



Student Loans Company

# SLC Disabled Student Stakeholder Group

## 31.03.2020 - Note to cascade

### COVID-19

SLC had taken several measures in response to COVID-19 restrictions. Most of its workforce were now working from home. Messaging to customers was being updated regularly, with a focus on encouraging students to apply for 19/20 and 20/21 funding as normal. All queries were being addressed through FAQs which were under constant scrutiny and development with focus groups from DfE and devolved administrations. SLC was working to ensure that all standard procedures, such as maintenance and attendance confirmations, proceed as normal.

Concerns among DSSG members around online diagnostic assessments were taken offline with DfE. This should only impact students who needed a new diagnosis, particularly those with specific learning difficulties, but SLC appreciated the gravity of the effect on them.

Medical evidence was becoming harder to obtain for all students, as government advice remained against attending GP surgeries in person as much as possible, although surgeries were open for online and phone requests. Circumstances were changing daily, and long-term thinking was needed to achieve positive long-term outcomes for everyone. The likely duration of current restrictions remained relatively uncertain. Students who needed additional support should contact SLC straightaway.

The group discussed the need for hard copy invoices to be submitted to SFE, as it was felt that the lack of digital paperwork functionality presented a barrier to student support and providers' payments. Reasons for this had been outlined in an SFE comms issued the previous day. However, implementing digital invoicing functionality was SFE's priority now. An update on this would follow in the following week.

Where NMH providers were struggling in the coronavirus pandemic, any eligibility for government financial support would depend on their individual circumstances. No invoice payment issues had been reported to date.

Concerns were raised around students' year end dates and the associated funding issues dependent on individual HEPs' approaches to extensions. Regulations were in place around when students could and could not be paid.

A considerable backlog of DSAs applications seemed possible as application volumes were currently lower than usual. Preparation for next year's cycle would begin when normal service had resumed, but SFE was mindful of the impact going forward and continued to encourage applications for 20/21 as normal.

The SFE contact centre would be up and running again later in the week. Many staff had been repurposed, and many were being enabled to work from home. The return to full capacity



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would take some time, but SLC was doing everything in its power to reinstate normal support levels.

Students were running out of hours of entitlement to NMH support, and there was some lack of clarity around its provision in the current situation. Students were able to access their support at any time during their course, and should contact SLC in the event that they needed more. Most students did not normally exhaust their full entitlement and therefore had some flexibility. It was suggested that there could be an agreed number of additional hours which providers could recommend, and anything beyond these should be referred back to the needs assessor, but this was not agreed.

There was concern around the future ramifications of students taking up support remotely. Students needed to be encouraged to access available support which did not need face-to-face contact, through clear and concise messaging. Remote support was often more flexible but not necessarily a natural environment. The rate of accessed support had already seen a drop. Some students felt more secure at home while others felt less supported. Students were having to adjust to remote teaching and learning, as well as distance delivery and assessment, each of which could impact on their mental health.

Changes to the DSAs application process would be addressed in the next FAQs. While comms on this had been issued, more information was needed.

As a result of the loss of employment in industries affected by COVID-19 restrictions, significantly more students were finding themselves unable to afford the £200 IT equipment contribution. Help was available from HEPs' hardship funds, but DfE was monitoring the situations more widely.

A document confirming the timeline for the Equipment and Training tender was due to be shared at the end of May 2020. The timeline for the Needs Assessment tender would be moved out due to COVID-19. This award had been originally scheduled for autumn 2020. Updates would follow on both, and timelines could be shared by members. While the names of those who sat on the tender panel would not be disclosed, they included members of senior operational staff and commercial staff from SLC.

It was noted that September may not be an ideal point for the Assistive Technology and Training tender award amid the absence of furloughed staff, and rapidly increasing productivity may be challenging. The concerns were acknowledged and any necessary mitigation would be considered. Any changes to the timeline would be communicated in advance.

Stakeholders felt that amounts being charged for NMH support provided remotely should remain the same as those being charged for face-to-face support. There were reports of agencies paying their support providers substantially less now that support was being given remotely while continuing to charge the same. DfE's ability to intervene was limited.

There were concerns around audit practices since the closure of DSA-QAG, but it was confirmed that DSA-QAG Quality Assurance Framework standards continued to be applicable to all DSAs providers.

## Office for Students update

OfS was working to enhance its engagement and collaboration with the sector through clarity and updates to regulatory requirements. The focus was on financial support for students and minimising long-term disruption from COVID-19. There were concerns around international students, teaching standards, and teaching quality.

