

**FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT: RESEARCH COUNCILS DISABLED STUDENTS
ALLOWANCES (DSA) – ADVICE FOR RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS AND
RESEARCH COUNCILS’ STAFF**

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Introduction

1. Funding for Research Council studentships is awarded to Research Organisations (University, Institutions or other Independent Research Organisations eligible to receive Research Councils' funding) on the understanding that they will provide the necessary equipment and facilities to enable students to undertake and complete their studentship's project and training programme. Disabled students who have been recruited to Research Councils' postgraduate studentships are eligible to apply for additional financial support towards disability related expenditure arising from their postgraduate studies. The additional support commonly referred to as Disabled Students Allowances (DSA) is available to students regardless of age and is not income assessed.
2. *For EPSRC only* Provision for DSA for students supported by a Collaborative Training Award (CTA) has been included in the funding provided to the Research Organisation. We would expect that the normal procedures for DSA would be followed e.g. completion of a Needs Assessment etc but the payment of all costs should be met by the Research Organisation from CTA funding and need only be reported to the EPSRC when the Final Expenditure Statement (FES) is completed.
3. This document provides information to finance and postgraduate officers, disability advisers and supervisors in Research Organisations and to Research Councils' staff on the support available to disabled postgraduate students funded by the UK Research Councils and on the arrangements for seeking DSA funds from Research Councils. The document does not identify all cases where extra costs may be incurred in studying because of a disability.
4. In terms of an understanding of what is meant by a disability, Research Councils refer to the following extract from the 1999 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Code of Practice – section 3: Students with Disabilities:
“Disability covers a wide range of impairments, visual impairments, and specific learning difficulties including dyslexia, medical conditions and mental health problems. Some of these impairments may have few, if any implications for a student's life or study. Others may have little impact on day to day life but may have a major impact on a student's study, or vice versa. Some students may already be disabled when they apply to an institution; others may become disabled or become aware of an existing disability only after their programme has started. Others may have fluctuating conditions. Some students may be disabled temporarily by accident or illness”. Research Councils' overall concern is to ensure that disabled students who wish to undertake postgraduate study are encouraged to do so, know where to go for advice and receive the necessary support.

5. It is the responsibility of the Research Organisation to ensure that buildings, facilities and equipment are as accessible as possible to disabled students. Disabled students allowances (DSA) are not therefore intended to cover disability-related expenditure that is the responsibility of the Research Organisation. Furthermore, DSA are not intended to cover costs that the student would incur irrespective of whether or not they were undertaking postgraduate study. Research Organisations must therefore satisfy themselves that a student will by reason of a disability incur additional expenditure in undertaking their postgraduate study. The social services department should continue to provide assistance towards personal care costs that will be incurred irrespective of whether or not the student is undertaking a postgraduate course.

Accountability

6. Research Organisations in receipt of DSA funds from Research Councils are expected to ensure that there are reliable systems and processes in place for controlling the receipt and disbursement of those funds in accordance with established guidelines for the care of public funds. Research Councils reserve the right to have reasonable access to inspect the records and financial procedures associated with the use of funds, including DSA funds.

Disability Advisers

7. Disability Advisers or a named contact to advise on disability matter should be available at all Research Organisations. Research Councils value the expertise of Disability Advisers and their understanding of the research environment and of the nature of the postgraduate study that students will be undertaking. Research Councils expect Disability Advisers to have a key advisory role in the DSA process and in providing assurance that DSA funds are being used appropriately. The role of Disability Advisers may vary between Research Organisations. Generally, however they may:
 - offer disabled students advice on other sources of funding and support that may be available;
 - advise students on all the stages of applying for DSA;
 - arrange assessment of needs appointments on behalf of students;
 - advise on particular needs that may arise from specific studentship programmes;
 - help put in place the support that is recommended in the needs assessment report;
 - work with Accommodation Services, Social Services, Local Authorities and academic departments;
 - co-ordinate training for support workers;
 - make recommendations for the academic department in relation to students, for example, special exam arrangements;
 - research, develop and help implement Research Organisations' policy for exams, physical access and field work;

- contribute to the development and implementation of Research Organisations' disability strategies

Evidence of a Disability

8. Where a student's disability has not been documented previously, a diagnosis of the disability by a suitably qualified person or body for the purposes of establishing eligibility for DSA will be required. A written statement from a qualified professional confirming that a student has a disability should be sufficient evidence. (See also paragraph 9 on non-disclosure)
9. The evidence provided should state the nature of the student's disability and should also explain in brief how the student is affected by the disability, including its potential impact on study. The costs of diagnostic evidence solely to establish eligibility for DSA cannot be met from DSA funds. Students may request help from their Research Organisation's Access to Learning Fund.

