## Disabled Student Support for England in 2017. How did we get here and where are we going? A brief history, commentary on current context and reflection on possible future directions. Lynn Wilson1 and Professor Nicola Martin2

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**Abstract**

Provision for disabled students studying in England’s HEIs is at a crossroads with the simultaneous review of the DSA and push towards embedded inclusive practices governed by social model principles of universal design for learning. The National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) has come of age at a time of huge change and now seems to be the the perfect moment to reflect on its underpinning values and ask where the organisation has come from and where it is going in relation to promoting disability equality in post compulsory education. The authors of this paper have condensed the history of disability support in England from the early 1980s to the present time. During this time NADP has grown into a powerhouse of social model thinking focussed on disability equality in post compulsory education. NADP’s success is surprising given that the infrastructure is tiny and the Board of Directors is made up of unpaid disability and inclusivity practitioners who work for NADP in their spare time. NADP has grown to over 1300 members in 2017 and their lively contribution contributes to the success of our professional association. This paper contextualises the challenges which face the HE sector in 2017 and considers the areas where NADP could help, in relation to ensuring equality of access and parity of experience between disabled and non-disabled students.

**The Higher Education Sector in the UK**

Universities in the UK are generally financed by government with a small but increasing number of private universities who receive no government subsidy. The private universities include both charities and for-profit institutions with the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) effectively opening up the sector to an increasing number of diverse HEIs of this nature.

The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE, 2017a) produces a register of those providing higher education who agree and comply with the terms and conditions set down in the Memorandum of Assurance and accountability that reflect HEFCE’s responsibility to provide annual assurances to Parliament that: funds provided to HEFCE are being used for the purpose for which they were given; risk management control and governance in institutions funded by HEFCE are effective; and value for money is being achieved (BIS, 2015).

There are 160 ‘recognised bodies’ who have degree awarding powers granted by the Privy Council and recognised by the UK authorities with another 700 ‘listed bodies’ which provide courses leading to recognised UK degrees which are validated by other institutions who hold degree-awarding powers. These include colleges of further education and some schools.

Universities in the UK have been categorised in a number of different ways. The term ‘mission groups’ was employed by Boliver (2015), referring to the idea of a group with a defined membership. Boliver’s research performed cluster analysis of publicly available data on the research activity, teaching quality, economic resources, academic selectivity, and the socioeconomic student mix of UK universities. Findings demonstrate that a longstanding binary divide persists with Old (pre-1992) universities characterised by higher levels of research activity, greater wealth and ‘more academically successful’ and socioeconomically advantaged student intakes. New (post-1992) institutions were found to reveal levels of teaching quality comparable to that associated with older institutions.

**Non-Governmental Organisations within the HE Sector**

There are an increasing number of non-governmental organisations included within the HE Sector which act as representative bodies or professional associations in the sector. These include Universities UK (UUK), the representative body for universities in the UK; Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE); National Association of Managers of Student Services in Colleges (NAMSS); and the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP) which is the professional association for those working with disabled students in both colleges and universities.

Smaller groups also exist to support staff and/or students in more specialised areas. These include the Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education (ADSHE); the Association of Non-Medical Help Providers; the Consortium of Higher Education Support Services with Deaf Students (CHESS); and the University Mental Health Advisers Network (UMHAN).

**Student Funding**

Student loans and grants in the United Kingdom are primarily provided by the government through the Student Loans Company (SLC), a non-departmental public body. The SLC is responsible for Student Finance England (SFE).

SFE takes advice and guidance from various groups including the Disabled Students Stakeholder Group (DSSG) which advises and supports the delivery of specialist services for disabled students and the Disabled Students Allowance Quality Assurance Group (DSA-QAG) which is a non-profit making regulatory body.

