Discrepancies between support provided and accessed in UK for disabled students

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to identify the uptake of Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) allocated support by disabled students within a higher educational institution, solely within the Art & Design faculty in the UK. Specifically, the study intended to ascertain what support roles in particular were not being taken up by students and possible barriers or explanations as to why this is. The study gathered quantitative statistical data as to the number of hours taken up and within what particular role. Qualitative data was gained to further investigate the uptake levels through the use of online questionnaires. The in-depth case study allowed for data to be gathered within a narrow field and for recommendations to be made. Results show that significant barriers remain for students with disabilities within university, and the system set up to reduce this gap, may very well be part of the problem, alongside other factors such at the university department organising the provision.

Several recommendations such as the necessity for a review of the current processes, particularly the Needs Assessment procedure is required, alongside institutional based improvements. Further investigation is required into the discrepancies between support provision and uptake identified by this research. Implications for establishing a support system in regions where none is yet available is also considered, but again required further attention.

Keywords: Disabled Students Allowance, Support Provision, Barriers to Support, Assistive Technology, Equality

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INTRODUCTION

This aim of this research was to investigate the discrepancy between the support hours allocated through the UK Disabled Students Allowance and the uptake of this support by disabled students. The study intended to identify possible internal and external causes for the lack of uptake and recommend departmental changes to address this. Disabled individuals within this report are students who meet the 2010 Equality Act definition of disabled in that they "have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities" (Equality Act, 2010). These students have been diagnosed with a disability and have proceeded to complete a Needs Assessment and apply for support through the Disability Students Allowance.

Prior to gathering data, a number of hypothesis were made. The main hypothesis was that across all support roles there would be a lack of uptake by students, while no theories were set as to the reason for this, it was expected that the data would show a strong correlation between lack of uptake and support. With the rise of technology, the second hypothesis lay around the increase of allocation and uptake of Assistive Technology Training rather than the more traditional Note Taking support. Working in the field for a number of years, the last hypothesis was based around previous experience and the expectation was that the most commonly allocated support role was Specialist 1:1 Study Skill support, followed by Assistive Technology Training and Study Assistance. It was predicted that the data gathered as part of this study would support these initial hypothesises.

Issues around disability in Higher Education have proved contentious since its initial implementation 25 years ago. While there is an increasing need for additional support, with growing disabled student numbers annually, this support is taken up by only 25% of those registered as disabled. The reasons for this lack of uptake remains unclear with some critics arguing that inclusivity and support for students remains a "combination of tick-box approaches to achieving disability equality, failures by some universities to implement legally required measures, and failures by the student's loans company are all hindering disabled students" (Hirsch and Lagnado, 2010). The process of accessing the Disabled Students Allowance can itself be a major deterrent for students with disabilities, involving a number of complex stages over the first two terms of university in many cases. The process is outlined in Figure 1 on the following page.

There is no deficit in the number of policies or initiatives which focus upon disabled students in the UK, yet arguably there is very little research which takes into consideration the first-hand accounts and experiences of those who are at the heart of the issue- the students themselves. A notable exception was a 2009 report from the Centre for Disability studies, drawn from 96 Higher education institutions in England and Wales, whose research explore the beliefs of both staff working in HE institutions and the

Induction and Pre-Assessment

- The first week for students within university is induction week. During this week they will receive a talk from student services in that school, who will provide an overview of the services offered an how to pursue support.
- Screenings are offered on a weekly basis throughout the academic year. These screening consist of a dictation exercise which highlights possible challenges.
- Following the dictation exercise, students will be sent a pre-assessment questionnaire. This questionnaire goes into increased depth about challenges the student may experience, this will provide indicators of a range of disabilities including dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD and Autism.

Screening

- Following the completion of the pre-assessment questionnaire, it is possible to identify the key areas in which the student shows indicators.
- A member of the core team will then perform a screening. A screening will vary dependent upon the indicators, some are simple questionnaires while others are assessments such as the DAST.
- After the completion of the screening, a short report will be created detailing the key findings. This along with the testing scoring sheets is sent to the administrator for student service es to be sent forward to a full Diagnostic Report.
- This university offers Diagnostic Bursaries to cover the cost of reports for students.

