

## **STUDENT SUPPORT INFORMATION NOTE (SSIN)**

### **ARRANGEMENTS FOR STUDENTS FUNDED UNDER THE STUDENT SUPPORT REGULATIONS**

#### **DISABLED STUDENTS' ALLOWANCES (DSAs)**

**SSIN 03/17  
February 2017**

**To:**

Student Finance administrators and practitioners in institutions of higher education, further education or specialist colleges providing HE, and alternative providers; DSA assessors, assessment centres and suppliers; The Disabled Students' Allowance Quality Assurance Group; Student Finance advisors, and The Student Loans Company

Dear Colleagues

#### **Specialist mentoring and specialist study skills.**

##### Background

We have had a number of enquires recently about specialist mentoring and specialist one to one study skills support. There appears to be some confusion over these terms in connection with DSAs, particularly in relation to Needs Assessment Reports (NARs), and there also seems to be some confusion about what this support is for. We thought therefore it might be helpful to issue some further guidance on these topics.

##### Specialist mentoring and specialist one to one study skills support

Specialist Mentors provide support to help students address barriers to learning, such as dealing with high levels of anxiety and stress, difficulties with concentration and managing course workload etc. (this is in addition to the support usually offered to all students, sometimes called wellbeing support). Specialist one to one study skills provision is different to specialist mentoring support in that it is to address issues a student may have with information processing, i.e. '...acquiring, recalling and retaining information in written and spoken language'. A full description of both types of support is in paragraphs 5.5.1 and 5.5.2 of the 2016/17 DSAs guidance.

##### Making the case for specialist support

Guidance is clear that specialist mentoring is provided primarily to students with mental-health conditions and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), whereas specialist one to one study skills provision is primarily for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) or ASD. Both types of specialist support are only available for the types of issues outlined in the guidance, or issues of a very similar nature.

If, in an assessors opinion, a student requires either type of specialist support and the student has one or more of the conditions listed above for which this type of support is primarily provided, they must present a clear case in the NAR providing disability related justification and providing two quotations from DSA QAG Registered Providers.

However, we do recognise that in a small number of circumstances it might be appropriate for students with other disabilities to receive specialist mentoring, or specialist one to one study skills support, or exceptionally both. Where assessors feel that this is the case, they should again make a clear case in the NAR, and this should be clearly linked to the student's medical evidence. Student Finance England will consider whether the students Medical Evidence from their GP or specialist shows a specific link to a need for specialist mentoring or specialist one to one study skills support. It is not sufficient for the Needs Assessor to recommend the support without the link to the Medical Evidence. If there is no clear link the recommendation will be rejected and referred back to the assessor.

#### Students with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder / Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD/ADD)

After discussion, we have recently agreed that there is evidence to support the inclusion of ADHD/ADD for the purposes of Specialist one to one study skills support, as well as Specialist mentoring. Therefore students with these conditions should be able to access either type of support (where appropriate), and NMH providers should be selected from the list of those able to provide support to students with SpLD.

#### Mentoring and study skills support

We have recently received communications that refer to mentoring and study skills (i.e. not 'specialist' in both cases). Although these terms may have been used in the past, they are not terms that are recognised by Student Finance England for use in NARs. Recommendations for either mentoring or study skills support will not be processed. Since the adoption of a national framework in 2014 (via the SLC's NMH Guidance Manual) assessors should only be using terms contained in the DSAs guidance, particularly in a student's NAR.

#### **Other issues**

#### Non-medical help (NMH) providers – changes to invoice documentation, including standard timesheets

Administrators should note that DSA Quality Assurance Group (DSA QAG) have recently notified all NMH providers that they are now required to use a standard format of supporting documentation when invoicing SFE for their services. These changes will help SFE process invoices quickly, and also ensure that invoice data is

collated easily for management purposes. The new standard format form can be found at [https://www.dsa-qag.org.uk/application/files/6414/8647/5954/NMH\\_Quality\\_Assurance\\_Framework\\_V1.4.pdf](https://www.dsa-qag.org.uk/application/files/6414/8647/5954/NMH_Quality_Assurance_Framework_V1.4.pdf)

### Non-medical help (NMH) providers – quality assurance framework and conflicts of interest register

DSA QAG has recently commenced the introduction of a quality assurance framework (QAF) for all NMH providers. This will bring NMH providers into line with assessment centres and assistive technology software providers (ATSPs), where QAFs already provide part of the framework that assures the Department for Education that funds are being correctly spent.

As part of this process, NMH providers will need to submit a declaration about the management of potential or actual conflicts of interest, which again mirrors the situation in place with assessment centres and ATSPs. SSIN 03/17 provides further details.

### Non-medical help (NMH) take up and over-recommendation, including excessive hours of support

SLC have performed analysis to review the actual usage of Non-Medical Help (NMH). The table below provides a view of recommended and used hours for the 15/16 academic year and is based on a sample of circa 29,000 records. As the table shows, the amount of NMH actually used by students across the support types, only accounts for a small percentage of what is being recommended by Needs Assessors. We have reviewed this in prior academic years and the trend was very similar.

List of Support Types	15/16			
	Total Hours Used	Average Hours Used Per Student	Total Hours Agreed (DSA2)	Current Usage %
Assistive Technology Training	60511.01	5.69	273955	22.09%
British Sign Language Interpreters	17223.5	195.72	31973	53.87%
Communication Support Worker	4527.5	215.60	11043	41.00%
Electronic Notetaker	9640.25	139.71	28588	33.72%
Language Support Tutor for Deaf Students	1397.25	17.91	7507	18.61%
Mobility Trainer	432.5	19.66	1604	26.96%
Sighted Guide	2537.75	61.90	7710.5	32.91%
Specialist Mentor	97257.05	15.06	427828.5	22.73%
Specialist Notetaker for Deaf and Visually Impaired Students	286.75	286.75	1051	27.28%
Specialist One-to-One Study Skills Support	129726.83	11.38	802884.5	16.16%
Specialist Transcription Services	2011.53	87.46	7684.5	26.18%
	325551.92	11.29	1601829	20.32%

This information should be of interest to Needs Assessors, as it demonstrates a large disparity between what they understand SFE customers need by way of NMH support, compared to what students actually decide to use in practise. This

information may assist Needs Assessors to make better-informed recommendations for NMH.

Further to this, DfE & SLC have recently been involved in investigating some concerning cases of potential abuse within the system. We have accepted audit recommendations to introduce some controls to optimise our methods of identifying and managing potentially excessive recommendations of support. To be clear, we do not wish to implement any processes which will impact upon the customer journey. We will provide more information on the intended approach to this shortly.

Requirement for DSA suppliers to be DSA-QAG registered in the Devolved Administrations: clarification in the DSAs guidance

We have issued an update to the 16/17 guidance section 1.10 in order to correct a mistake in the wording regarding which support providers are required to be QAG registered.

The guidance relates to students who are applying for English DSA support. When these students attend a Higher Education Institution in Scotland or Northern Ireland, any equipment or assistive software they receive must come from a registered ATSP. The only other exceptions are for:

- Non-Medical Help suppliers in Northern Ireland
- Scottish Assessment Centres who should be validated by the Scottish Government's Disabled Student Advisory Group

The table below sets out whether a DSA supplier is required to be DSA-QAG registered or not:

<b>Table A</b>	England and Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
ATSPs	Yes	Yes	Yes
NMH	Yes	Yes	No
Assessment Centres	Yes	No	No