**Historical Context of Disability Support**

Prior to the 1980’s, support for disabled higher education (HE) students in the UK was sparse and numbers were not reliably recorded. The focus of this brief history is England and it needs to be recognised that arrangements to assist disabled students differ between the countries of the UK. England has Disabled Students’ Allowances (DSAs) whilst Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own systems of support which are very similar to DSAs. Those from outside the UK have no access to DSAs and this clearly results in an equity issue which universities have to address from their own funding.

The number of disabled students accessing HE has been steadily increasing, as figure one illustrates. This increase appears to be as a direct result of initiatives that can be traced back to the 1980s, including the inception of the DSAs. However, the latest figures suggest that the number claiming DSAs has reduced in the last two years although total numbers of disabled students are rising.



Figure 1: First degree entrants declaring a disability (HEFCE, 2017b)

**The Early Years of the 1980s**

During the 1980s there were several initiatives to support disabled students, especially with the use of information technology. These included the formation of the National Federation of Access Centres in 1986 which assisted students to secure funding from charities to support their studies (NNAC, 2016). The Disabled Students’ Award (non-means tested) was introduced and amounted to a maximum of £750.

Legislation was introduced in 1989 to change the Award to Disabled Students’ Allowances (DSAs) and government funding was supplied to set up DSA assessment. In 1989 there were approximately 500 students who received DSAs towards equipment and travel but these students had to fulfil certain conditions. They had to have physical or sensory impairments and had to be under 25, on full time courses. They were means tested (NNAC, 2016).

**Rapid Progress in the 1990s**

Throughout the 1990s the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) resourced a series of projects to encourage universities to develop their own support services. University staff detailed with assisting disabled students in the early 1990s were often working alone at this stage. Many had a position which combined several roles such as the one at the Institute of Education which included financial support, disability support and examinations (Woods, 2017, pers. comm.). As a result, disability practitioners were often isolated within their institution, although some were accessing support from those in similar roles at other institutions.

The need for a Professional Association for Disability Officers who work in the post-16 education sector grew out of deepening concerns that staff in the sector were reporting a perceived lack of professional status and very high variance in conditions of employment.

A ‘Partnership on Campus’ conference was held in 1997 by the Association of University Teachers (AUT), the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) and the Commission on University Career Opportunities where overwhelming support for a professional association for Disability Officers was apparent. Advocates included David Triesmann of the AUT and Baroness Warwick of the CVCP. Progress on formation of the National Association of Disability Officers (NADO) was rapid with the establishment of a mailing list in February 1998 and an inaugural conference ‘Raising the Standard’ in March 1999.

HEFCE produced guidance in 1999 for base-level provision for disabled students in higher education institutions (HEI’s) (HEFCE, 1999) which recommended one Disability Adviser for every 200 students and 0.5 of an administrative post for each Disability Adviser. HEFCE also financed a round of ‘improving provision for disabled students’ in order to encourage smaller institutions to catch up with the support provided by larger universities. Many small universities applied for funding to increase their disability provision and some of the HEFCE funding was also used to formalise the set up of NADO. NADO aimed to promote and widen the support that some universities were offering each other. The National Federation of Access Centres (NFAC) already had a strong network and their expertise was utilised during the formation of the professional organisation. The first NADO website was launched in June 1999.

Alongside these HEFCE projects, the government was concerned with disability discrimination and gradually increased the reach of DSAs to include provision of non-medical helpers (for example notetakers) and a general allowance for things like additional photocopying (1991). Legal guidelines were introduced in the form of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and then, in 1996, student eligibility for DSAs was increased to include those with specific learning differences and mental health conditions (NNAC, 2016).

**A New Century – the 2000s**

At the end of the 1990s there were a couple of reports that initiated policy development from successive governments over the start of the new century. The Kennedy Report (1997) investigated patterns of participation in, and access to, further and higher education. The Dearing Report (1997) was a series of reports looking at the future of higher education in the UK. A stated aim of the policies resulting from these reports was to remove barriers to progression to HE and extend provision to assist disabled students once they arrived at university.

