. The Department for Education points out that these variations can largely be explained by differences in prior attainment.⁷

The SEN/Non-SEN gap has remained broadly the same in absolute terms since 2009/10 at around 30 percentage points. It has fallen in *relative* terms. In 2009/10 Non-SEN pupils were four times as likely to go to higher education. In 2016/17 this had fallen to just over three and a half times as likely.

Continuation rates

The Office for Students produces continuation rates for students in England. These look at the proportion of full-time first year students and whether they are still in higher education a year later. **10.6% of 2016/17 first years with a reported disability were not in higher education a year later compared with 9.7% of those without a disability.** The difference was smaller after other factors were taken into account⁸, but deemed to be statistically significant.

The non-continuation rate for disabled students has increased slightly over time from just below 10% in 2010-11.

The Office for Students breaks down reported disability into five different types. 2016/17 non-continuation rates for these are given opposite. **The non-continuation rate for those with a reported mental health condition was highest at 13.2%.** The figure for those with cognitive or learning difficulties was below the rate for students without a reported disability. **Students with a reported mental health condition were also more likely to transfer to another university. 3.8% of 2016/17 first years were still in higher education a year later, but at a different institution.** Equivalent rates were 2.5-3.4% for other types of disability and 3.1% for those without a disability.⁹

Non-continuation rates 2016-17	
Mental health condition	13.2%
Social or communication impairment	11.9%
Sensory, medical or physical impairments	11.3%
Multiple impairments	10.9%
Cognitive or learning difficulties	8.6%

Qualifications and employment

The Office for Students data on outcomes looks at receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance as well as reported disability. **In 2016/17 a lower proportion of UK disabled students were awarded a first or upper second class degree than those without a reported disability.** The rate was 76.8% for both groups with a reported disability (in/not in receipt of DSA) and 79.7% for those without a disability. The gap has remained at around three percentage points since 2013-14.

Students without a reported disability were more likely to gain a first or upper second class degree even when they are grouped by A level qualifications. The gap was smaller (1.6 points) for those in receipt of

⁶ Statement of SEN or EHC Plan

⁷ [Widening participation in higher education: 2018](#), DfE

⁸ Age, qualifications, ethnicity, local area, subject and level of study

⁹ OfS [Continuation and transfer rates](#)

DSA after other factors related to degree outcome were taken into account. It was larger for the non-DSA disabled group at 3.2 points.

Disabled graduates were also less likely to be in employment and less likely to be in highly skilled employment than those without a reported disability. The table opposite summarises the latest data.

The overall gap has increased slightly since 2013-14. As with the degree outcomes the gap is smaller, but still apparent, once other factors related to outcomes are taken into account.¹⁰

Graduate employment by disability		
young UK graduates 6 months after graduation		
	% employed or in further study	% in highly skilled employment or further study
Disability reported		
-in receipt of DSA	87.7%	70.8%
-not in receipt of DSA	88.2%	70.6%
No disability reported	89.9%	73.4%

Source: OfS [Differences in student outcomes](#)

¹⁰ OfS [Differences in student outcomes](#)

3. Support for disabled students

Support for disabled students is provided by the Government through Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) and by higher education providers (HEPs) making reasonable adjustments and delivering disability services. Changes to the DSA in 2016 rebalanced the distribution of responsibility for disabled students between HEPs and the Government and moved more responsibility to providers.

Disabled students who are applying for assistance to student finance bodies, or to higher education institutions will need to provide evidence of their impairment, health condition or disability.

The evidence provided by the student can be a diagnostic assessment for a specific learning difficulty, or a letter from a doctor or consultant stating the nature of their condition. Students who have previously had an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan in England can use this to support the diagnosis and to indicate the areas where support is required.

3.1 Education providers' statutory duties

HEPs have legal responsibilities to support disabled students under the Equality Act 2010.

The [Equalities Act 2010 s20](#), states that all further and higher education providers must ensure that disabled student are **not treated less favourably** than other students and providers have a **duty to make reasonable adjustments** to make sure that people who are disabled are **not put at a substantial disadvantage** compared to people who are not disabled in accessing education.

