The impact on disabled students of the introduction of a £200 levy on Disabled Student Allowances and proposals for a positive way forward

Compiled by the British Assistive Technology Association
The British Assistive Technology Association believes that the imposition of a £200 charge for hardware supplied under the Disabled Students Allowances grant scheme is damaging the prospects of disabled students. The £200 charge, introduced in September 2015, is a direct barrier to entry into higher education for students with disabilities. Not only is this group of students the most financially disadvantaged - many disabled students struggle to find the £200 – but disabled students are much more dependent on technology to study effectively than their non-disabled colleagues.

In light of the clear evidence, outlined in this briefing document, that students are being deterred from taking up their entitlement to assistive technology by the charge, BATA believes the only way forward is to end what amounts to a tax on learning and disability. The cost is minimal in terms of the overall budget for higher education but would have an immediate positive impact on the career prospects of a vulnerable and often neglected group of students.
Background

Through a series of reviews the Government has reformed, and is continuing to reform the provision of Disabled Student Allowances (DSA).

This includes the introduction of a £200 levy on disabled students who are recommended a computer as part of the essential technology required to allow them to study independently and successfully.

This levy is imposed on all students, regardless of ability to pay or socio-economic background.

The contribution is required to be paid in one sum up front by students; there is currently no option to receive it as part of their student loan.

Since the introduction of this student contribution, there has been a 29.64% downturn in the number of students taking up the equipment that has been recommended for them, even though applications have increased and so have recommendations.

The government contend that there is no correlation between the downturn in uptake and the introduction of the levy.

The British Assistive Technology Association (BATA) has undertaken research which shows a clear correlation between the introduction of the levy and the downturn in DSA equipment uptake. Further statistics received from the government show that students with learning difficulties and Mental Health issues are most likely to be adversely affected.

It is the position of BATA that the government has created a situation wherein disabled students are being disadvantaged, and that:

DSA is now only available to those who can afford it.

The following document outlines the current situation, the research carried out with its findings and what BATA believes is a fair way forward.
Disabled Student Allowances (DSA) are grants to help meet the extra course costs students can face as a direct result of a disability or specific learning difficulty. These are aimed at helping students with disabilities to study on an equal basis with non-disabled students.

This support can take a number of forms, from provision of non-medical help such as human guides, scribes, readers or other physical intervention for students that have a profound disability to the provision of assistive technology for students with various learning difficulties, to allow them to study on an equal and independent basis. For example, a student with a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia will be provided with a laptop loaded with various specialist software packages to enable them to undertake their studies independently.

Students who apply for DSA are assessed by independent experts who recommend relevant and tailored support for each individual student, in line with the very individual nature of their disability and needs.

The DSA is associated with disabled students attaining higher grades and exceptionally high continuation rates in higher education:

**Disabled students who take the DSA get better grades and tend not to drop out (HESA & BIS data).**

Furthermore, disabled people entering the workplace with confidence contribute to our economy, earning more than those who enter the workplace less qualified. Analysis carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers shows that the increased earnings of disabled students leads to increased lifetime Exchequer revenue.

**Thus it can be argued that the DSA is a cost neutral investment.**
The British Assistive Technology Association is a not-for-profit collective made up of AT professionals and organisations who provide support to individuals with disabilities who need Assistive Technology solutions.

We campaign for the rights and interests of those who need Assistive Technology, provide an information and signposting service to the public and aim to educate and inform widely on the benefits of Assistive Technology. On behalf of our members we represent Assistive Technology interest to government as a grassroots organisation.

**Current reforms to Disabled Student Allowances**

Since 2013 the government has undertaken a review of the provision of DSA, with an aim of ‘modernising and ensuring efficiency in the system’.

Previous Minister for Universities, Jo Johnson, embarked on a policy of reducing the support available to disabled students via DSA in the expectation that universities will fill the gap by making their course materials, lectures, tutorials etc. accessible, as they are indeed required to do under the Equalities Act.

**Introduction of a £200 Student Contribution**

As of September 2015, if a student with relevant requirements is recommended provision of a computer as part of their Assistive Technology, that student is required to pay a £200 contribution towards the cost of their equipment. This is to be paid upfront, regardless of socio-economic background or ability to pay.
BATA wrote to the government to understand the rationale for this student contribution. Then Minister for Universities, Jo Johnson, outlined the government position as follows:

‘A computer is now a mainstream expense, and DSAs are in place to offset the additional expense of the equipment required by those who need it.

Therefore, funding is limited to that above and beyond what an average student would expect to pay, the minimum being £200 for a computer’.

On the surface of this explanation, the rationale seems fair, but BATA contend that it is flawed and leading to serious disadvantage for many.