Diagnostic Assessment

- Following the approval of the Diagnostic Bursary, a diagnostic report will be organised within the university. This could be completed by a professional qualified to complete diagnostic assessments or an educational psychologist, depending upon the indicators presented within the pre assessment and screening.
- Once the Diagnostic report has been completed, and approved by the student, this along with an application for DSA will be sent off for approval.

Needs Assessment

- Once DSA has approved the Diagnostic Assessment they send a letter directly to the student, asking them to make an appointment for a Needs Assessment.
- A Needs Assessor will look at the students Diagnostic report and make recommendations based on their individual needs. These recommendations could include non-medical helper support, assistive technology or financial support with printing or travel costs.
- A completed Needs Assessment is sent to the student for approval, before being sent on to DSA.

DSA 2

- The final stage of the process, in terms of student finance and DSA. Once DSA have accepted the Needs Assessment, a letter called a DSA 2 is sent to the student. This letter sets out what support is provided to the student and which provider will be giving them the support, fore example, if it is a university or if it is an external company.
- Once the student has the DSA 2, they provide a copy of the letter to the provider with equipment, they would need to contact the provider directly and arrange for delivery of this.

Figure 1. Flow chart showing the process of applying and receiving DSA support at a UK Higher education institution.

students. This report entitled *Evaluation of Provision and Support for Disabled Students In Higher Education* investigated in significant depth the support provision in place for disabled students through the use of a national survey. This study found that there was a substantial need to respond more rapidly to the requirements and needs of those students whose impairments were not visible, specifically this related to improving teaching and assessments, as well as the assessment of individual needs. Key findings from this report identified that while the thinking around disability has certainly gained attention over the last 10 years, and arguably there has been a change in attitude visible within intuitions , this does not equate to appropriate responses to such needs and commonly these needs, although noted, are not at the top of agenda. These issues and the lack of corresponding studies to corroborate provided the rationale for this piece of research.

ETHICS

Full ethics permission was granted by the University ethics committee, with fully informed consent, anonymity and right to withdraw.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methodology approach was adopted using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, based on a questionnaire including both open and closed questions. These questions investigated the type of support students were allocated, what they were accessing, why they were not accessing support if this was the case, levels of satisfaction of the process leading up to support as well as the support provision itself, and finally if students had suggestions as to the improvement the system or service. The questionnaire consisted of 23 questions (see Appendix 1) using a combination of open and closed questions to gain qualitative and quantitative data. Initial questions were based around what support they had been allocated and which support they had picked up, with follow up questions asking why they perhaps chose not to pick up support, or if there was support not allocated to them that they would have benefited from. Follow on questions were based around overall thoughts and feelings towards the support service they accessed, allowing them to share opinions on how the service could have been improved or how appropriate they felt the environment was to their learning. The last set of questions enabled the student to opt into the second stage of the research - an interview, as well as request a meeting with Student Services to discuss their support needs following this questionnaire. No questions around the participant's age, gender or course were asked as at this time these were not relevant to the study.

Participants

A convenience sample of 198 students participated who held a diagnosis and Disabled Students Allowance, including students with Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity

Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Autism and mental health issues, and co-morbidity between these disabilities.

RESULTS

Unfortunately, due to moving university and therefore, loosing access to the participants for this study, results were manly compiled from the online questionnaire and statistical data, with only one interview having taken place. Across all roles, a large percentage of support hours allocated were unclaimed by students. The significant lack of uptake raises concerns, and requires further investigation. The support type most frequently allocated to students was Specialist 1:1 Study Skills support, with 86 % of students being allocated this type of support, corroborating the initial hypothesis and therefore, forming itself as the focus of analysis in that it addressed the majority of students. While three students used above their allocated hours and requested additional hours through the Needs Assessor and consequently the funding body, less than 5% of students used the total hours allocated to them. 30% of the students within this study used less than 50% of their hours, with 40% having never accessed any of the support allocated to them.