Section 149 of the *Equality Act 2010* contains the Public Sector Equality Duty which further requires public bodies, including HEIs, to comply with **general duties to eliminate discrimination, to promote equality of opportunity**, and to **foster good relations** between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

Reasonable adjustments

The *Equality Act 2010* requires bodies to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people - this duty aims to ensure that disabled people do not face '**substantial disadvantage**' in comparison to non-disabled people.

Section 20 of the Act defines what is meant by the duty to make reasonable adjustments. The first requirement of the duty covers **changing the way things are done** (such as changing a practice), the second covers **making changes to the built environment** (such as providing access to a building), and the third covers **providing auxiliary aids and services** (such as providing special computer software or providing a different service). **The duty is anticipatory.**

Reasonable adjustments in higher education may include:

There are persistent gaps in the experience and outcomes of disabled and non-disabled students. These are caused by institutions, systems, processes and culture. So there is an imperative for providers to make sure that barriers to success are recognised and dismantled.

[Chris Millward](#) -
Director for Fair
Access and
Participation, Office
for Students

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- adjustments to assessment practices and the provision of alternative assessment methods.
- improving physical access to the campus buildings
- providing auxiliary aids and services to enable or facilitate disabled students with studying

The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) have published a document [Managing reasonable adjustments in higher education](#), 2010 which gives guidance to HEIs on their strategies around the duty to make reasonable adjustments. Information on reasonable adjustments can also be found on the following websites:

- Equality and Human Rights Commission, [What are reasonable adjustments?](#)
- Disability Rights UK, [Adjustments for disabled students.](#)

The OfS have said that they expect HEPs to go “above and beyond ‘reasonable adjustments’ in supporting disabled students, in order to reduce gaps at all stages of the student lifecycle for this group.”¹¹

Disability policies

Most higher education providers have **disability policies** describing their support and provision for disabled students. A report by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in November 2017, [Models of support for students with disabilities](#), said that 90% of higher education providers (HEPs) had disability policies covering:

- Assessment (91%)
- Teaching and learning (82%)
- Student support (80%)
- Accommodation (66%)
- Student experience (44%)
- Inclusive curriculum design/universal design (43%).

Higher education institutions usually have a **disability services team** and **disability advisors** which provide students and staff with advice, manage internal non-medical support and ensure compliance with legislation.

The disability services team works directly with students to:

- **carry out a needs assessment and develop action plans** (detailing the reasonable adjustments that need to be made);
- **undertake testing** for Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD), sensory and social needs;
- **develop tailored packages** for particularly complex cases (which could also involve support with academic skills, financial support and disability services);

¹¹ OfS webpage Disabled students

- **support DSA claims** and applications for other relevant funding; and
- **manage the resulting specific support** provision (e.g. mentors/tutors/advisers).

The support provided by institutions commonly includes: signers, note-takers, specialist support workers for those with mental health problems or SpLD (e.g. dyslexia tutors who work on a one-to-one basis with students on writing skills), help with assessment such as exam access arrangements (e.g. supervised rest breaks, separate room, additional time allowance, sitting exams at home), lecture notes and handouts in alternative formats, use of computers and assistive software and advising on adjustments to teaching approaches.

In addition, institutions aim to provide clear information for students, prospective students and staff on the services and support that is available. University websites set out information on the support provided such as on the University of Sheffield website at [Disability and Dyslexia Support Service](#).

4. Role of the Office for Students (OfS)

HEPs that charge fees above the basic level must draw up access and participation plans agreed by the Office for Students. These plans should contain measures to increase numbers and improve outcomes of students from underrepresented groups including students with disabilities.

The work of the OfS with disabled students is outlined on their website at [Disabled students](#).

The OfS has set targets to eliminate the inequalities and poor outcomes that disabled students experience. These include a target to close the gap in degree outcomes between disabled and non-disabled students within the next five years.¹²

The OfS is distributing £40 million annually to universities and colleges to help them create more inclusive environments for disabled students.

