DSA Roundtable Summary: Text Version

This is a plain text version of the Policy Connect and ATech Policy Lab LinkedIn graphic summarising a roundtable on the proposed changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). ATech means assistive and accessible technology. DfE means the Department for Education.

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Roundtable Summary

Six key themes raised in a discussion on the proposed changes to the Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA).

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Policy Context

The DSA provides non-repayable support for disabled students' additional study costs, covering equipment, software, travel and non-medical support. In March 2026, the DfE proposed changing assistive software funding. Free, built-in or university-provided tools would be the default, with paid software funded only where needs cannot otherwise be met. Several software categories would be limited to 'exceptional circumstances', and the DSA would normally fund the lowest-cost suitable product.

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Theme 1: One Size Does Not Fit All

Different impairments, courses, and ways of working create different barriers, requiring different tools and combinations of ATech. Some free tools meet accessibility standards on paper but are unusable in practice, and free technology already has a place in the system where needs assessors judge it suitable. Support should therefore start from assessing the student's barriers, not from presuming free tools will be sufficient. Availability is not the same as accessibility.

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Theme 2: Shifting Responsibilities and Costs

Reducing government-funded support would not remove disabled students' underlying needs. Instead, it could shift costs and responsibility onto universities and students themselves. The quality of support available could then vary between institutions and individuals, depending on their ability to make up any shortfall. This

risks creating a less consistent system in which a student's access to the tools they need depends on where they study and what they can afford.

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Theme 3: Ill-Defined 'Exceptional Circumstances'

There is no clear threshold for what counts as 'exceptional'. One university estimated that only 86 of its 1,703 students currently receiving DSA would keep a funded package, leaving 1,617 to rely on free tools, absorb costs, or appeal. Extra evidence requirements may slow an already slow system, where some students wait around two years for adjustments. Students do not want to be "exceptional", or to be asked whether they are "disabled enough".

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Theme 4: Inconsistency with the Broader Policy Direction

ATech is essential for participation, not a "nice to have". The DSA is one stage in a pipeline of support, from SEND provision in school, through higher education and into Access to Work. University is where many disabled people build confidence with tools they will rely on at work. As the Government expands access to ATech in schools and employment, reducing specialist support through the DSA risks creating a gap in that pathway.

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Theme 5: The Economic Case

The question was raised as to whether the reforms would actually improve value for money. The current system was described as "net positive to the exchequer". Students receiving DSA have significantly higher completion rates than disabled students without it, helping more people benefit from the graduate premium and move into sustained employment. Short-term savings on the DSA could therefore create greater costs elsewhere over the longer term, at a time when the Government is focussed on reducing disability and ill-health-related economic inactivity.

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Theme 6: Reform should be Evidence-Based and Co-Designed

Freedom of Information requests found the DfE held no data comparing the accuracy of free tools with specialist software, and had not tested free tools in the 'lockdown' browsers used for online assessments. The DfE was unable to provide details of any assistive technology specialists, clinicians or disability-led

organisations who inputted into the proposals now being consulted on. Many practical weaknesses in the suggested reform may stem from not involving disabled students and experts as equal partners from the start.

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Read the full summary

Follow the link in the post above to read the full summary.

This roundtable was kindly sponsored by the British Assistive Technology Association (BATA).