Non-Disclosure

10. A student does not have to disclose a disability to the Research Organisation. A student who chooses not to disclose their disability to the Research Organisation can contact the sponsoring Research Council directly for advice on DSA. Research Councils will treat such approaches sensitively, whilst aiming to ensure that students understand that non-disclosure may mean that necessary and helpful support will not be available from the Research Organisation.

Assessment of Study-Related Needs

11. Once the disability has been diagnosed by a qualified professional, the student will normally have to undergo an impartial assessment of need to identify the study-related support required. The cost of the needs assessment will be met from DSA funding. An assessment of study related needs should be arranged as soon as possible after it is established that the student has a disability. The needs assessment enables the Research Organisation to determine how much additional support the student will require. It is important that the student understands that the purpose of a needs' assessment is to identify the additional support required to undertake postgraduate study, taking into account the nature and profile of the student's project.

DSA Funds

12. Once a DSA needs assessment has been completed, the Disability Adviser should identify the DSA funds that are claimable from Research Councils and should ensure that an application for DSA support is completed. Application forms will be available on each Research Council's website. The application should be sent for processing to the relevant Research Council's studentships contact, listed at Annex 1, except in the case of ESRC sponsored students (see paragraph 14). The Research Council will notify the Research Organisation's Finance Services, Disability Services and the student of the outcome of the application, including details of the DSA funds approved for the student and how funds will be paid.

13. DSA funds will be paid to the Research Organisation and it will be the responsibility of the Research Organisation to have systems in place for reimbursement of these funds either to disability services or to the student as appropriate. DSA funds are for use in meeting the costs of supporting disabled students and may not be used for any other purpose.
14. *For ESRC only* Claims and decisions regarding DSA entitlement for ESRC sponsored students will be dealt with by the nominated ESRC contact at the Research Organisation, without the need for referral to the ESRC, except where the individual student claims for DSA would amount to £25k or more over the lifetime of the studentship or the student chooses not to declare their disability to the Research Organisation. For claims under £25k, the Disability Office in the Research Organisation is asked to inform ESRC via the ESRC nominated contact when a DSA claim has been approved. Claims above £25k should be referred to ESRC, again via the ESRC nominated contact (see Annex 1), when the request for DSA is being reviewed by the Disability Office.

Types of Funds Available

DSA may cover the costs of:

Specialist Equipment and Insurance

15. This may cover items of equipment for which the need arises from the student's disability and which are necessary if the student is to undertake the programme of postgraduate studies e.g. assistive technology equipment or specially adapted furniture that is required for study purposes in the student's own residence. The costs of training recommended in the use of specialist equipment will be met from DSA funds. Students should be advised to ensure that any equipment purchased is covered by insurance. Insurance or extended warranty costs for any repair and modification costs arising from the ownership of equipment purchased under DSA may be met from DSA funds within the duration of the studentship. Where students do not take out insurance and equipment is stolen, any replacement of the equipment will be at the student's expense. All equipment purchased with the help of DSA is and remains the property of the student. It is open to the student, at the end of the studentship, to offer the equipment to their Research Organisation for the use of other students.

Non-Medical Assistance

16. Non-medical assistance covers readers, lip-speakers, note-takers, campus specific mobility trainers and any non-medical assistance where the Research Organisation is satisfied that the disabled student requires help to undertake the demands of postgraduate study. Non-medical assistance costs may also include specialist study skills support where the support is provided by a specialist tutor. These funds must not be used as a means of supporting extra subject tuition. Provision for non-medical assistance does not remove the duty of social services to provide for care costs that would have been incurred irrespective of a student's attendance on a studentship programme. However, in some circumstances a personal assistant may also provide course-related help for a student. In such cases it might be agreed to share the cost of the course-related help provided by the personal assistant with the social services.

Extra Travel Costs

17. DSA is not intended to cover everyday travel costs that any student undertaking postgraduate study would incur. DSA is for use in meeting only the additional travel costs that arise as a direct result of a disability and that a disabled student has to incur in order to undertake postgraduate study. An example would be the extra costs incurred by a disabled student with mobility problems who may need to use taxis rather than public transport.

