



Student Loans Company

DSSG 10.09.2019 12:30 – 15:30

The Memphis Building, Lingfield Point, McMullen Road, Darlington, County Durham DL1 1RW

Note to cascade

NMH Support

Concerns were expressed around the current policy regarding cancelled sessions of non-medical help support. It was felt by some that this could result in students potentially abandoning their studies and their existing health conditions being further aggravated. Uncertainty around the definition of what constituted an “acceptable” reason for cancellation added to the ambiguity, and no allowances were currently made for disability related circumstances, unless these are deemed to be exceptional (e.g. requiring emergency medical intervention). Department for Education agreed to continue the discussion over evidence submitted at this meeting with colleagues.

Closure of DSA QAG

DSA QAG had reviewed their sustainability following the announcement of the planned introduction of contracts directly between SFE and needs assessment centres. The board of trustees had determined that DSA QAG would therefore close on 20 December 2019. Prior to closure, all audits for the assessment centre cycle, the Outreach cycle, and non-medical help would be completed, with a report of accredited organisations to be provided to DfE before then, and a further list of accredited organisations and respective expiry dates to follow in 2020. The DSA QAG website would be taken offline on 20 December and all data purged, but the website would be maintained on a “business as usual” basis until then. Until 20 December, student feedback would continue to be monitored, NMH quarterly rates review would proceed as planned, practitioners’ details would be updated as needed, and validation and publishing of new policy updates and support role requests would continue to be met. Legislation around data protection and intellectual property had to be observed.

Key priorities and areas for concern and consideration had already been highlighted to DfE. For example, students, needs assessors, and non-medical helpers would all need continued access to a facility which offered them equivalent functionality to the DSA QAG website after it closed. DSA QAG feel that the audit function was essential to ensure compliance and that qualifications were verified.

The current moratorium on new assessment centres, providing needs assessment reports to students domiciled in England would continue along with the registration of new non-medical help

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suppliers, but did not impede the hiring of new support workers under support that a centre already provided.

SLC intend to have contracts in place for the supply of needs assessments for SFE students in Autumn 2020. Contingencies were under consideration to ensure continuous support for all affected parties throughout the transition process. The importance of student choice was emphasised, as was the urgency of the need for an adequate solution.

DSSG members offered their support during the transition, and this would be investigated further. DfE encouraged the group to offer their contributions and opinions.

DSA Operational Performance Update

Application volumes were higher than ever and students were submitting their applications earlier in the cycle. DSA funding figures remained static. E-invoices for needs assessment and equipment were now being processed using robotics automation, and NMH invoices were the next to be included in this.

A new specification matrix with accompanying needs assessor guidance had been published to the DSA QAG website, with another new matrix scheduled to follow in the week commencing 16 September 2019.

Department for Education Update

DfE was working closely with DSA QAG and SLC to ensure ongoing support for students and DSA providers post-DSA QAG closure. Meetings were also planned with NMH providers and autism advisory groups. SLC was now accepting pre-16 diagnostic tests, but guidance was needed on what constituted “acceptable evidence”. The new specification matrix covering system speed would be released in the week commencing 16 September 2019. DfE was due to meet reps from vision- and hearing-impaired students, and SLC’s CEO was meeting with delegates from the Thomas Pocklington Trust on 11 September 2019.

Tender Update

An announcement on the equipment and training tender was due to be released soon. Work on the needs assessment tender was still in the initial phases.

Office for Students Update

Progress on a more socio-inclusive model for disabled students had been slow. A report on this was due in October 2019, with a mental health report scheduled to follow in November 2019. HEPs were developing more inclusive teaching and learning practices. The disparity in pay rates

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for disabled and non-disabled employees continued to be an area of concern. The barriers programme was due to conclude, and an evaluation report would be published on that basis.

Mentor Pay Rates

UMHAN had surveyed specialist mentors and had found that many agency-employed mentors had not received any rise in salary or had seen their salary drop. Similarly, many HEP-employed mentors had been graded down internally. Mentors tended to be paid less than the rates stipulated in DSA guidance, and were further impacted by factors such as zero-hour contracts, last-minute cancellations, a two-quote system in a competitive market, and rising administration costs, as well as having to meet mandatory CPD supervision and room charges themselves. Consequently, staff wellbeing had suffered, mentors were demoralised and disillusioned, which resulted in high staff turnover.

This affected the quality, availability, consistency, and appropriateness of the support provided to students who often had particularly complex needs. Suicide ideation was also becoming increasingly prevalent and needed to be addressed. Undercutting was commonplace despite guidance notes to the contrary. HEPs were obliged to maintain the best possible care for the student.

A working group already established would investigate this further and provide an update at the next meeting of the DSSG.

Colorimetry Funding

Since funding for colorimetry testing had been withdrawn with two weeks' notice in October 2018, the affected cohort had been at a disadvantage. Many of these students lived with visual disturbance and/or dyslexia. The main issue is that the colorimetry funding paid for the assessment and the support, but DSA only funds support. Assessments had dropped significantly, as these were no longer funded. Where conditions went undiagnosed, this could lead to academic underachievement. Assessment costs were considered a barrier and may lead to students not reaching their academic potential or failing compared to their peers. It could also lead to a rise in civil prosecutions if the funding withdrawal was deemed to constitute disability discrimination. An update would follow at the next DSSG meeting.

SLC Tailored Review

The SLC Tailored Review had followed a change of government. Many questions had arisen on this, and a lack of clarity was leading to increasing levels of anxiety surrounding employment. Members expressed a desire for a clearer idea of the intention behind the review. DfE assured all parties that further information would be shared as soon as it became available.

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AOB

In light of time constraints and recent full agendas, it was agreed that the DSSG meeting in November would be extended by half an hour, and therefore was scheduled to begin at 12 noon.

Next meeting details: Tuesday 26 November 2019, 12:00 - 15:30, OfS and SLC Offices, 2nd Floor, Finlaison House, 15-17 Furnival Street, London EC4A 1AB.

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