

DISABLED STUDENTS' ALLOWANCES:

GIVING STUDENTS
THE TECHNOLOGY
THEY NEED TO SUCCEED

July 2019

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Foreword

The increasing number of disabled people reaching university is a major step forward for inclusion and social mobility. More disabled people rightly see university as an option for them and the growing culture of disability inclusion within the UK has encouraged more students to disclose their impairments.

Yet when disabled students get to university they still face a persistent gap in experience and outcomes compared to their non-disabled peers. This gap in experience and outcome is evidenced in student satisfaction surveys, overall grades, course completion rates, and post-graduation destinations.

We must match the aspirations of young disabled people with a higher education system that is truly inclusive throughout their experience, right up to graduation and beyond. If not, we risk blighting lives and wasting public money, and will not use our talent base to the maximum extent.

As Co-Chairs of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology, we have seen the huge contribution technology and innovation can play in levelling the playing field and giving students the tools they need to achieve their ambitions.

From software that reads out text for visually impaired students to note-taking software used by those with dyslexia, there are a number of tools which are already a part of many students' success stories. That is why it is so important to ensure that all disabled students have the software they need, and the powerful hardware required to run it.

The DSA is the primary means by which students access assistive technology at university. Students undergo a needs assessment which recommends a bespoke package of technology and human support, funded by the Allowance. Since 2015, policy was changed so that students must pay a £200 contribution towards purchasing the higher-powered laptops needed to run assistive software.

The £200 charge was introduced with the understandable aims of wider student fairness and value for money. It was argued that since most students now use a laptop, a £200 contribution (equivalent to the price of a low-powered laptop) should be deemed a mainstream cost of university study. But what our research found, in practice, is that the policy undermines both of the aims it sought to advance.

Firstly, the charge does impose an unfair additional cost for disabled students. Many students already own a standard laptop at the time when they apply for the DSA. Where this laptop is deemed by the Needs Assessor as not able to run the assistive software programs the student requires, the Assessor will recommend a new, more powerful, DSA-laptop. So while non-disabled students can keep using the standard laptop they own – devices which are perfectly fine for typing notes and browsing the web etc – students with additional needs have to find an extra £200 for the new hardware prescribed via the DSA. In short, they have to pay twice.

Second, the charge has undermined delivery of the government's objectives for the DSA of better student outcomes and narrowing the disability gap. This is because increasingly the government-funded needs assessment report recommends a package of assistive technology software which the student doesn't order because they cannot afford the up-front £200 for the hardware. Not only are students' expectations – and job prospects – being dashed, but the cost to the taxpayer of the assessment is largely wasted.

The Disabled Students' Allowance has a proven track record of providing students with assistive technology and improving education outcomes. The government is right to continue to review and work to improve the DSA to ensure fairness and value for money, but this should include a recognition that some reforms have had a negative effect. The £200 charge should be removed as an upfront cost to the student as a matter of urgency so that the 2019 cohort of students are helped to achieve their full potential.



Seema Malhotra MP

Co-chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology

Labour Co-operative MP, Feltham and Heston



Lord Holmes of Richmond MBE

Co-chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology

Conservative Peer

Executive Summary

This report starts by looking at the value of the Disabled Student Allowance, how it operates and - drawing on statistical evidence - the successes achieved by the introduction of the DSA policy. It then sets out the 2015 reform to the DSA, in particular the purpose of the £200 charge. Section two looks at the impact of the charge on achieving the government's objectives for disabled students, on value for money, and on individuals. It demonstrates that the charge has in practice resulted in the opposite to that intended: it has introduced unfairness for the student, reduced overall value for money, and crucially put in jeopardy the achievement of policy objectives for disabled student attainment. The final section sets out options for recovering the position, key conclusions and recommendations.

Key Findings

1 – Closing equality gaps

FINDING 1: The Disabled Students Allowance has a good track record in narrowing equality gaps in higher education. The programme should be recognised for its ability to play a role in helping to meet the Office for Students' recently announced targets to eliminate equality gaps within 20 years.

FINDING 2: The requirement for disabled students to pay £200 towards the cost of the high-powered laptop they need to run assistive software has led to a significant drop in take-up of essential assistive technology – estimated at 20% – and has undermined the delivery of the government's policy objectives for disabled students.

2 – Improving the cost-effectiveness of Disabled Students' Allowances

FINDING 3: When students do not take up the package of assistive technology recommended in the assessment, this wastes part of the cost of the assessment as well as dashing student aspirations.

3 – Removing additional barriers

FINDING 4: In addition to the £200 equipment charge, we have seen evidence of other financial barriers that students face when accessing Disabled Students' Allowances. These include payments for evidence of eligibility, and computer upgrades on top of the £200 charge because even DSA-laptops can be underpowered.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: The Department for Education should remove disabled students' up-front out-of-pocket-cash costs associated with accessing assistive technology through the Disabled Students' Allowance, by removing the charge or adding it to the student loan.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The Department for Education should open a public consultation on all financial barriers faced by disabled students associated with the Disabled Students' Allowances.

1. The success of the DSA

1.1. What is the Disabled Students' Allowance and why is it needed?

Since 1990 the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) has funded additional support for disabled students in higher education.¹ Students in England make an individual application for an allowance, which is funded by the government through Student Finance England.²

Disabled Students Allowances provide a range of different types of support, grouped as “specialist equipment, non-medical help, travel costs, and general costs”.³ Students meet with a Needs Assessor to determine the right package of support for them. Those who receive the DSA are typically recommended both specialist software and training sessions in how to use it. For example, a student with a specific learning difficulty might use mind-mapping software to help organise their thoughts, text-vocalisation software to help with reading and proof-reading their work, and enhanced spell-checking, auto-correction software and voice recognition for writing. To run all these programs together, students require a powerful laptop, so, when the Assessor determines that any existing laptop the student has is not suitable, they recommend a new laptop via the DSA, one that meets prescribed specifications.⁴

The need for DSAs – coupled with support provided by universities – is demonstrated by the still persistent educational outcome gap between disabled and non-disabled students. Although a record number of disabled people now reach university, disabled students still face worse outcomes: they are less likely to complete their course, achieve grades that match their talent, or find employment after graduating.⁵ It is a measure of the extent of this challenge that the Office for Students recently made the disability degree classification gap one of its four equality targets.⁶ Indeed, this is part of a wider problem in education, as Emma Lewell-Buck MP, former (2016-19) Shadow Minister for Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), told us:

“Right across their lifespan children and adult learners with disabilities are being denied or are being locked out of education”.⁷

1.2. How well has the Disabled Students' Allowance worked?

The track record of the Disabled Students' Allowance is impressive in addressing this inequality. The impact of the program is evident when we compare the outcomes for disabled students who receive DSAs and those who don't

1 BIS (2014), 'Disabled Students' Allowances: Equality Analysis', p.9. See also, Wilson, L. and Martin, N. 'Disabled Student Support for England in 2017. How did we get here and where are we going?'