The government’s stated intention at this time was to continue to focus on removing discrimination at all levels and the Disability Discrimination Act was amended to become the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA). The Disability Equality Duty which followed in 2005 placed a responsibility on Public Bodies for pro-active change (the anticipatory duty) and the need to publish Equality Schemes which outlined specific action plans to address barriers.

DSAs were also becoming more inclusive as, in 2001, part time students became eligible for support providing they were studying for at least 50% of a full-time course and the age limit of 50 years was removed. Open University students also became eligible for support. (NNAC, 2016).

Universities were facing a great deal of change and continuing to require support to implement various equalities initiatives focussing on the disabled student experience, and the membership of NADO was growing. NADO appointed their first member of staff, Rachel Orme, in March 2000 and it was registered as a Company Limited by Guarantee in 2003. The name was changed to the National Association of Disability Practitioners in 2006 with the aim of accommodating DSA assessors within its ranks.

At the end of 2009 the HEFCE report on the Evaluation of Provision and Support for Disabled Students in HE was published, providing information about variance in support for disabled students across the sector. Equality impact assessment, inclusive practice, staff training and focused funding by HEFCE were highlighted as key areas for development (HEFCE, 2009).

**The Latest Changes (2010-2017)**

In 2010, the Equality Act brought together a wide range of previously separate equalities legislation under the umbrella of nine protected characteristics which included disability. A stated aim of the Equality Act was to make various systems and procedures easier to administrate. Rhetoric around the advantages of nurturing diversity began to permeate the sector, a world view enthusiastically endorsed by NADP. (Martin 2017). An interesting omission in the nine strands of the EA was socioeconomic status or the obvious disadvantages of poverty. Philosophically, and arguably a more interesting point, is that the notions of multiple identity, multiple disadvantage and intersectionality gained prominence from the introduction of the Equality Act 2010.

Reform of DSAs has been rapid since 2010 with a charter and reference manual for non-medical helpers produced by the NADP (2012). This document is now contained within the DSA Quality Assurance Group guidance document (DSA-QAG, 2016).

The rate of change increased with the issue of David Willets’ ministerial statement (2014) which signalled a systemic review including a rebalancing of responsibility with institutions funding and providing certain aspects of disability related support previously funded via the DSAs.

Elaine Shillcock, vice Chair of the NADP, crystallised this rebalancing statement with the diagram in figure 2.

Figure 2: Elaine Shillcock, University of Manchester.

In 2015 two HEFCE-initiated reports were produced looking at provision for specific groups of disabled students – those with dyslexia who are the largest group for which HEI’s cater and those with mental health conditions who were identified as the group who were least likely to feel that their needs had been met (HEFCE, 2015a & b). Publication of the reports was followed by two national conferences in 2016 which were planned to disseminate information about student mental health and wellbeing. During these conferences Millward (2016) reported that there were seven key issues to address in the support of student mental health and wellbeing:

* Early disclosure
* Development of inclusive culture and curriculum
* Building student resilience and promoting good mental health
* Improving relationships between academic and support staff
* Staff training/development
* Developing partnerships between external health and social care agencies (statutory and voluntary)

These events signalled a refocussing towards ‘Universal Design for Learning (UDL)’, often termed ‘inclusive education’ (Milton *et al.* 2016), and away from individualised adjustments other than for students with complex requirements. DSAs guidance produced by BIS/DfE for 2016/17 (DSA-QAG, 2016) stated that:

 ‘The learning environment should be as inclusive as possible, so that the need for individual interventions is the exception, not the rule. Institutions should engage in a continual improvement cycle that develops inclusive practice, with the aim of reducing the number of individual interventions required.’ (p.3)
 ‘We expect institutions to strive to provide the best possible support for all their students, including their body of disabled students, to continue to remove or reduce the need for individual support through DSAs.’ (p.14)