General disabled students' allowance

18. These funds may be used to contribute towards other disability-related needs e.g. consumables such as tapes and Braille paper.

DSA Rates

19. Research Councils do not have set rates for DSA. However, Research Organisations Disability Support Advisers, Research Councils and others may find it useful to refer to the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) guidance on DSA as an indicator of the likely levels of funds a disabled student may require.
<http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/EducationAndTraining/HigherEducation>

Period of Eligibility for DSA Funds

20. DSA funds are linked to the period of the studentship and are payable whilst the student continues to be registered as a Research Council student at the Research Organisation. If a student withdraws from the studentship or the studentship is terminated, no further funds will be payable. Where a student leaves part way through a course, the sponsoring Research Council may claim back funds to which the student was not entitled and where payment was made for the period after withdrawal from the course.
21. Undergraduate students who have just graduated and are proceeding directly to postgraduate study from undergraduate study or students proceeding from Master level to doctoral study should be able to use their current DSA needs assessment as a basis for seeking DSA at postgraduate level. This means for example, that a student can continue to receive non-medical assistance, without a new needs' assessment. If the student has to undergo a new assessment, whether because their circumstances have changed or the requirements of the postgraduate study are substantially different, the costs of the new needs assessment can be paid met from DSA funds. If the new assessment identifies equipment support, it may be appropriate to take into account whether the equipment the student received as an undergraduate meets the student's requirements at postgraduate level.

DSA Support Requested in the Final Stages of a Course

22. Some students may apply for DSA support in the latter stages of the final year of their studies. Many of the students who apply late for DSA support do so because they have been reluctant to disclose their disability before and have concerns about their impending examinations or are struggling with dissertations. It is important that the student receives the appropriate support even if it is only for a short period. If a need for disability-related

support is identified in the latter stages of study, a claim may be made in the normal way though hiring equipment rather than purchasing new should be considered.

Student leaves a course after receiving equipment

23. If a student, who has started a programme of postgraduate study, receives DSA equipment and subsequently leaves postgraduate study, there is no provision for recovery of the equipment, regardless of the length of time the student spent on the course. This is because the award is made with statutory authority and the purpose for which the equipment is supplied has already materialised.

Disability Organisations

24. National disability organisations such as Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, RNIB (Royal National Institute of the Blind) and RNID (Royal National Institute for Deaf People) provide valuable specialist support and advice upon which Research Organisations can draw. These organisations can help in one or more of the following ways:

- providing information on particular disabilities;
- assessing students' needs;
- helping with the training of Student Support Officers;
- increasing awareness of DSA in their own constituent groups; and
- providing a network of wider help for Research Organisations

Acknowledgments

The main source documents for these guidance notes were

- i) The Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) guidance on DSA for undergraduates and non-Research Councils funded postgraduate students – “Bridging the Gap”.
- ii) The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education – code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education – section 3 students with disabilities – October 1999
- iii) Members of Skill Higher Education Working Group - Professor Alan Hurst, Dr Caroline Davies, Jenni Dyer, Helen McNeely, Ellen Pugh, and Elaine Shilcock provided guidance on the final content and structure of the document
- iv) Val Farrar, who was project officer to the Premia project launched at Newcastle-upon-Tyne University, provided helpful advice on early drafts of the document.

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ANNEX 1

Research Councils Studentship Contacts	E-mail	DSA Payment Method as at April 2009
The Arts and Humanities Research Council	pso@ahrc.ac.uk	Studentship Grants to Research Organisations
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council	Postaward.admin@bbsrc.ac.uk	Doctoral training grants to Research Organisation
Economic and Social Research Council	http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Support/postgraduate%5Fstudents/Liaison%5FOfficers/	Funds paid to Research Organisation against individual student records
Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council	grantspolicy@EPSRC.ac.uk	Doctoral training grants to Research Organisation
Medical Research Council	MRCpolicy&ops@headoffice.mrc.ac.uk	Doctoral training grants to Research Organisation
Natural Environment Research Council	trainingawardsteam@nerc.ac.uk	Doctoral training grants to Research Organisations
Science and Technology Facilities Council	studentships@stfc.ac.uk	Doctoral training grants to Research Organisations