2 The reforms to the DSA that are considered in this report only apply to England. Elsewhere in the UK, the £200 charge does not apply.

3 BIS (2015), 'Consultation on targeting funding for disabled students in Higher Education from 2016/17 onwards', p.10

4 Students also receive a DSA-laptop if they don't have a laptop at all (e.g. they have a tablet instead). A common reason why students' existing laptops are not powerful enough is because they are too old, and older laptops are also found to be unsuitable if they are unlikely to last the duration of the course. For guidance requiring Needs Assessors to evaluate what equipment students already have before they recommend a DSA-laptop. See: Student Finance England (2019), 'DSA Guidance (Students applying for DSAs for the first time from AY 2016/17 and beyond)', p.52-5. See also Student Finance England (2019), 'Needs Assessment Template, SFE Guidance Document (April 2019)', pp.3-4

5 OFS (2019), 'Differences in student outcomes: Disability'

6 OFS (2018), 'Universities must eliminate equality gaps'. The OFS aimed to “eliminate the gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between disabled students and non-disabled students by 2024-25”.

7 Evidence Session. See also Education Policy Institute (2018)

have that support. While both groups of disabled students receive a lower degree classification than predicted by their entry grades, the gap is half as great for DSA students.⁸ This sometimes life-changing impact of DSAs was driven home by Neil Cottrell, who received the DSA at university and later founded the assistive software company LexAble:

“I’m dyslexic and . . . the assistive technology I got through the disabled students’ allowance literally made the difference between not being able to read journal articles and therefore failing my course, and graduating top of my class with a first.”

The effectiveness of the DSA program is also indicated by the statistics on post-graduate destinations, i.e. entry into highly skilled employment or further study. DSA students outperform disabled students without the DSA (even when we account for the difference in degree classifications mentioned above).⁹

The most striking data on the positive impact of the DSAs relates to continuation, i.e. the rate at which students complete their course. As shown in Figure 1 below, disabled students who receive DSAs have better completion rates even by comparison with non-disabled students.

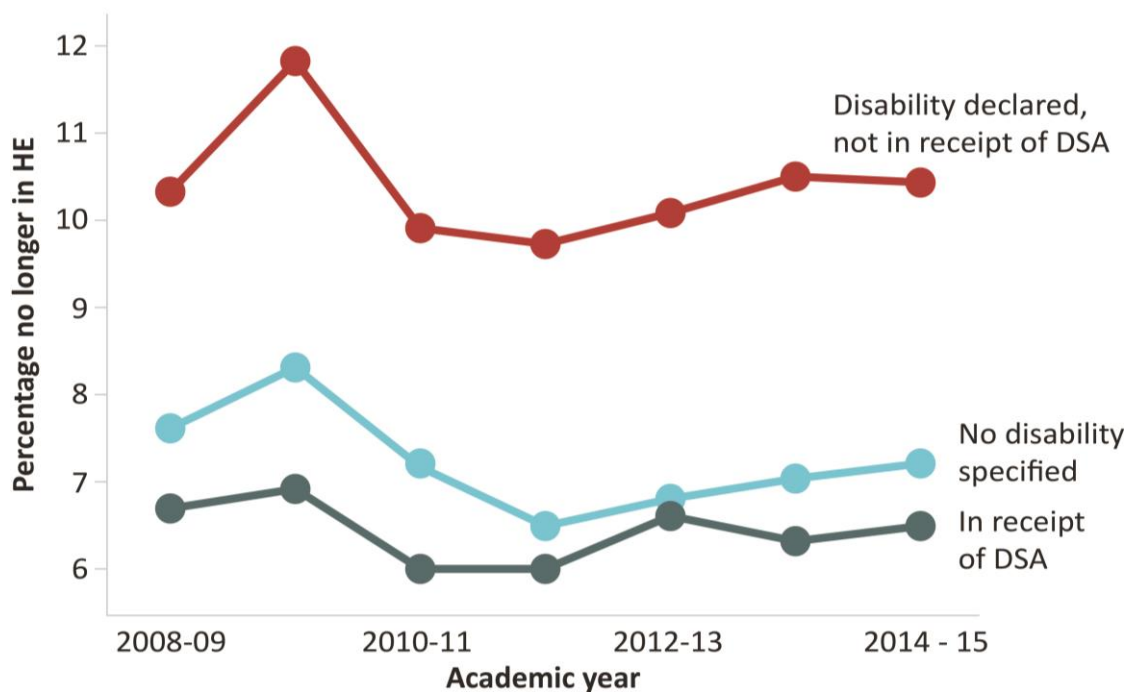


Figure 1 source: HESA Student Record, cited in HEFCE Key Facts 2017

A DfE-commissioned study found that students themselves recognise the impact of DSAs: DSA recipients who felt confident about passing their course were asked whether they would feel this way without getting DSAs, just one-

⁸ OFS (2019), 'OFS Official statistic: Key performance measure 5'

⁹ OFS (2019), 'Differences in student outcomes: Disability'

quarter said they would (23%) while three in five (59%) said they would not.¹⁰ Marsha de Cordova MP, shadow Minister for Disabled People, received the DSA herself as an undergraduate: she called assistive technology "*one of the essential aspects of the DSA*".¹¹

At the end of 2018, the Office for Students announced a new target to entirely eliminate the key equality gaps in higher education over the next 20 years, including between disabled and non-disabled students.¹² The evidence above suggests that meeting this target will depend on maintaining and building on the essential contribution to date of the DSA to narrowing disability outcomes gaps.

1.3. Reforms to the DSA

Beginning in the 2015/16 academic year, the Government started implementing reforms in England. Some of the reforms restricted the kinds of support provided by DSAs in order to strike a new "balance" between "support supplied by HE providers and [support provided through] DSAs."¹³ For example, DSAs no longer pay for support workers to take notes for disabled students in lectures as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are expected to provide this support where needed,¹⁴ and some forms of IT equipment ('peripherals' such as mice) are no longer funded through the DSA. Importantly, the government began requiring students to pay £200 towards the cost of the high-powered laptops that many students are recommended as part of their package of assistive technology.