 ‘Institutions should not take the continued provision of DSAs as setting the limit to their reasonable adjustments.’ (p.14)

In order to assist HEIs to restructure their support, HEFCE doubled the baseline funding to £40 million with the aim of further developing inclusive provision for disabled students in 2016-17. The April 2016 letter to institutions reports that:

 ‘The increase is to support institutions to meet the rapid rise in mental health issues and to transition towards an inclusive social model of support for disabled students. The distribution of this funding better reflects the actual numbers of disabled students at each institution by no longer assigning institutions to quartile groups for weighting purposes.’ (HEFCE, 2016)

A variety of conferences focusing on inclusivity were held across the sector throughout 2016 and 2017 as Higher Education institutions worked quickly to address the situation. These conferences enabled sharing of good practice and showcasing of some creative approaches to support for all aspects of the student journey, not just the academic (Hastwell *et al.* 2017), as well as inclusive teaching and learning.

The Disabled Students Stakeholder Leadership Group (DSSLG; 2017) designed guidance for senior management which further unpacked the idea that institutions are required to develop an inclusive teaching and learning strategy to ensure that course design, delivery and assessment is accessible to disabled students. HEIs are also expected to consider how they deliver information about available resources to students and staff and ways in which strategies can be put in place to reduce the need for support workers and encourage greater independence and autonomy. The expectation that there will be a systemic institution wide plan which is driven from the top is articulated clearly.

Bringing this completely up to date, in this current edition of the Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and Higher Education, James *et al.* (2017) have commented in detail on the report of the DSSLG and posed the question ‘what next’ i.e. how can its recommendations be translated into practical applications designed to have a positive impact on the experience and successful outcomes of disabled students. Their conclusions were that embedding universal design for inclusive learning at the planning stage and throughout the student journey from pre-entry to post-exit requires a strategic approach with senior leadership support. The DSA clearly has an ongoing role to play but the sector is moving into an era in which everybody within the institution needs to take responsibility for inclusion. James *et al. (ibid.)* also suggest that the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) could clearly play a pivotal role in ensuring that academics plan for the diverse range of students they teach.

**The Current Arrangements for Disability Support within HEIs**

**Structure and Organisation of HEI Teams**

The teams of staff working with disabled students are variously named in a continuum of terms from Disability Support, Disability Advice or Access to Student Wellbeing with many FE Colleges using the term Additional Learning Support. Some institutions highlight the differences between impairment and neurodiversity with the use of terminology such as Disability and Dyslexia Team.

Organisation of the disability team structures are varied with some teams situated within the University Registry department, others in Student Services and a minority within Teaching and Learning /Academic development. The disability service may be co-located with a cluster of medically related services such as counselling, wellbeing and GP provision or may be located with libraries and guidance services.

Disability support in universities and colleges may consist of individual members of staff or full teams with Heads of Department plus Disability Advisers (DAs). Some teams are configured such that DAs support a wide range of disabled students, whilst others have DAs who specialise in a certain area such as mental health or Autism.

Some university disability services host their own Assessment Centres for DSAs and /or run their own in-house Non-Medical Helper (NMH) support. Others have traditionally relied on external suppliers for some or all of the resources their students require.

**Administration of DSAs**

Individual support for eligible disabled HE students, including those studying HE courses in FE, comes from DSAs. Students submit medical evidence to Student Finance England (SFE) and, once approved, attend a DAS QAG approved assessment centre. The result of a meeting between the student and an approved DSAs assessor is a report which includes a detailed set of recommendations for the support required to assist the student to progress with their academic study. This support can come from the HEI or from DSAs. Reports are submitted to Student Finance England (SFE) for approval. The process can be lengthy and often depends on the student knowing that the DSA is an option. It has been suggested that this is not always the case (Walker, 2015).