The second most common support type allocated to students was Assistive Technology Training (ATT), with 62% being awarded with support hours. Historically, students would have been allocated Manual Note Takers to support them with lectures, however, a change in provisions sees the reduction of this. Data from this study shows that only 3% of students were allocated a manual note taker in 2018/19 and of these hours none were used. This data is consistent with the initial hypothesis that as technology develops and becomes improves accessibility and access, there will be a concurring increase in the number of Assistive Technology Training hours allocated, and consequently a decrease in the demand for Manual Note Takers.

When asked in the questionnaire if students used all of the allocated support provided to them, 64% responded yes. However, statistical data from departmental records show that 56.5% of all support allocated was not taken up by students, which means that a mere 43.5% of support was used; a 20.5% discrepancy [Adding up all of the percentages of hours used and dividing by the roles to provide an average percentage of all support used].

While the departmental statistical data starts to show a picture of the current climate of DSA support provision, it was the qualitative data which provided valuable insight into this. There were two reoccurring themes which arose when students were asked why they did not take up their support. The most common response from students was that they felt the support allocated to them did not meet their needs, with 43% commenting it was not the right support for them. The second theme was that students were unable to access the support, either because no one replied to their correspondences or there were no staff available at the time and they were put on a waiting list. One student

commented that the entire process of getting and arranging support was simply too complicated, and therefore, support was never taken up. 29% found that despite having followed the entire process to accessing Disabled Student Allowance when it came to arrange this support with the university, they were unable to. One student commented that "I tried to book them in but was never contacted to arrange it" (Anon Student, 2018), while another said that support was "too hard to get hold off" (Anon Student, 2018). These comments highlight the need for further investigation and analysis of support provision for students in higher education, particularly within this university.

More detailed information was obtained from the interview study, with one insightful student commenting in depth on the shortcomings of the existing system, in particular the Needs assessment, which forms the basis of the support offered (see Figure 1 above for an outline of the process).

> *"the initial interview to determine support, while thorough, couldn't foresee how I would handle techniques and processes that hadn't been tried prior to university. I feel it would be beneficial to have a follow up interview after the first term to adapt/increase/decrease the level of support offered after the student has had a chance to identify areas they need additional support. Also, as you have to book in support usually a week in advance, this does not allow for lecturers who don't let you know a week in advance what workshops they have planned or any spontaneous workshops, resulting in students having to sit out of workshops that require participation"*
>
> (Anon Student, 2018).

DISCUSSION

The initial hypothesis contended that across all support roles there would be a lack of uptake, this was proven indeed to be the case. Research arguing just this is not uncommon; Macculaugh, Basanquet and Badcosk (2016), reported that 70% of students did not pick up their recommended support, similarly Wilkinson, Draffan and Viney (2012) report that 60.6% of students failed to pick up support allocated to them. The reason for lack of uptake is not clear, with both qualitative data gathered from this study and others providing a myriad of reasons with no obvious consensus. Two main themes appeared as a result of this study in relation to why students are not taking up support. Students are most frequently attributing lack of uptake to incompatibility of support allocated, closely followed by the inability to access the right support when needed.

There is no doubt that the majority of students are not picking up their allocated support, the reasons for this is a significantly more complex issue. When asked why support was not taken, 43% of students said they did not feel the support allocated met their needs. This is not a new insight, with 7.4% of students in Wilkinson, Draffan and Viney's 2012 study saying mirroring comments. As part of the Disabled Students Allowance process

students undertake a rigorous diagnostic assessment, followed by an in-depth Needs Assessment which discussed the needs of the student. Despite this long, sometimes tedious process, feedback from students remains consistent that the support allocated does not meet their needs. This highlights an area in desperate need for further investigation. Student feedback is saturated with comments that the support provided does not meet their needs, yet as this study has shown, a large percentage have never accessed any support but remain determined it is not right for them.

The *Evaluation of Provision and Support for Disabled Students in Higher Education* report (Harrison et al., 2009) attribute this to the unrecognised and unmet needs of students, and that despite good practice, there are significant gaps in support provision which students can fall through. Perhaps this this is based on a miscommunication of the reality of support against student expectation, or lack of communication at all as to what support can offer.