1.4. Rationale for the £200 laptop charge

The government explained the new charge on the grounds that the DSA should only cover additional costs faced by disabled students, not the mainstream costs of study. This is to ensure both fairness and value for money in achieving the policy objectives.

The DSA-laptop is not mainstream equipment and the government recognises this.¹⁵ But it argues that a *portion* of the cost of a DSA-laptop is a mainstream cost because all students can expect to pay around £200 for a low-powered laptop to support basic study tasks such as work processing and internet browsing.¹⁶ We will consider whether this rationale has in practice stood up to the test of reality, and the impact of the £200 charge on achieving fairness and value for money through the DSA initiative as a whole.

¹⁰ DfE (2019), 'Evaluation of disabled students' allowances', p.92

¹¹ Ms de Cordova also said that assistive technology is something that she continues to use to carry out her work as an MP and Shadow Minister for Disabled People

¹² OfS (2018), 'Universities must eliminate equality gaps'

¹³ BIS (2015), 'Consultation on targeting funding for disabled students in Higher Education from 2016/17 onwards', p.5.

¹⁴ Except in exceptional circumstances

¹⁵ Because DSA-laptops must be powerful enough to run several demanding assistive software applications, they are configured to specifications set by the DSA Quality Assurance Agency. As the government explains "DSAs-funded 'standard' computers are generally of a higher specification compared to entry level computers to ensure multiple assistive software programmes can run effectively... A Student Loans Company sampling exercise of DSAs students found that 75% had received a standard specification computer, sometimes referred to as a 'classic' or 'workhorse' computer by the DSAs sector." BIS (2014), 'Disabled Students' Allowances: Equality Analysis' p.10.

¹⁶ BIS (2014), 'Disabled Students' Allowances: Equality Analysis', p.51.

2. Evaluating the impact of the introduction of the DSA charges

2.1. Reduction in the take up of DSA-laptops

Evidence shows that since the imposition of the £200 charge there has been a significant decline in take-up of assistive technology via DSAs. The DSA Quality Assurance Group has produced figures on the number of students who have received a Needs Assessment as part of the DSA process, and the Student Loans Company records the number of students who have received a package of assistive technology – this package is referred to as an ‘Equipment DSA’. By comparing these two figures we can estimate the gap between the number of recommendations for assistive technology and the number of students who actually place an order for this equipment.

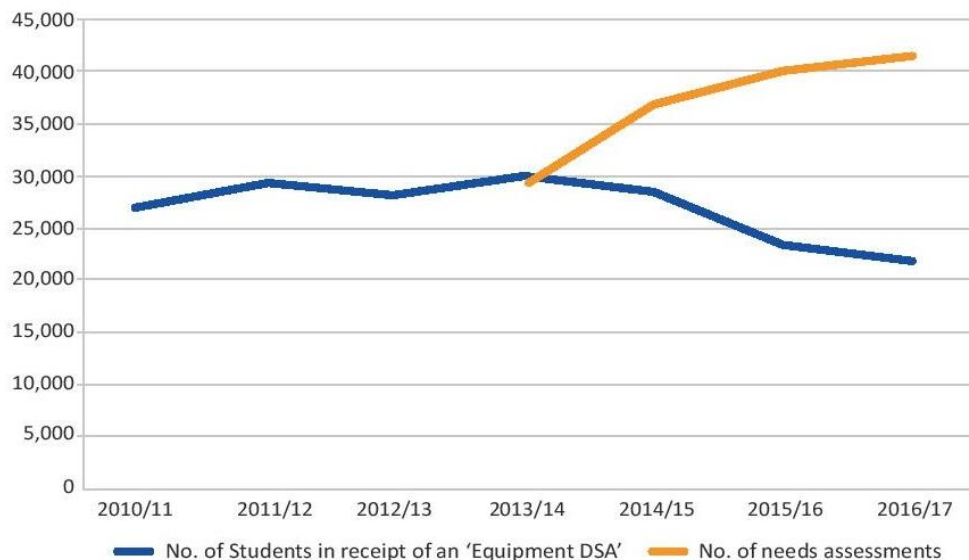


Figure 2 source: Student Loans Company and DSA Quality Assurance Group

The figures show that this gap opened up significantly when the £200 charge for laptops was introduced for the 2015/16 academic year. The number of students who received a Needs Assessment continued to increase, but the number of students who received technology fell. We could find no evidence of a reduction in the tendency for Assessments to find that students require assistive technology¹⁷, and so the figures suggest an increase in the

¹⁷ Note that any time students receive technology via the DSA, this is counted as an Equipment DSA – including when the technology package does not include a laptop. Therefore, even if we assume that fewer students are being recommended a DSA-laptop – e.g. because more already have a suitable laptop – and are only being recommended software, this would count as decline in recommendations for Equipment DSAs

number of students who received technology fell. We could find no evidence of a reduction in the tendency for Assessments to find that students require assistive technology¹⁷, and so the figures suggest an increase in the number of students who ‘drop out’ of the assistive technology aspect of the DSA. In other words, those students who apply for a DSA, undergo a Needs Assessment, receive a recommendation for package of technology including software and a DSA-laptop – based on the professional judgement of an Assessor that a new, more powerful laptop is required – but then do not order the laptop and so don’t receive any assistive technology via the DSA. In the 2016/17 academic year there were almost twice as many students who underwent Needs Assessments as there were students who actually received assistive technology via the DSA.¹⁸

We can estimate the scale of the impact of these reforms by comparing the average uptake of Equipment DSAs for the pre-2014/15 years with the post-2014/15 years, after the charge was introduced. From this, we can see that close to 5840 fewer students now receive this support each year, a fall of approximately 20%.¹⁹ The impact of the charge can also be illustrated by comparing the figures for England with those of Wales and Northern Ireland, where DSAs still fund the entire assistive technology package, without any charges. Between the years 2014/15 and 2015/16 (when the reforms were introduced), equipment uptake fell by just 5.9% in Wales and not at all in Northern Ireland, compared to a 16.4% fall in England over the same period.²⁰

In sum, given the timing of the fall in take-up, and the increasing number of assessments over the same period, it is highly likely that the £200 charge is responsible for the decline in access to assistive technology. Indeed, the government has accepted this conclusion: the previous Universities Minister, Sam Gyimah MP said *“The main reason for this fall [in Equipment DSA take-up] is that the £200 student contribution to the costs of computer hardware took effect from September 2015.”*²¹

The link between the charge and reduced take-up of technology is further established by a survey conducted by the British Assistive Technology Association. The Association surveyed 1,028 DSA recipients and found that 10% were recommended a DSA-laptop but did not order one, and 69% of that group cited affordability as the sole reason they didn’t access the equipment. Even among those students who do pay the charge, 30% took more than one month to pay and reported this was due to affordability.²²

Put simply:

“the cost is encouraging students to turn down essential support that's been identified in the [Needs Assessment] report” according to Lesley Morrice, Chair of the National Network of Assessment Centres.

