

# **“Bridging the Gap” Student Support Guide Feedback**

**November 2010**

**Produced by, and on behalf of, the University Mental Health Advisers Network (UMHAN)**

Page number	Section (e.g. 'what are DSAs for?')	Comments and suggestions (content, style, design)
		Please note the following feedback is an organisational submission on behalf of UMHAN (University Mental Health Advisors Network). Should any further clarification be needed please contact: Phil Scarffe tel: 0115 8482536, phil.scarffe@ntu.ac.uk
1	<b>The name of the DSA</b>	<p>People with mental health difficulties are unlikely to consider themselves to be disabled and are therefore unlikely to try to access an allowance which is explained solely in these terms. This is partly demonstrated by the fact that only a tiny proportion of students with mental health difficulties access support available to them through the DSA.</p> <p>The updated BTG goes some way to addressing this by explicitly mentioning mental health difficulties. However, it would be useful for the Disabled Student Allowance itself to be re-named. Re-naming the DSA would also be commensurate with the Equality and Human Rights Commission position that just over half of the people who are protected by disability legislation – and presumably eligible to apply for the DSA – do not identify with the term “disabled”.</p> <p>It needs to be understood that having a booklet which says on the front cover that it is about the Disabled Student Allowance will lead to the vast majority of people with mental health difficulties not even picking it up.</p> <p>The front cover needs to very explicitly and prominently state that the allowance is open to people with mental health difficulties (including Depression and Anxiety) – this qualification is important because many people with mental health difficulties do not recognise the MHD label as applying to them either.</p>
3	<b>What is Student Finance</b>	Whilst it may be important to explain the DSA as part of the Student Finance package, when people are considering the effects of their condition they do not usually think in terms of money.

		The DSA needs to be explained in far more user friendly terms which are relevant to peoples experiences. This is particularly important for people with mental health difficulties who are not usually encouraged to think of themselves as having entitlements.
5	Jenny, 19	There really needs to be a very prominent case study of a student with mental health difficulties within BTG.  The case study of Jenny does not in any way explain why she is entitled to funding through the DSA, and therefore does not have wider applicability than Dyslexic students.
6	What are DSA's for?	Explaining the DSA purely in terms of extra costs incurred is a fairly abstract concept. There needs to be some comprehensive examples of what is meant.  This is particularly relevant to students with mental health difficulties who are usually unaware that there is support they can access which is paid through the DSA.  Whilst they may also incur extra expenses e.g. having to buy more books, ICT equipment, it is unlikely without this being explained explicitly that they will conceptualise their spending in this way.  Change wording 'can prove...' to 'provide evidence that'
7	What if I do not want to tell my university...	This needs amending to the explain the Single Equality Act
11	Medical evidence	It would be helpful for the BTG form to include a tear-off letter for students to give to their doctor or specialist in order to request medical evidence. An explanation of the need for it, and the purpose of the DSA, would be helpful for medical professionals who are unaware of the DSA.
11	How do I show that I am eligible?	Requests 'medical proof', should be re-worded to medical evidence.  Whilst it may be beyond the scope of this review, it should also be pointed out that in many cases the 1 <sup>st</sup> point of contact for someone with a mental health difficulty is not a medical professional and therefore this requirement directly discriminates against people with mental health difficulties.

		<p>Also their first point of contact may be a mental health professional working within a university, by not allowing such professionals to provide evidence (despite having relevant professional qualifications) students with MHD's are further disadvantaged.</p> <p>There is also a strong argument for moving towards a more social model based approach which might include accepting evidence from counsellors too. (Particularly because increasingly mental health services are moving towards more social oriented models).</p>
13	<b>Specialist Equipment Allowance</b>	<p>Most people with mental health difficulties will not understand how this is relevant to them.</p> <p>It needs to explain that they may get funding for equipment such as PC's if they find it difficult to access the university's resources, for example because they have anxiety difficulties, or find it difficult to concentrate in a shared environment.</p>
15	<b>Non-Medical Helper Allowance</b>	<p>This needs to include less obvious examples such as a Mental Health Support Worker or Mental Health Mentor, which will emphasise the relevance of the DSA to people who do not identify with the disability label.</p>
17	<b>Travel Allowance</b>	<p>It would be helpful for there to be an explanation of why you might incur extra travel costs, for example because you need to take a taxi to university because your anxiety difficulties mean you find it difficult to use public transport</p>
21	<b>Submitting the form</b>	<p>Can the form be submitted online with scanned medical evidence?</p>
22	<b>Evidence</b>	<p>It states that if you do not have evidence yet you can always send it later. This is very vague, there needs to be some explanation of how the procedure would work in such circumstances.</p>
22	<b>Step 1</b>	<p>It would be helpful to explain the advantages of applying early i.e. that it may then be possible for a package of support to be in place from the outset of the course, and that this will be likely to make the transition to university far easier and less stressful.</p>
28-29	<b>Mental Health Difficulties in the index</b>	<p>Mental Health difficulties are not mentioned in the index, which could lead someone to the quite logical conclusion that people with mental health difficulties are not entitled to claim the DSA, and mean they read no further.</p>
All	<b>General Point</b>	<p>Whilst it is understandable that there may be a need for a general guide to DSA, we</p>

		also believe that there is a very strong case for developing a booklet and on line information specifically aimed at students with mental health difficulties. (This would be in keeping with the recommendations made in the Social Exclusion Unit report on improving access to the DSA for students with mental health difficulties).
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