It is fact that not all students own a laptop, nor is it mandated to attend university. Therefore it is not a mainstream expense. When you examine the impact of not having a computer on disabled students as compared to non-disabled students the difference is vast. A student without a learning difficulty can easily cope with the IT service provided by the University, however this is not the case for students with specific learning difficulties or disabilities, as the computer is an essential part of their Assistive Technology that is required for them to study and participate fully. It is worth noting that Needs Assessors and Disability Advisors (the experts in this area) believe that disabled students benefit significantly from being able to study in their own time off campus.
Assistive Technology provided to disabled students is not a luxury that brings ‘some’ benefit, but an essential and custom built set of tools required to allow disabled students to carry out their studies. DSA has allowed many thousands of students to study independently, succeed at university and prepare themselves for a productive career, in a way that would not be possible without this support structure. DSA has been proven beyond doubt to improve outcomes for disabled students, increase student retention rates from the lowest level of any grouping to the highest and ultimately lead to higher earning workers contributing to the economy.

Unfortunately, the case can be argued that that support is now only available for those who can afford it.

The most recent statistics available on the supply of equipment show a significant decrease in the uptake of DSA despite a marked increase in student applications for DSA, assessments being carried out, and recommendations being made.

There are various statistics all showing a marked decrease of uptake of DSA after the introduction of the £200 contribution.
Since the introduction of the £200 contribution there has been a 29.64% decrease in equipment uptake. This decline is composed of a 16.43% reduction in year one (YE 2016).

Source: Student Loans Company,

* Provisional figure (this figure has the potential to increase slightly based on previous statistics.)
DSA QAG Aggregated KPIs

Statistics compiled by the DSA Quality Assurance Group - a group mandated by Government, show even larger reduction in uptake in year one. More importantly, the QAG figures show no drop off, in assessments. As such the number of applications and assessments has remained steady, with the only difference being the £200 contribution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Ending</th>
<th>No. of assessments</th>
<th>No. of completed equipment orders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>39,242</td>
<td>45,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>36,718</td>
<td>43,096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>40,208</td>
<td>34,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>41,450</td>
<td>33,027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DSA Quality Assurance Group
Student drop-out rate

Statistics on the ‘dropout rate’ of students, and the breakdown of disability were received from Student Loans Company following a Freedom of Information Request. The dropout rate is the number of students that have been approved for DSA, but do not take up their equipment (make the £200 payment). The following compares the dropout rate before and after the introduction of the £200 fee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability type</th>
<th>2014/15 dropout</th>
<th>2015/16 Approved Students</th>
<th>Dropout at 2014/15 rate</th>
<th>Actual 2015/16 dropout</th>
<th>Increase in dropout</th>
<th>% Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>4868</td>
<td>1411.72</td>
<td>2075</td>
<td>663.28</td>
<td>46.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Difficulty</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>16892</td>
<td>3040.56</td>
<td>5277</td>
<td>2236.44</td>
<td>73.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longstanding Illness</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>3256</td>
<td>683.76</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>340.24</td>
<td>49.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1319</td>
<td>263.8</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>138.2</td>
<td>52.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blind / Partial Sight</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>59.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf Partial Hearing</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>113.5</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>28.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelchair/Mobility</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>667</td>
<td>140.07</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>48.93</td>
<td>34.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4841</td>
<td>919.79</td>
<td>1302</td>
<td>382.21</td>
<td>41.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/blank</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>731</td>
<td>190.06</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>105.94</td>
<td>55.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>33428</td>
<td>6685.6</td>
<td>10826</td>
<td>4140.4</td>
<td>61.93%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Student Loans Company, FOI Ref 20-18

There has been a 62% increase in overall dropout of students who have equipment approved but do not take it up. The largest numbers affected are those with Specific Learning Difficulties and those who suffer from Mental Health issues.
Regional comparison

The £200 contribution has only been implemented in England, and not in devolved regions of the UK.

Data received from Student Loans Company for comparison with Wales and Northern Ireland (SLC FoI Ref: 03-17) shows:

there has been no decrease in uptake in the devolved regions, strengthening the argument that the decrease is a direct result of the fee.

Government Response

The government does recognise there has been a fall in the number of students in receipt of equipment in 2015/16 and 2016/17, however, they argue that the figures do not indicate what is driving this decrease, or whether this means that disabled students are not getting the essential equipment they require.

Correspondence from the Department has stated that “Increasingly, standard software packages have assistive solutions included. This includes speech to text capability in Microsoft Office 365, which the vast majority of students can access at no cost to them. It is possible that students decide that this meets their needs and that they already have a suitable computer, and they therefore decide not to order any further equipment as they would need to pay a £200 contribution towards new hardware”.

This is inaccurate, and in general these tools are very basic and not suitable to support students that in many cases have complicated needs.

The most commonly required software is text-to-speech and not speech-to-text and no one who is expert in this area would support this view.

Put simply, this highlights a lack of understanding from the government in this regard.
Throughout July and August 2016 BATA undertook a large scale survey of recipients of DSA, to clearly ascertain the reason for the fall in uptake of DSA and ask students how the £200 contribution had affected them directly.

**Affordability is the number one factor.**

Further to those students who have not been able to take up their equipment, there are a significant number who have, but have been delayed in doing so due to affordability. This has an obvious and serious impact on students’ studies especially at the outset of their course.