17 Note that any time students receive technology via the DSA, this is counted as an Equipment DSA – including when the technology package does not include a laptop. Therefore, even if we assume that fewer students are being recommended a DSA-laptop – e.g. because more already have a suitable laptop – and are only being recommended software, this would count as decline in recommendations for Equipment DSAs

18 41,450 assessments to 21,600 Equipment DSAs. See footnote 18

19 The average number of Equipment DSAs awarded from 2010/11 – 2014/15 is 28,340 a year. The average for 2015/16 and 2016/17 is 22,500. The difference between these two averages is 5840, and 5840 is 20.6% of 28,340 (the 2010/11 – 2014/15 average). The SLC has also released a provisional figure for the number of equipment DSAs in 2017/18: 23,386. This figure is slightly higher than the average for the years 2015/16 and 2016/17 (22,500). Assuming the provisional figure is not revised down, the average for 2015/16 – 2017/18 will be 22,795, and the drop off will be 19.5%. It has also been suggested that the provisional figures may be revised up, as has happened in the past, however, it is highly unlikely an upward revision will be so significant as to take the yearly average close to the pre-reform levels

20 SLC FOI request 03-17. The figures for Wales and Northern Ireland are provisional

21 Answer to written question 135499

22 BATA (2018), ‘The impact on disabled students of the introduction of a £200 levy on Disabled Student Allowances and proposals for a positive way forward’, p.17

2.2. Government's assessment of declining access

The government accepts that the £200 charge for DSA-laptops has led to fewer students ordering this equipment,²³ and it did commission new research to “assess the extent to which DSAs are meeting their objective to reduce barriers to learning that disabled students might experience”. The study had a “subsidiary aim to explore the impacts of the recent changes to DSAs funding.”²⁴ This study – based on a student survey, interviews and case studies – provides new and important insights into both the positive effects of DSA support and the difficulties that students still face when navigating the system; we draw on its findings throughout this report.

However, the study does not provide an evaluation of the impact of the £200 charge policy. This is because the survey did not ask students whether they had been assessed as requiring a DSA-laptop, and whether they had paid the £200 charge to order that recommended equipment.²⁵ The study did not therefore produce data that would allow us to compare the experiences or outcomes of those who are able to pay and those who aren't. Nor did the study attempt to replicate the findings of the BATA study, cited above, by asking the students who didn't order a DSA-laptop why they didn't take up this support.²⁶ In short, the new research is welcome for the attention it brings to students' experiences of the DSA, but it was a missed opportunity to evaluate whether the £200 charge is adversely impacting students ability to fulfil their personal and economic potential.²⁷ This is the question we take up in the remainder of this chapter.

2.3. Impact of the charge on fairness and value for money of the DSA

To inform the government's response to the new research, this inquiry therefore took evidence about the impact of the charge, in particular whether it does introduce fairness and provide greater value for money for the taxpayer.

The evidence provided all pointed to the other direction, i.e. that it *does* impose a disability-related cost on disabled students and therefore is an unfair charge on an already disadvantaged group.

- a. While it is true that laptops are widely *used* among HE students, laptop ownership is only truly *required* for disabled students. This point is made by Rick Bell, Vice-Chair of British Assistive Technology Association:

²³ DfE (2019), 'Evaluation of disabled students' allowances', p.8

²⁴ DfE (2019), 'Evaluation of disabled students' allowances', p.8

²⁵ The study does ask students whether they received 'IT equipment you need for your course'. However 'IT equipment' is a category that includes devices such as dictaphones and reading pens, for which there is no charge. So we cannot assume that those who received 'IT equipment' paid the £200 charge and received a DSA-laptop. In addition, the study notes that, when it comes to IT equipment students may confuse support received from their HEI with DSA support (DfE (2019), 'Evaluation of disabled students' allowances', p.47) (e.g. a dictaphone loaned to them by their HEI)

²⁶ The study - DfE (2019), 'Evaluation of disabled students' allowances' - did find that, of students who received a DSA in 2017/18 and did not 'use all of the support that was offered', 9% cited affordability as the reason. However, this data set - students who did not 'use all of the support that was offered' - could include those who did pay the £200 and receive a DSA-laptop but didn't take up some other form of support, for which there is no charge. E.g. a student who did order a laptop but who didn't book all of their mentoring sessions, would count of as one of the 91% of students whose failure to take up all their support was not due to affordability. But the fact that affordability is not an issue in the take up of free support should not obscure the potential impact of affordability on the take up of support that does come with a charge. The DfE study also cites a 6% figure which is doubly unhelpful because here the group of respondents includes students who received the DSA before the £200 charge was introduced

²⁷ One might still hope to gain some insight into the impact of the £200 charge by using the date that a student was awarded a DSA as a proxy for whether they were subject to the charge. If we ignore the fact that not all students are recommended a DSA-laptop, we can assume that students who received the DSA in 2014/2015 or earlier were not subject to the charge whereas those who received the DSA after that date were asked to pay the charge. We could then compare the experiences and outcomes of the two cohorts as a rough indication of the impact of the charge. However, because the survey was conducted recently, it only captures a small sample (106) of students who received a DSA before the charge was introduced. Consequently, as the researchers point out, they were not generally able to make robust comparisons between those who were awarded the DSA before the introduction of the charge and those who were awarded the DSA after the policy change. See DfE (2019), 'Evaluation of disabled students' allowances', p.18.

"There is no requirement for all students to own their computer. If a non-disabled student does not have their own computer the impact is minimal. They use a computer primarily for word processing or for research. Both of which can be done on other machines, in the library or at home at the weekend. For the disabled student, this is not the case, the computer is not simply a tool for word processing, but forms only part of an assistive technology package that may be required in lectures, seminars or group activities to comprehend, capture or communicate information. Without which that student may simply be unable to participate fully or independently."