Information on work of the Office for Students with disabled students is on the OfS website at [Supporting disabled students to succeed](#)

4.1 Disabled Students' Commission

In June 2019 the Chris Skidmore announced the establishment of the [Disabled Students' Commission](#) – this body will take forward the work of the Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group (DSSLG) The DSC aims to bring about change by:

- advising, informing and challenging the higher education sector to develop more effective models of support for disabled students in higher education
- identifying and promoting practice and approaches which will help students with disabilities to have a positive and successful experience at university.

The Commission will look at approaches which work well to improve support for disabled students, such as more inclusive curricula, restructuring support for students and enhancing learning and teaching environments.

A group of expert commissioners will be appointed from the HE sector, students and employers and the body will offer independent advice to the Government and the OfS on issues affecting disabled students.

¹² OfS [Supporting disabled students to succeed](#), 8 October 2019

5. Disabled Students' Allowances

Higher education students with special educational needs and disabilities are eligible to apply for a Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) – the rules on DSAs are contained in the *Education (Student Support) Regulations 2011*.

The DSA is a **non-means tested grant** that is paid by the Government to eligible disabled students, to cover the extra study costs that are incurred because of their disability.

There are four elements to the full-time undergraduate DSAs:

- **General Allowance** - used to help pay course-related costs they may have as a direct result of their disability. Up to £1,899 in 2019/20.
- **Specialist Equipment Allowance** - used to help buy equipment needed because of their disability. Up to £5,657 in 2019/20.
- **Non-Medical Helper Allowance** - used to help pay for support workers such as British Sign Language interpreters or mobility trainers. Up to £22,603 in 2019/20.
- **Travel Allowance** - used for any additional study-related travel costs they may have as a direct result of their disability.

DSAs are instrumental in the decision to apply to higher education among those who know about them at that point.

DfE [Evaluation of Disabled Students' Allowances \(DSAs\)](#)

Information on eligibility and the maximum level of DSA payments is set out in detail in a Student Finance England (SFE) document, [DSA Guidance \(New Students\) 2019/20](#).

A report commissioned by the DfE evaluating the DSA stated that students received a wide range of support:

Students in receipt of DSAs received a wide range of support. Three-quarters (73%) of DSAs recipients reported that they received specialist software needed for their course and a similar proportion received IT equipment needed for their course (72%). Over half (57%) received non-medical help, including support such as note-takers in lectures or from other types of learning support workers. It should be noted that this is based on self-reported measures and differs somewhat from the most recent SLC statistics on DSAs, which show a smaller proportion of students receiving IT support (38%) and travel support (5%); and a higher proportion receiving non-medical help (67%). The difference is perhaps indicative of a lack of clarity among students about who has provided the support they receive.¹³

The evaluation report stated that most students were satisfied with the level of support provided by their DSA:

Over half (55%) of those in receipt of DSAs agreed that the DSAs support they receive meets all of their needs, although 28% disagreed. Findings were more positive with regards to whether the DSAs support they received enabled them to participate more fully in their course than they would be able to otherwise: around

¹³ DfE [Evaluation of Disabled Students' Allowances \(DSAs\)](#) January 2019 p10

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two-thirds (68%) of DSAs recipients agreed and just 16% disagreed.¹⁴

Two disability groups are running campaigns to raise awareness of the DSA:

- Disability Rights UK [Support the DSA Claim It! campaign](#)
- AbilityNet [Support our Claim It! campaign](#)

Library briefing, [Post-16 Special Educational Needs FAQs](#), 17 May 2018 has information and data on DSAs on p21-22.

5.1 How many students get DSA?

56,900 students from England received DSA in 2016/17. The number increased from 47,300 in 2010/11 to a recent peak of just over 60,000 in 2013/14. It has fallen slightly since then. **The amount paid increased from around £109 million in 2010/11 to £134 million in 2013/14.** It has also fallen since 2013/14, but at a faster rate than the number of recipients, **down to just under £100 million in 2016/17.**¹⁵

Provisional data for 2017/18 (up to December) shows a small fall of 300 in the number receiving DSA compared to the same point in 2016/17. The amount paid to December increased by just over £4 million to £100 million.¹⁶

The average payment per recipient has fallen from almost £2,350 in 2011/12 to around £1,750 in 2016/17; a 26% drop in cash terms. Provisional figures for 2017/18 show a small increase in this amount. Most of the fall in the value of payments was in the non-medical helpers element of DSA; down from £73 million in 2012/13 to (provisionally) £45 million in 2017/18.¹⁷