Normal regulatory requirements and specific registration conditions had been suspended during COVID-19, and a moratorium was in place on changes to 20/21 offers. Providers were expected to continue to meet requirements to which they had committed in the absence of active monitoring, including financial commitments to existing and future students.

There was an active focus on mental health, and additional student support was being planned. Quality learning and teaching was the current priority, with a focus also on students with long-term conditions as well as disabled students.

## SFE Operational Update

The postcode search had been launched on gov.uk. Medical evidence could be submitted for assessment by centre managers using the online HE clinic, provided that this was done by a qualified medical professional and contained all the necessary information.

The NMH list for assessment centres was not considered by some members to be a perfect solution in terms of data validation and accuracy. SLC was responsible for updating regions and data, but changes to roles needed to be requested from DfE. Existing providers could add roles in regions where they were already providing support.

## Department for Education Update

A reprioritisation exercise had taken place to ensure that work on the DfE's COVID-19 response took precedence. As a result, work on many DSAs policy related issues had now taken a lower priority. This was likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. DfE was also considering the impact on suppliers of DSA-funded goods and services and so was temporarily postponing the conflict of interest exercise and the audits of NMH suppliers. Members should stay abreast of SLC's Q&A updates and make sure their colleagues were aware of the temporary closure and reopening of SLC's contact centre.

It was generally not possible for DfE to pay out students' DSAs funding for goods and services that were not provided to the student. In response to questions received from stakeholders, DfE could not therefore guarantee or advance funding during the Covid-19 pandemic to support DSA suppliers who were struggling financially, but any provider experiencing difficulties with cash flow should refer to the Government's specific advice for businesses.



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Lengthened response times should be expected for any queries.

The HE sector was particularly fluid, with variations between students being sent home from halls and being taught online. Actively following developments should help to reduce or avoid last-minute cancellations of support.

The NMH rates charged were no longer centrally published, but documentary proof must continue to be maintained. SLC was contactable for any necessary support in this area.

Given the current situation, the moratorium on new suppliers would remain under review. Few enquiries had been received since the closure of DSA-QAG about joining the register. Any enquiries about the moratorium should be addressed to DfE. There was not the resource to manage a waiting list of those who wanted to join the register. It was not possible to confirm a timeline for lifting the moratorium.

The annual statistics which DSA-QAG had previously requested from Assessments Centres would no longer be required as these were already available from SLC at the end of the financial year, dependent on COVID-19 implications.

There was no longer a need to notify changes to NMH staff lists, but any staff must have the necessary qualifications or professional body memberships appropriate to their role. A record of the qualifications and professional memberships of NMH support workers (and documentary proof) must still be maintained.

Those wishing to remove roles from the register of NMH providers should notify SLC. Those wishing to add new roles to their entry on the register of NMH providers should contact DfE.

The consideration of some solutions which had been proposed by the sector to improve SLC's processes was possible but the Department was bound by regulations and guidance, as well as guidance such as "Managing Public Money".

## NUS Update

Students were experiencing struggles around accessibility, wellbeing, and access to housing, as well as accessing funding to which they were entitled, and employment issues resulting from COVID-19 restrictions.

Placements were changing, meaning that many nursing and medical students were effectively being asked to volunteer to join the NHS workforce. This would impact on their funding and student status. NUS was looking to formalise how HEPs should support students' mental health under the COVID-19 pandemic and afterwards.

There was also an emphasis on disabled students. Their priorities often lay in addressing more immediate practicalities, such as lifts being out of order, access to buildings, and food delivery curtailment. The provision of much disabled student support provision was being



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reallocated. Data on this should be follow in the week commencing 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020. This data could be shared with OfS.

Looking for answers was causing many students distress. HEPs were working hard to move everything online and address a myriad of student queries. Institutions were equally working on a colossal scale. Students deserved reassurances, whether they were disabled or not. However, not all answers would be immediately available, and the individual's expectations were often excessively high.

## AOB

Discussions were underway in different areas of DfE to address the impact of financial support challenges resulting from COVID-19, including and beyond the scope of DSAs.

Attention was drawn to the reforms to diagnostic assessment reports introduced by SASC in January 2020. Assessment for SpLD would be synthesised to make information more accessible.

Next meeting date: Tuesday 2 June 2020, venue to be confirmed.