HE disability teams navigate a number of different routes to ensure that recommended support is put in place. The English route to DSA is described here. Similar but slightly different processes are in place for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man and the Channel Islands. Courses linked to the NHS have alternative process; self-funded PhD students qualify for DSAs but those studying under Research Council funding receive funding from the relevant Research Council based on a needs assessment similar to DSA. In addition, those studying on work based courses, such as teaching, often require assistance to apply for Access to Work funding for the periods of their course which take place within a work setting.

The historic increase in DSAs is levelling out and starting to reduce in a short space of time since the reforms began in 2014. Changes to eligibility criteria and non-medical help have added to the additional planning needed by HEIs. Smaller institutions, and FE providers offering HE, have arguably done a great deal to widen participation of non-traditional learners. However, these HEIs have not had the time or money to invest in new projects while some institutions with more resources have been able to introduce changes to moderate the impact. The University of Cambridge and the Royal Agricultural University, for example, have worked fast to get funding routes approved to enable two aspects of non-medical help to be brought in-house: academic mentoring and specialist tuition. This will mean that they can exercise quality control more easily and have a free hand to sustain and even enhance disability support.

A significant percentage of students do not qualify for DSAs or require provision which costs more than DSAs can offer. DSA ineligibility applies to international students and those without medical evidence. Obtaining medical evidence to confirm eligibility is not necessarily always straightforward. A student with a childhood diagnosis of autism, for example, may be asked by SFE to prove that the information still applies (despite the fact that autism is lifelong) and a pre-sixteen diagnosis of dyslexia is not deemed acceptable by SFE. Deaf students who may require extensive help from highly qualified interpreters, specialist English tutors and notetakers often exceed the top of DSA funding and disability teams need to negotiate for additional institutional resources. Charitable funding (such as the Snowdon Trust) and support from Social Services is available on occasion but accessing money from these sources require separate processes. It can be argued that the cumbersome nature of the system creates additional barriers.

**Other Services for Disabled Students**

At an institutional level the HEI is also required to provide other services which are outside the remit of DSAs. This can include making alternative examination arrangements and supporting some aspects of fieldwork, placement and practical aspects of the course. Most commonly the package is co-ordinated, usually by the disability team, in the form of a learning contract or agreement which can be securely shared across the institution with the permission of the student. The expectation is that staff in receipt of the document read it and act upon its recommendations. Ideally, academics and relevant professional services staff will be sufficiently informed and involved to, at least, buy-in and, at best, contribute to the process.

Some universities have specialist academic staff who provide a link between the disability team and the academic team with the aim of ensuring that appropriate provision is put in place. When professional services teams are also involved and senior leadership commitment is evident there is a better chance of embedding inclusive practice. Widening Participation practitioners, Equality & Diversity practitioners and the Student Union also have a useful contribution to make. When disability equality is viewed as an integral part of the broader equalities agenda and universal design is conceived as a way to include all students everybody benefits. Recording lectures, for example, can help students for whom English is a second language, and automatic doors ease the flow of movement for everyone. Benefits for students can also translate into benefits for staff.

Although Health and Safety training is usually compulsory for HE staff, and some universities offer an online overview of the Equality Act 2010, there is no similar mandatory requirement for personnel working with disabled students in various capacities to understand the relevant entitlements and processes and this is a concern. If an academic, for example, receives a learning contract amongst six hundred other emails and does not really know what to do with it, or an ICT or estates update fails to adequately consider accessibility, the chances of the student receiving a joined-up service will inevitably be somewhat reduced.