- b. In practice, the £200 charge represents a cost which only disabled students have to bear, rather than a contribution to a mainstream cost. Many disabled students – like non-disabled students – already own a mainstream laptop at the point at which they apply for the DSA, so the £200 charge for a DSA-laptop is an additional expense for those who have already paid for a laptop that is assessed as not suitable.²⁸

As Lesley Morrice, Chair of the National Network of Assessment Centres, explained:

"We have lots of students who've purchased computers ahead of starting their studies but these are not of a sufficient specification to run the assistive software. Students have already made best efforts to ensure that they've got a computer but they're now required to either contribute £200 towards another device or go without the assistive software."

It would be unrealistic to argue that disabled students can delay buying a mainstream laptop in anticipation of accessing the DSA once they get to university. The recent DfE study showed that only 58% of students who went on to receive the DSA were aware of the programme before they started at university.²⁹ We understand that DfE plans to increase awareness prior to students starting their course, but do not judge this to be a realistic way of ensuring students aren't hit by a duplicate cost once they've been assessed as needing a DSA-laptop. This is because, as DfE acknowledges, many students only have their disability identified or diagnosed while at university, and some may develop a disability after they have started their course.³⁰ Thus, even students who are aware of the DSA before they start university may not apply for the DSA until they are some way into their course and have already bought a laptop. In addition, a Jisc study shows that 64% of FE students own a laptop. It would be unfair to expect disabled FE students to hold back on buying a laptop for use at college in anticipation of applying for the DSA at University.³¹

Turning to value for money for the taxpayer in delivering the objectives of the DSA policy, the inquiry heard very clearly that the £200 charge has reduced not increased value for money. There is now evidence that the policy is affecting disabled students' access to other support elements, ie the policy is having a wider impact on disabled students. As Neil Cottrell put it, whatever the rationale for the policy "at a high level" we can now see that "*on the ground, in the real world, it's creating a barrier*".³² As new data has become available, such as from the BATA survey showing 69% found the charge unaffordable, it has become clear that the significant group of students who are put off by, or simply can't afford, the £200 charge, are not getting access to the assistive software they need to be successful throughout their course. In short, the lack of powerful laptop means they lose out on the rest of the

²⁸ NUS found that 34% of students are using a computer that is between three and five years old. See NUS 'Degrees of discrimination' (2014) quoted in DfE (2019), 'Evaluation of disabled students' allowances', p.10

²⁹ DfE (2019), 'Evaluation of disabled students' allowances', p.20

³⁰ DfE (2019), 'Evaluation of disabled students' allowances', p.24 and also Byrne, Christopher (2018), 'Why do dyslexic students do worse at university?'

³¹ Jisc (2018), 'Digital experience insights survey 2018: findings from students in UK further and higher education', p.8

³² Evidence session

DSA package. This is not value for money: the cost of the assessment is wasted and the delivery of the government's policy objectives is undermined.³³

In particular, the inquiry found three main types of consequence for disabled students of the £200 charge. We shall take each in turn, but first reflect on the broader financial circumstances for disabled students and hence why a £200 sum represents such a barrier.

2.4. Why a £200 charge is a barrier

The Student Loans Company provides maintenance loans and grants to students on a means-tested basis.³⁴ However, students from less well-off backgrounds can still struggle: official figures show the impact of the £200 has been felt disproportionately by lower-income students. Since the introduction of the charge there has been a 17.6% drop in the number of students with a household income of below £30k who order DSA-laptops following their DSA needs assessment; this compares with a 13.0% drop for those students with a household income above £30k.³⁵

A second important factor is that the £200 charge often comes on top of other additional costs faced by disabled students. As we heard from Lord Addington, President of the British Dyslexia Association, students with dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties often have to pay several hundreds of pounds for a diagnostic assessment to qualify for the DSA.³⁶ The former (2017-19) NUS Disabled Students Officer Rachel O'Brien added that there are other additional expenses associated with accessing the DSA:

*"Medical proof in case of students with physical and mental and chronic impairments. Often doctors' notes are very expensive. I know one doctor servicing the University of Durham which charges £50 per note and they only put one condition on each note. So for some students, with multiple conditions, they're literally paying hundreds of pounds."*³⁷

More broadly, the disability charity Scope found that disabled people face a significantly higher cost of living than non-disabled people - the study pointed to costs including paying for therapy and making home adaptations.³⁸ These higher costs faced by disabled students help explain why an additional £200 out-of-pocket expense has created such a financial disincentive to taking up the support that will help a student succeed at university. We have also made a recommendation to review costs and barriers more broadly.

Against that background, the inquiry found the following consequences for students from the £200 charge:

Delays in getting support

A BATA survey of students who received the DSA found that the £200 charge was leading to a delay in take-up, due largely to cash-flow issues for the student: 30% of those who ordered equipment reported they took more than

³³ The loss of value for money might be mitigated by only charging those students who have not already purchased their own laptop, but this would be administratively complex and potentially costly so would require another assessment of respective costs to the public purse. In addition, this proposal would not address the disincentive effect of the £200 that has led to a reduced take-up of assistive technology via the DSA

³⁴ UK domiciled only, see answer to written question 203783

³⁵ BATA (2018), 'The impact on disabled students of the introduction of a £200 levy on Disabled Student Allowances and proposals for a positive way forward'

³⁶ For example, The British Dyslexia Association offers such assessment for between £450+VAT and £600+VAT, see BDA (2019) 'Diagnostic Assessments'

³⁷ Evidence session

³⁸ Scope (2019), 'The Disability Price Tag'

one month to do so, due to affordability. The impact of delays in receiving support can be significant. The DfE survey of disabled students found that delays were a major concern for students: 21% of students who were recommended some kind of support via the DSA found getting that support “very difficult” (10%) or “fairly difficult” (11%). For those who experienced difficulty accessing support 17% say it “Took too long / too many delays” and 16% still hadn’t received some or all of the support at the time they took the questionnaire. The demands of a student’s course don’t stop while they wait for support so delays disrupt study significantly.