The inability to access the support provided was the second most common comment made when students were asked why they did not pick up the support allocated. The details of this are not clear and would require an in-depth departmental investigation to find where the service needs to be improved to meet the student's needs. Unfortunately, this seems to be the case for many institutions who are aware of the requirements of disabled students and are making steps to address these, but this does equate to successful delivery. Harrison et al., (2009) found in their research that there was evidence of delays for student attempting to access support, poor awareness and understanding of disabilities and process by staff, shortfall in resources and facilities, and lack of continuity across many institutions working with disabled students.

The quantitative data corresponds with the initial hypothesis of this study which foresaw the increase in Assistive Technology Training provisions in replacement of Manual Note taker. Following cut backs in Disabled Students Allowance, and the development of digital technology, the majority of students are no longer allocated a Manual Note Taker (McLean, 2017), rather they are provided with software which records and transcribes their notes. Feedback from student demonstrated that they were not happy about this shift in support provision, and argued that a Manual Note Taker would be more beneficial: "I would have liked to have a note taker, as lectures can often get quite disorientating" (Anon student, 2018). Maccullagh, Basonquet and Badcock (2016), correspondingly found in their research that students expressed issues and frustration with Assistive Technology in that it had a tendency on occasion to not work, and that a Manual Note Taker would meet their individual needs a lot better than a piece of software created to meet the needs of the many. They found that students with dyslexia reported the process of taking notes to be extremely difficult, and that use of Assistive Technology required too many hours of additional tutoring and familiarisation with the software. Arguably, a Manual Note Taker requires no additional effort on the student's part in many instances. Despite research and student feedback arguing that students

are in need of Manual Note Takers, statistical data from this study shows that of those students who were lucky enough to get that support allocated to them, a mere 3% of students, none of the support was actually picked up. This discrepancy requires further investigation, the misconnect between student feedback and statistics suggests that there is a need for Manual Note Takers, but that perhaps the support provision is not being focused when it is needed.

While this study found a very small proportion of students are being allocated Manual Note Takers, the number of students being given Assistive Technology Training was as expected significantly larger, with 62% of students being given four or more hours of training as part of their Disabled Students Allowance support package. Despite technological advancements and academics arguing that digital technology and consequently Assistive Technology Training will increase, the number of hours of support picked up by students is lacking, with the majority choosing not to access this support. The reasoning for this is not clear with student comments following general themes of inconsistent practice of support services rather than specific feedback regarding why they did not pick up their assistive technology package. This is an element which requires further in-depth investigation in light of the allocation of Assistive Technology in replacement of traditional Manual Note Taking. If this does indeed become the case, it is important to identify what the barriers are affecting the student's ability or willingness to access such support, and subsequently recommendations can be made for improved practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As this is a case study of one particular faculty within a higher education setting it is not possible to make conclusive recommendations, but rather form institution-based ones alongside noting themes which require further investigation. Internally, the systems and processes in place for the department need to be revisited and revised to ensure they are fit for purpose, meet the students needs and are accessible when required. More time and resources being allocated at the early stages of support provision have the potential to address any misconceptions or issues at the beginning of the process which consequently would reduce challenges down the line. As part of this early intervention process, expectations of support must be addressed from the outset, with clear guidelines set out as to what the role and purpose of this support is. While there was evidence of good practice in the case of staff providing this information to students from the initial stages of support, there lacks consistency across the department.

This study has provided valuable insight and highlighted issues requiring further investigation. It is not without its limitations however, while the statistical data was from the department as a whole, the qualitative feedback only provided an insight into those students who were registered with the department and were actively using one or more elements of the support provided. It would have been advantageous to have the

opportunity to speak to those who are not engaging with support to find out why. This study has only touched upon the surface of these issues and required a far more in-depth investigation. To expand upon the research here using a larger sample study, across courses and between different universities, would enable the data gathered here to be reinforced further with a larger qualitative and quantitate study.

Nevertheless, the findings of this study have clear implications for development more widely in regions where a system for supporting students has not yet been developed, and should provide a range of insights into improving on the existing system for application in other countries. This should enable the most effective and cost-effective approach to be generated, emphasising the need for ongoing monitoring of support, and the need to ensure that assistive technology and human support is based on expertise and ongoing evaluation.