**Most Recent Research**

Williams *et al.* (2017) were commissioned by HEFCE to conduct a study of the support available to disabled students across the English HE sector in 2016/17 and examine the progress made towards inclusive practice. In-depth case studies of 13 providers, and feedback from 59 individuals supplemented the online data obtained from 137 providers. In summary the report concluded that the HEI’s surveyed delivered effective training and organisation for staff to support disabled students. Participating providers reported making progress on inclusive curriculum design and teaching and learning practices. 30% identified a priority for developing their use of both general and assistive technology. The report listed various recommendations including: using inclusive practice champions; identifying alternative funding streams to resource the longer-term embedding of inclusive practice; improving accessibility of digital resources; staff development, engagement and senior leadership buy-in to foster an inclusive institutional culture.These recommendations are in keeping with James *et al*. (2017) and chime with NADP’s active support to progress disability equality in post compulsory education. NADP advocates the use of social model language and would therefore not have used the term ‘students with disabilities’ in the title of the report. However, the report does make substantial recommendations about the reduction of barriers experienced by disabled students.

**NADP Experience**

Members communicating via the NADP JISCMail list suggest that HEIs are in various stages of preparation for the new conditions. In response to this, NADP has organised a series of ‘Inclusive Practice’ conferences in the last two years with the aim of sharing good practice across the sector. However, indications point to a patchy picture across the sector with some institutions struggling to cover the basic guidelines and others working towards a higher standard of inclusive practice.

Support for students who do not qualify for DSAs, such as international disabled students, has also been a topic for intense discussion on the NADP JISCMail support line and at NADP conferences. The lack of financial assistance has appeared to result in a system where provision for international disabled students varies widely between institutions.

NADP aims to be an inclusive organisation and seeks to engage with: leaders, academics, researchers, staff from services beyond disability teams and external agencies. NADP is growing in influence and it offers advice and guidance to many organisations not directly engaged with disability equality but understanding of services for disabled students from professionals working with disabled students can be limited. NADP members are very clear that what is required is a shared responsibility, an ‘all-in-it-together’ approach, which views disability as part of diversity and understands intersectionality. The organisation is striving to collaborate with others in order to provide something useful to this agenda.

**Conclusions**

Joined up thinking is a pre-requisite to ensuring that disabled students receive an equitable experience. Students do not access aspects of university life in little boxes and the component parts which go together to make the whole journey both enjoyable and productive need to be viewed as a whole, from pre-entry to post-exit.

Universal design for inclusive practice demands co-ordination and above all leadership which is modelled from the top. An arrangement that systematically incorporates all aspects that affect the student journey would be ideal: everything from staff induction through inter-departmental communication to the social aspects of student life. Only in this way will we ensure that unacceptable levels of variance between institutions are minimised. In these new systems DSAs will be included as additional support for those who need a little more.

When universal design underpins all aspects of strategic and operational planning, everybody (staff, students and others) can benefit. Intersectionality and multiple identity are factors which require consideration. Within university populations there will be disabled and non-disabled people who may experience disadvantage if their requirements are not considered and advantages to the institution of nurturing diversity and recognising all the talents will also be missed.

The pace of change poses organisational challenges which need to be addressed on a practical as well as strategic level. If a disabled student needs resources to be in place at the start and to follow through coherently from pre-entry to post graduation but services do not kick in for months or finish too early, then the system will fail. If there is no co-ordinated support for work on placement or lecturers are unaware of their responsibilities, then the system will fail. A robust, joined up system designed to fully support all aspects of the student journey is required.

Success demands leadership from the top with higher management buy-in, policy and guideline development with input from all areas of the HEI and stakeholder involvement. Disability advisers, researchers, lecturers and staff from a wide range of professional services have expertise to offer. Students are the experts in their own lives and disabilities and usually have a very clear idea about what would work for them as individuals. Their feedback and involvement in the development of services is vital and has been required, although not carefully monitored, since equality impact assessments were introduced.

We are undoubtedly living in very challenging times and our Prime Minister has already told us that there is no magic money tree. The challenge is to mobilise our capacity to work with and for students in order to promote disability equality as a vital aspect of a broader equalities agenda, in our rapidly changing university sector. NADP, despite its tiny infrastructure and unpaid, voluntary Board of Directors, is a fierce and influencial force for social model thinking around disability equality in post-compulsory education. The strength of the organisation lies with its lively and engaged membership.

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