The DfE report quotes a student who had to “*sit the whole of the first year again to be able to access everything I should’ve had at the start of that year*”.³⁹

Trying to make do using pre-existing low-power hardware

As indicated above, many older or lower specification laptops that students already own before they apply for the DSA are not powerful enough and so the assistive software doesn’t run properly. It is only in such cases that Needs Assessors recommend a DSA-laptop as part of the technology package.⁴⁰ When students aren’t able to pay the £200 charge for a DSA-laptop they may order the (free) software they were recommend and decline to order the DSA-laptop, attempting to run the software on an inadequate device. In such cases, official statistics record that an ‘Equipment DSA’ had been received even though the full package of recommended technology has not been taken-up. For this reason there are no official statistics tracking how many students have attempted to use assistive software on unsuitable pre-existing laptops. The DfE survey did find that, of the 34% of students who did not take up all their DSA support, 15% cited ‘Issues with the hardware / software’,⁴¹ and there have been anecdotal reports of students who are struggling to run their DSA assistive software on an older laptop that they already own. This suggests students are taking up the software and trying unsuccessfully to make do with a pre-existing laptop. Indeed, the problem was cited as the primary reason why the policy of a £200 charge was recently rejected by the Welsh Government:

“There was little support for charging students £200 for a computer, as there were many accounts of students coming to Higher Education Providers with old computers or computers not designed to run appropriate software.”⁴²

Missing out entirely

Though some students will attempt to use assistive software on their existing laptops, it is likely that many more simply miss out on assistive technology altogether if they aren’t able to pay the £200 charge. When students don’t take up all the support that is recommended for them, it undermines the potential for the DSA to improve outcomes. As Lord Addington explained:

“You’re running the risk now of actually causing people to fail. And the dropping out after three or four semesters is a disaster all round... there is no point in getting someone to university to make sure they’re going to fail.”⁴³

³⁹ DfE (2019), ‘Evaluation of disabled students’ allowances’, p.59

⁴⁰ See Student Finance England (2019), ‘DSA Guidance (Students applying for DSAs for the first time from AY 2016/17 and beyond)’, p.52-5. See also Student Finance England (2019), ‘Needs Assessment Template, SFE Guidance Document (April 2019)’, pp.3-4

⁴¹ Furthermore, the sample of students who were asked this question includes those who were not recommended any hardware or software as part of their DSA, so the proportion affected by technical problems is likely even higher. Nor does the question ask whether the hardware in question was the student’s existing laptop or a laptop acquired via the DSA

⁴² Welsh Government (2017), ‘A Review of the Disabled Students’ Allowances’, p.61

⁴³ Evidence session

Even DSA-laptops may not be powerful enough

Evidence to our inquiry about the relationship between full DSA support and achieving educational outcomes is echoed in the DfE study.⁴⁴ It found that “DSA recipients who did not report any gaps left in their support” were more confident that they would stay on to the end of their course and pass their degree. Interviews carried out as part of the study confirmed that, where DSA recipients reported less confidence from having DSA support “this was sometimes due to obstacles such as delays in getting access to it or problems using it”.⁴⁵ At an evidence session for this inquiry, the former (2017-19) NUS Disabled Students Officer, Rachel O'Brien shared her experience of missing out on key support:

“I got through university by the skin of my teeth. I came very close to dropping out a number of times for various reasons, some of those reasons were directly related to not having those adjustments in place.”

When students have to delay using effective technology, or try to make do with inadequate equipment, or miss out on using assistive technology altogether, it undermines the ability of the DSA to achieve the government’s stated objective of making a positive impact on outcomes for disabled students.

Disproportionate impact

DfE research has found that students with learning difficulties (including dyslexia and autism) and/or mental health conditions are poorly served by the DSA system in a number of ways. Relative to other disabled students, students with mental health conditions and/ or learning difficulties are:

- **Less likely to be aware that they are eligible for the DSA (page 9),**
- **Less likely to be satisfied with their assessment (page 10),**
- **Less satisfied with the type of support to which they are entitled (page 10),**
- **More likely to delay disclosing their condition (page 24),**
- **More likely to find it difficult to complete the application form (page 31),**
- **Less satisfied with the application process (page 35),**
- **Less likely to feel listened to by their assessor (page 41),**
- **Less likely to be satisfied with their HEIs response to the needs assessment recommendation (page 44),**
- **Less likely to be satisfied with the amount of funding available for DSA support (pages 44-45),**
- **Less clear on how to access support (page 53).⁴⁶**

It is therefore especially concerning that the negative impacts of the £200 charge appear to have had a disproportionate impact on some of these groups. Before the charge was introduced 20% of students overall failed to order their DSA-laptop and this climbed to 32% in the year following the policy change. With respect to students with autism, a learning difficulty or mental health condition, the number who failed to order their equipment rose from 20% to 30%, from 18% to 31%, and from 29% to 43% respectively.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ DfE (2019), ‘Evaluation of disabled students’ allowances’, pp.91-2

⁴⁵ DfE (2019), ‘Evaluation of disabled students’ allowances’, p.94

⁴⁶ In addition, those with mental health conditions specifically were less likely to know that the DSA applies to them; less likely to go to their needs assessment meeting (page 39), more likely to feel there were gaps in their support; less likely to be confident of complaining about their course (page 91); but more likely to know about HEI support (page 61). See DfE (2019), ‘Evaluation of disabled students’ allowances’

⁴⁷ BATA (2018), ‘The impact on disabled students of the introduction of a £200 levy on Disabled Student Allowances and proposals for a positive way forward’, p. 11, citing FOI request to the Student Loans Company: ref 20-18

3. Recovering the situation

In considering options for reversing the decline in DSA take-up and hence improving the prospects of delivering the 2018 target to eliminate key equality gaps⁴⁸ we benchmarked with similar policies. A very pertinent read-across is to the £111 million per annum Access to Work scheme, where the government has recognised that employer co-payment for the cost of assistive technology can disincentivise take-up of other necessary equipment. It has announced plans to remove this disincentive, by introducing a new Tech Fund so that the full cost of assistive technology is grant-funded. The rationale is to “avoid dis-incentivising an SAE [Special Aides and Equipment] technology solution for employers”.⁴⁹ Importantly, the government has adopted the Tech Fund policy irrespective of the issue of fairness – it might be fair for employers to contribute⁵⁰ - but this is a less important principle than the priority it places on achieving its policy of increasing take-up of assistive technology within Access to Work and hence of increasing disabled employment. **The same policy rationale could be applied to the Disabled Students Allowance, now that the data shows the £200 charge has had a negative impact on take-up of the overall assistive technology component of that scheme.**

To assist in determining how to improve the likelihood of achieving government objectives on disabled students, we have set out three approaches to removing the up-front financial disincentive for students to order a DSA-laptop capable of running the assistive software they have been recommended.

