



Student Loans Company

SLC Disabled Student Stakeholder Group

05.05.2020 – Note to cascade

An extraordinary meeting of the DSSG was held on 5 May 2020, to provide updates on SLC business functionality and remote diagnostic assessments under COVID-19. Following considerable successful adjustments in compliance with government guidelines, business as usual had largely resumed, and a communication was due to be issued to that effect. There had not been any DSAs-specific content so far in COVID-19 messaging, and SLC was keen to understand what was needed here.

The group highlighted the need for information on access to medical evidence for DSAs applications, and from Higher Education Providers (HEPs) on the nature of learning and teaching at the start of the new academic year. All students needed reassurance that their needs would be met, with this being particularly urgent for disabled students. Information on the provision of and access to NMH support was also necessary.

Under COVID-19 restrictions, SASC was proposing an evaluation of need instead of a full diagnostic assessment as an interim measure. It was crucial to understand the nature of evidence being given and what was available. Performing full diagnostic assessments was not possible in the present circumstances.

Estimating the numbers of affected students would be difficult. Pended DSAs applications for 20/21 were disproportionately under-represented, and a solution was needed now to prevent a future bottleneck.

DfE would be issuing comms on this matter to the sector, and DfE was considering interim evaluations which would be implemented as soon as possible when the detail of what was involved had been worked through. Whether interim evaluations would be based on a full assessment at a later date, and the implications where the two did not align, formed part of ongoing considerations. Concerns here were substantial and a timeline for conclusions was requested. Medical evidence requirements would not be waived as GPs were continuing to operate online and by telephone.

SLC Engagement with Partner Organisations

SLC was continuing to update its series of FAQs through engagement with multiple student groups, particularly with disabled students. Concerns were being raised around third-term dates, and enquiries around HEPs' planned schedules for the 20/21 annual year had indicated a potential shift from an October intake to a January one instead.

FAQ topics included long-course loans, attendance management, communication with DSAs partners, and business-to-business comms.



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The automatic extension of DSAs funding for final year students and DSAs funding was raised. Some HEPs were granting blanket extensions to all students. Many students were anxious over whether funding would last until the end of their courses.

NUS Update

NUS guidance had not been targeted at disabled students historically. Disabled students seemed more likely to struggle with heightened challenges such as housing. They were also struggling to access information and to adjust to the changes imposed by COVID-19, and the resulting impact on their courses. More effective and beneficial comms were needed from HEPs who must adapt their communications channels quickly.

The ANMHP's survey had indicated a lack of information from HEPs on access to disability support services. This should be encouraged, as students were currently relying on NMH providers instead. OfS guidance notes had been issued to the sector, but these were not regulatory. OfS was reminding providers of the expectation that they would continue to deliver on existing commitments, but some flexibility was being allowed in how HEPs used their resources to meet student needs.

Both inclusive practice and anticipatory duty were essential, and the current crisis raised concerns which required OfS attention, in terms of access to teaching, to learning, to support, and to support materials.

The range of support being offered by HEPs varied from 24-hour exams and scribes delivering reader support via Zoom, to students being happy to have no support at all. Each case depended on the individual HEP or the person coordinating the support. There was therefore the potential for discrimination, and the reasons for regulations not being implemented remained unclear.

Regulatory levers were nonetheless in play, although some had been suspended under the pandemic. Regulations around quality, however, were very much still in place.

The coordination of a united message from SLC, DfE, OfS, NUS, and SASC was suggested, with work on this beginning soon. When published, its location would be signposted through social media.

Next meeting date: Tuesday 2 June 2020, 11:30 - 14:30, venue and format to be confirmed.