5.2 Postgraduate students

Postgraduate students with disabilities are also eligible for support. These student may be able to access a [Postgraduate Disabled Students' Allowance](#) which is a single payment. The Government announced a large increase in this payment from 2019/20:

And for postgraduate students with disabilities, we are increasing the maximum postgraduate disabled students' allowance to **£20,000** in 2019/20 from its current level of **£10,993**, which will help the most disabled postgraduate students with high support needs [\[HC Deb 22 November 2018\]](#)

¹⁴ DfE [Evaluation of Disabled Students' Allowances \(DSAs\)](#) January 2019 p11

¹⁵ [Student Support for Higher Education in England 2018](#), SLC

¹⁶ [Student support for higher education in England: 2018 update](#), SLC

¹⁷ [Student Support for Higher Education in England 2018](#), SLC

6. Impact of the 2016 changes to the DSA

In 2016 the DSA was reformed - the changes aimed to improve value for money and rebalance the distribution of responsibility for disabled students between HEPs and the Government. The changes were controversial and caused concern among disability groups.

An evaluation of the changes was made three years after their implementation – the report [Evaluation of Disabled Students' Allowances \(DSAs\)](#) January 2019 gives an overview of the policy changes:

Changes were made in 2014 to bring the definition of disability in line with that used in the Equality Act. In 2015/16 and 2016/17, the funding model changed to ensure it represents good value for money through paying for truly 'additional' costs. The 2015/16 changes introduced a £200 contribution for students towards the cost of recommended computer hardware. The 2016/17 changes transferred responsibility for less specialist non-medical help (NMH) provision to higher education providers (HEPs), and other changes were made to areas, such as IT consumables, etc.. In most cases, the expectation is that HEPs will offset the impact of the removal of DSAs funding by providing reasonable adjustments to disabled students as they are required to do under the Equality Act 2010. The expectation is that some of these will be anticipatory adjustments made to course delivery at a more universal level, to enable more inclusive learning, while some will still be provided on an individual basis.¹⁸

The report concluded that post the reforms overall DSA support was **broadly meeting the needs of students** and that HEP led adaptations and support were "moving into the space left by the changes to DSAs." The report also found that the two systems were working well alongside each other to support disabled students.¹⁹

One of the most controversial changes in 2016 was the introduction of a **£200 contribution towards the cost of computer hardware**. This issue has been raised in a number of PQs including one which gave information on the impact of the change on uptake of DSAs:

[Disabled Students Allowances](#)

Steve McCabe: 5 December 2018

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the effect on the level of uptake of disabled students' allowance of the introduction of the requirement for students to contribute £200 towards the costs of specialist equipment.

Chris Skidmore: 12 December 2018

The Student Loans Company (SLC) data show the uptake of the disabled students' equipment allowance by full time undergraduate students domiciled in England fell from 28,000 in

¹⁸ DfE [Evaluation of Disabled Students' Allowances \(DSAs\)](#) January 2019, Executive Summary p 8

¹⁹ Ibid p97

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2014/15 to 23,400 in 2015/16, the year the £200 contribution was introduced, and to 21,600 in 2016/17. Provisional figures for 2017/18 show an increase of 17% in uptake compared to the provisional figures in 2016/17.

The SLC National Statistics data are available at <https://www.slc.co.uk/official-statistics/financial-support-awarded/england-higher-education.aspx>.

A PQ February 2019 set out the current policy position:

Disabled Students' Allowances: Computers:

Steve McCabe: 06 February 2019

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, pursuant to the Answer of 6 February 2019 to Question 213927, if he will make further financial assistance available to students already in receipt of the maximum amount of maintenance loan who are required to pay £200 in order to receive specialist computer hardware allocated to them under the Disabled Student Allowance.

Chris Skidmore: 11 February 2019

A basic computer is now a mainstream cost of study for all students, disabled or not. We believe it is therefore reasonable for students to fund this £200 from their Maintenance Loan. Students from the lowest-income households who started their courses this year have access to the largest ever amounts of cash-in-hand support for their living costs.

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