3.1. Could Higher Education Institutions cover the cost?

HEIs have a central role in supporting their students to overcome barriers to study. This includes implementing inclusive practices for all students, targeted support for disabled students, and helping students access the DSA. As Daniela de Silva, Specific Learning Difficulties Adviser at the University of Westminster said, many HEIs establish a “process of working with individual students in order to identify a package of support that includes DSAs and university [funded] adjustments”; universities are working to “try to pull all these [elements of support] together and help to make sense of how they all join up.”⁵¹

Some HEIs already pay the £200 charge themselves as part of their commitment to supporting students to take advantage of DSAs - sometimes on a means-tested basis.⁵² A disabled student interviewed for this inquiry by the Muscular Dystrophy UK Trailblazers group said:

“DSA is essential for me completing my course as I need so much equipment which I could not afford alone. I was required to pay the £200 fee but my university reimbursed it.”⁵³

⁴⁸ OFS (2018), ‘Office for Students: universities must eliminate equality gaps’

⁴⁹ See Minister for Disabled People (2018), ‘Response to Work and Pensions Select Committee (WPSC) assistive technology inquiry letter’. See also DWP (2018), ‘Government announces Tech Fund to support disabled people and their employers’. Access to Work does not typically pay for laptops, which are considered standard office equipment, however, this ‘Tech Fund’ policy is a recognition that requirements to contribute assistive technology costs can be a disincentive and that this disincentive should be avoided even if a co-payment is fair.

⁵⁰ Larger employers are still required to pay part of the cost of other (non-technology) forms of support

⁵¹ Evidence session. In addition, Jeremy Brassington, Managing Director of technology company Notetalker, stressed the importance of HEI support and stated that “We need a joined up process whereby University and DSA work together to solve the student issues” - written evidence

⁵² Examples given in written evidence to this inquiry from Buckinghamshire New University, University of Warwick, Birkbeck College, and University of Sheffield

⁵³ Written evidence, Muscular Dystrophy UK

The practice of HEIs paying the £200 charge is further evidence that the policy has not worked as intended: many HEIs recognise that, unless they reimburse the cost, some students will be unable to access the assistive technology they need.⁵⁴ This raises the question of whether the practice of reimbursement could be promoted more widely, or even required of HEIs. In assessing this proposal it should be recognised that the £200 charge was introduced with the intention that students would pay the charge, not HEIs. The government has encouraged HEIs to ensure that “disabled students are not put at a substantial disadvantage compared with their non-disabled peers” but the rationale of the £200 charge is that it represents a cost which is unrelated to disability.⁵⁵ Encouraging HEIs to assume the cost of the charge would reinforce it as a cost that does relate to disability – in which case it should be covered by the DSA itself.

Importantly, many HEIs - perhaps most - do not currently take on the cost of reimbursing the £200 charge. The inquiry heard that some cannot afford to take on the cost, either because they are small institutions, e.g. FE colleges that provide HE, or have an unusually high number of disabled students.

3.2. Removing the charge

A second option would be to simply remove the £200 charge from the DSA system.⁵⁶ This would increase the cost of the DSA system: revenue collected from the charge would be lost, and, since more students would order DSA-laptops and assistive software, this too would represent an additional cost of the system. The cost of eliminating the charge can be estimated as equal to the amount the government currently receives in £200 fees related to the DSA: £4.3 million in 2016/17.⁵⁷ However, removing the charge would also have the positive effect of increasing student uptake of the assistive technology that they have been shown to require – an outcome that would align with current government policy and recent initiatives.⁵⁸ If technology uptake returned to its pre-reform level, approximately 5840 additional students would receive laptops and other assistive technology and this could cost the government a further £4.6 million.⁵⁹ This brings the total estimated cost of the policy change to around £9 million.⁶⁰

The aim of the DSA reform was not to reduce the cost of the program but to ensure it “achieve[s] value for money.”⁶¹ Removing the charge could help deliver this value for money as it would increase the overall positive impact of the DSA in enabling students to achieve the better outcomes proven to be associated with receiving DSA support. In particular, DSA support is associated with lower drop-out rates:⁶² If we can reduce dropouts further by improving the DSA’s provision of assistive technology support we could make a substantial saving to the public purse more widely. Labour Force Survey data show that graduates have higher rates of employment than non-

54 Written evidence from HEI, anonymous

55 HEIs do not typically pay for personal laptops for non-disabled students

56 As noted above, an alternative proposal to this one would be to apply the charge only to those students who do not have a laptop at the point of the DSA assessment. However, a partial removal of the charge would complicate the administration and therefore add administrative cost

57 200 x the number of Equipment DSAs funded by SLC in 2016/17. Figures from SLC (2019), ‘Student Support for Higher Education in England 2018: Publication Update (Table 4B)’

58 The government has recently proposed a procurement tender for assistive technology provided via the DSA and, in doing so, cited the need to address the difficulty some students have in accessing support and the low uptake of some forms of support. See SLC (2018), ‘Disabled Student Allowances (DSAs) – Procurement of IT hardware, software, specialist equipment and training’

59 £4.6million = difference between the pre- and post-reform average yearly take-up of Equipment DSAs (5840) x the average cost of an ‘Equipment DSA’ (£787). The average cost of an ‘Equipment DSA’ is calculated as the total spend on ‘Equipment DSAs’ in 2016/17 (£17 million) divided by the number of Equipment DSAs awarded (21,600) in the same year. Figures from SLC (2019), ‘Student Support for Higher Education in England 2018: Publication Update’ (Table 4B)

60 There would also be an additional cost to providing training to students who currently don’t take up their assistive technology support. However, we are unable to calculate this as we don’t have figures for the total or average cost of assistive technology training

61 Minister of State for Universities and Science (2015), ‘Disabled Students’ Allowances: Written statement - HCWS347’

62 See the section ‘How well has the Disabled Student Allowance worked?’ in this report

graduates (87.4% compared to 71.6%) and their median salary is £10,000 higher.⁶³ Additional tax revenue and student loan repayments accrued from those who complete university because they receive assistive technology via a DSA could more than offset the cost of removing the £200 charge.