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APPENDIX 1. ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE QUESTIONS

Art & Design Student Services Support

The purpose of this study is to gain feedback about any support allocated to you by Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) from Student Finance England (SFE) or Wales (SFW). Specifically, I am looking into; what support you did pick up, what your experience of this was, and what support, if any, you did not pick up, and why this was the case. The results from this study will feed into departmental changes in student services within the university. All data gathered is confidential, and you can withdraw from this research at any time. This research comes in two parts: a questionnaire and an interview. At the end of this questionnaire, you have the opportunity to volunteer to be contacted for an interview. You also have the opportunity to request a summary of the research once completed.   Any questions or concerns please contact Kristina Addis.

Thank you for your time.

1.   Having read the information above, do you agree to take part in the study? Single choice

  ○   Yes   ○   No

2. At what point was your disability first identified? Single choice

  ○   Childhood   ○   School   ○   Secondary School
  ○   College   ○   University

3. How was your disability identified at university? Single choice

  ○   Induction   ○   Lecturer recommendation to see student services
  ○   Own contact with student services   ○   Other [   ]

4. How did you hear about the support you could access through DSA and Student Services? Single choice

  ○   University Induction   ○   Prior to university, through college or school
  ○   Lecturer   ○   Friend or classmate   ○   University Screening
  ○   Other [   ]

5. What Support has been allocated to you? (Please Select all that apply) Multiple choice

☐ Specialist 1:1 Support   ☐ Study Assistant

☐ Specialist Support Mentor- Autism   ☐ Specialist Support Mentor- Mental Health

☐ Note Taker   ☐ Assistive Technology Trainer

☐ Communication/ Interpreter   ☐ Other

6. Are you in receipt of Disabled Students allowance? Single choice

○ Yes   ○ No

7. Do you use all of the support allocated to you? Single choice

○ Yes   ○ No

8. Which of your allocated support did you NOT use? Multiple choice

☐ Specialist 1:1 Support   ☐ Study Assistant

☐ Specialist Support Mentor- Autism   ☐ Specialist Support Mentor- Mental Health

☐ Note Taker   ☐ Assistive Technology Trainer

☐ Communication/ Interpreter   ☐ Other

9. Why did you not use this support? Multi-line Text

Enter your answer

10. Which support type have you found the most beneficial? Multiple choice

☐ Specialist 1:1 Support   ☐ Study Assistant

☐ Specialist Support Mentor- Autism   ☐ Specialist Support Mentor- Mental Health

☐ Note Taker   ☐ Assistive Technology Trainer

☐ Communication/ Interpreter   ☐ Other

11. Why did you find this support most beneficial? Single-line text

[   ]

12. Was there any support that you would have liked to access but were not able to? Single choice

○ Yes   ○ No

13. Which support type you would have liked but were not allocated? (Please select all that apply) Multiple choice

☐ Specialist 1:1 Support   ☐ Study Assistant

☐ Specialist Support Mentor- Autism   ☐ Specialist Support Mentor- Mental Health

☐ Note Taker   ☐ Assistive Technology Trainer

☐ Communication/ Interpreter   ☐ Other   [   ]

14. Did you access any additional support not provided through Disabled Students Allowance? Single choice

○ Counselling   ○ SoCom

○ Study Skills   ○ PASS

○ Other   [   ]

15. How challenging did you find the process of getting support?
    Rating: (1 being very easy and 10 being extremely difficult)

○ 1   ○ 2   ○ 3   ○ 4   ○ 5   ○ 6   ○ 7   ○ 8   ○ 9   ○ 10

16. In your opinion, what have been the benefits of support? Single-line text

[   ]

17. Are there any changes which could be made to improve your support? Single-line text

[   ]

18. Do you have any comments in regards to the facilities used for your support? e.g. rooms or equipment Single-line text

[   ]

19. Do you have any additional comments to make? Single-line text

[   ]

20. Would you like to take part in the second part of this research? This would involve an interview to discuss your views of support. Single choice

○ Yes   ○ No

21. Please provide your email address should you wish to take part in the interview Single-line text

[   ]

22. Are there any other comments you would like to make, to be shared or passed along to student services? Other comments or feedback given before this point remain confidential. Single-line text

[   ]

23.If you would like a summary of the research following this, please add your email address below. Single-line text

[   ]