**Survey Objective** - To understand if and how the request for £200 contribution affected DSA students’ learning.

**Number of Students Surveyed** - 1,028

**Number of responses analysed** - 799 (duplicates and incomplete responses were excluded)

**Findings** -
- 10% of surveyed students had **not paid their £200 contribution.**
- 69% of those who had not paid said they **could not afford to do so.**
- 30% of those who did **took more than one month to do so,** due to affordability.
- 42% of respondents said **the contribution negatively impacted their learning.**
What do disabled students say?

“Our family receives working tax credit. I have 2 children in university one of which also is dyslexic and had to pay £200 towards her computer, this was very difficult for me to manage.”

“I was on disability benefit. I went without basic essentials in order to pay the £200. I’m a mature student living on my own. My personal circumstances were not taken into consideration.”

“I think it is slightly unfair to request disabled students to pay for their equipment when they have a genuine real need for assisted software.”

“I was lucky enough that I had been able to work the summer prior so I had some money saved. Disabled students already struggle with the costs associated with attending university, especially someone in my position who is entirely self funded.”

“When you are already struggling to pay for university, have to pay £9000 per year, and attempting to afford the living costs of London, this is an absolute struggle to pay the contribution. What about those people who are already in their overdraft? This is a large cost for a disabled person to pay, just to assist their own learning.”

“Already had to rely on grants to attend university. So this made it even more daunting.”

“I am on low income, and it was hard, to find £200. it was a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul, and put me in further hardship. but i need it so had no choice but to find the money.”

“We already have to pay to get tested, you are basically fining us for being disabled which is unacceptable.”

“I asked if there was any support regarding the contribution for low income families and was told there was no financial support available.”
“Not all students can afford it, I had to use my student finance to pay the contribution and I didn't order till my university year was over to use in my second year as I didn't have the money earlier and my last semester was money tight.”

“There should be a waiver for students from low income families as myself and my friends entitled to DSA also in this situation are struggling because we don't have a spare £200”

“It needs to be a little more flexible as I had to wait for my next student loan to come through. I have a large family”

“I think it's incredibly unfair to ask people with disabilities to pay a contribution towards essential equipment that they need in order to be able to fully partake in learning at university. This equipment is not a luxury, but something that they essentially need.”

“If it's equipment that's deemed required in order to level the playing field for a disabled student, then expecting that student to make a further financial contribution when they may already be at a financial disadvantage, thereby putting them at a further financial disadvantage, is fundamentally unfair.”

“I think it's unfair to ask a student to contribute to something that is needed in order for them to have equal learning rights due to their disability. I almost had to turn down the equipment as I couldn't afford the £200”

“I believe it is unfair restricting access to facilities which are recommended for my continuance of study leaving me unnecessarily disadvantaged while I found my contribution”
As laid out in this document, the British Assistive Technology Association believe that the introduction of the £200 levy on DSA is discriminatory. We further believe that the negative impact experienced by disabled students is increased for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Provision of support that is essential for disabled students to study in an effective and independent manner is now only available to those who can afford the £200 contribution.

The direct cost saving from the introduction of the contribution is less than £5 million, out of a Higher Education budget of some £33 billion. This is roughly one hundredth of one percent - but is directly, negatively impacting some of the most vulnerable in society.

BATA believe that the policy should be reversed and the contribution should be removed. All students who are entitled to support due to disability should receive this support regardless of their ability to pay.

BATA do understand the pressures on the public finances. As such we would propose a second solution wherein the £200 levy will continue to be paid by the student, but the student should be enabled to add that £200 to their student loan, relieving the immediate financial pressure that paying £200 from personal funds creates.

BATA would recommend that the Student Loan for students in receipts of DSA is increased by £200 to accommodate the additional contribution.

Additionally we would recommend that SFE obtain permission from the Student to electronically add this to the Loan. This could be obtained as part of the application process.

This would enable students experiencing financial constraints to proceed with order and receipt of their equipment without delay.

The most important factor is to ensure these students do not miss out on essential aids as a result of their socio-economic situation and get the support they need to study as soon as possible into their courses.
Conclusions

There has been a dramatic downturn in students taking up support that they are entitled to following the introduction of a £200 student contribution.

**29.64% fewer students are receiving Equipment DSAs.**

This downturn has happened in spite of increased applications and assessments.

No downturn has been recorded in devolved regions of the country that have not introduced the charge.

**69% of students who have not taken up their recommended equipment cite affordability as the main reason.**

Of those who have taken up their equipment 30% were delayed by longer than one month due to affordability.

The government is using assumptions that suit their narrative to defend policy without investigation. These assumptions are clearly countered by BATA survey findings.

DSA support is now available only for those who can afford it.

DSA is the right thing to do. It adapts university provision to specialist needs, enhancing the way people work, leading to better marks and inclusion in society.

BATA argues that the £200 levy must be removed or at least added to a student loan.
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The Department for Education should create a mechanism to allow students to receive their equipment without the additional burden, stress and worry of finding £200 to pay for it.

This should come as an £200 addition to the student loan.

This addition should be applied by Student Finance England as part of the application process ensuring that no additional administrative burden is applied and that students can receive their equipment without delay.