Second, the £200 charge has introduced greater waste into the DSA system itself. When a student doesn't take up all the key parts of their recommendations from their Needs Assessment, such as assistive technology, the value of the whole needs assessment is greatly reduced. It cannot be value for money for the government to pay for needs assessors to recommend technology which students cannot then afford to take up.

3.3. Adding the charge to the loan

Though removing the charge would improve the value for money of the DSA system, it is right to consider solutions that would also be neutral in terms of the DSA balance sheet. One such proposal is that students will still incur the cost of the £200 charge but won't be asked to pay it upfront: instead, the charge would be added to their student loan.⁶⁴ It is likely that a charge paid as part of the loan would not have the disincentive effect of the current situation which creates an out-of-pocket cash expense.⁶⁵ There are two possible objections to this solution. The first is that it does not address the concerns about the fairness of imposing a charge on disabled students before they can access assistive technology. A second worry is more practical. Many students have already set up their student loan before they receive DSA. For this reason, the student loan would have to be adjusted for DSA students who are recommended equipment and this may pose an administrative challenge and at best introduce delays.

3.4. Assessment of options

The inquiry concluded it was not realistic to look to HEIs to reimburse the cost, mainly because not all could afford to and would do so. We were not able to look at the technical issues around adding the charge to the student loan, and accept that it may prove more efficient to remove the charge instead of setting up a system to adding it the student's loan. The decision is a matter for the department. But action needs to be taken urgently so that another cohort of students are not disadvantaged and the country does not lag further behind on its ambition to eliminate key equality gaps.

⁶³ DfE (2019), 'Graduate labour market statistics: 2018'. Figures are for people of working age. See also the 2006 KPMG report on 'The long term costs of literacy difficulties', estimated at between £5,000 and £64,000 over an individual's lifetime

⁶⁴ In this scenario, the £200 would be paid *directly* from the loan, i.e. without first going into the students' account. This would prevent the charge from being an out-of-pocket expense

⁶⁵ As noted above, one could opt to remove the charge for only those students who don't have a laptop; similarly, one could only give students who don't own a laptop the option of obtaining their recommended DSA-laptop by accepting a £200 addition to their loan. However, as noted above, this introduces complications that may not be workable or desirable

Methodology

This inquiry was conducted by Policy Connect with the APPG for Assistive Technology. The findings and policy recommendations in this report are based on a review of pertinent literature, interviews, responses to a written call for evidence, an evidence session held in Parliament chaired by the APPG for Assistive Technology co-chair Seema Malhotra MP, and findings from previous APPG for AT policy work on employment, skills, and education.

Contributions

Evidence Session Panellists

Parliamentarians

Marsha De Cordova MP, Labour Member for Battersea. Shadow Minister for Disabled People

Emma Lewell-Buck MP, Labour Member for South Shields. Former (2016-19) Shadow Minister for Children and Families and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (in that role at the time of the evidence session)

Lord Addington, Liberal Democrat Peer. Parliamentary officer of the APPGAT. Vice Chair of the APPG on Dyslexia and Other Specific Learning Difficulties. President of the British Dyslexia Association. Chair of Microlink

Baroness Campbell of Surbiton DBE, Crossbench Peer

Sector Experts

Lesley Morrice, Chair, National Network of Assessment Centres. Assessment Centre Manager, University of Nottingham ACCESS Centre

Jeremy Brassington, Managing Director, NTEHub

David Atkinson, CEO, Wyvern Business Systems Ltd

Paul Doyle, Research and Development Manager, ACCESS, Hereward College

James Ward, General Manager (UK), Ai-Media

Rachel O'Brien, Former (2017-19) Disabled Students' Officer, National Union of Students (in that role at the time of the evidence session)

Neil Cottrell, CEO, LexAble. Member of the British Dyslexia Association New Technologies Committee

Adam Tweed, Needs Assessor and Project Lead, AbilityNet

Rick Bell, Director and Vice Chair of the British Assistive Technology Association (BATA). Head of Education, Texthelp

Sal McKeown, Author of the ATEC Newsletter

Alistair McNaught, Accessibility consultant to HE

Noel Duffy, CEO, Dolphin Computer Access

Daniela de Silva, Specific Learning Difficulties Adviser, University of Westminster

Jill Berry, Board Member, National Professional Association for Disability and Inclusivity Practitioners in the further and higher education sector (NADP). Disability Services Manager, Teesside University

Written Evidence

Lauren West, Trailblazers Manager, Muscular Dystrophy UK.

Jeremy Brassington, Managing Director, NTEHub.

Maureen O'Brien, Disability Service Manager, Buckinghamshire New University.

Kathryn Fisher, Joint Head of Disability Services, University of Warwick.

Mark Pimm, Disability Service Manager, Birkbeck College.

Bryan Coleman, Head of Disability & Dyslexia Support Service, University of Sheffield.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive Technology

The APPGAT is an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) made up of MPs and Peers who are interested in the opportunities presented by assistive technology to make society inclusive for all. The APPG works by holding policy events in Parliament, bringing together experts, end-users, politicians and policy makers for roundtable discussions, symposia, and receptions; we use the findings from these policy events to develop briefings, term papers and research reports, to inform and influence Parliament, Government and the sector. The APPGAT is managed by Policy Connect, the cross-party collaborative think tank.

Inquiry Co-Chairs

Seema Malhotra MP, Labour and coop member for Feltham and Heston

Lord Holmes of Richmond MBE, Conservative Peer

Policy Connect



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We lead and manage an extensive network of parliamentary groups, research commissions, forums and campaigns. We are a London living wage employer and a Member of Social Enterprise UK, and have been operating since 1995.

Acknowledgements

We would like to give our special thanks to Rick Bell and Neil Cottrell for their input on the use of official statistics relating to the DSA. We extend thanks to Oona Muirhead CBE, Louise Young, Geena Vabulas and Clive Gilbert in Policy Connect. We would further like to thank the associate and affiliate members of the APPG for Assistive Technology, who support Policy Connect in our work on assistive technology policy: NTEhub, Ai-Media, Connect Solutions Group, Lexxic, AbilityNet, Dolphin, Hereward College, Inclusive Technology, Manchester Metropolitan University, Microsoft, Possum, Pretorian, Smartbox, LexAble, The British Assistive Technology Association, Blackboard Ally, Tobii Dynavox, TextHelp, Bournemouth University, Ace Centre, Douglas Stewart EDU, Barry Bennett Ltd, iansyst, Jisc, Leonard Cheshire Disability, and Muscular Dystrophy UK.

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