



Research Councils UK

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FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT

RESEARCH COUNCILS - DISABLED STUDENTS' ALLOWANCES (DSA)

ADVICE FOR RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS, RESEARCH COUNCIL FUNDED STUDENTS, AND RESEARCH COUNCILS' STAFF

SEPTEMBER 2016

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Introduction

1. Funding for Research Council studentships is awarded to Research Organisations (Universities, Institutions, Institutes 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 project and training programme. Disabled students who have been recruited to Research Council studentships are eligible to apply for additional financial support towards expenditure arising from their postgraduate studies incurred solely because of their disability. This additional financial support is commonly referred to as Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA).
2. 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 students funded by the 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.
3. All seven Research Councils operate a harmonised process for DSA, which is detailed here. We have devolved responsibility to the Research Organisations to undertake the assessment of need and to provide costs for the student when they are required. Research Organisations can claim back eligible costs at the end of the preceding academic year¹ by submitting a completed DSA claim form by 31st October each year. It is the Research Organisation's responsibility to ensure that the costs committed are eligible for Research Council funding.
4. In terms of an understanding of what is meant by a disability, the Equality Act 2010 definition is as follows: 'A person has a disability for the purposes of the Act if he or she has a physical or mental impairment and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. Some of these impairments may have few, if any implications for a student's 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. DSAs are not therefore intended to cover disability-related expenditure that is the responsibility of

¹ For the purpose of DSA claims the academic year is defined as 1 October to 30 September

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the Research Organisation. Furthermore, DSAs are not intended to cover costs that the student would incur irrespective of whether or not they were undertaking postgraduate study. DSA will contribute to the additional costs resulting from a disability over and above those provided as reasonable adjustments. 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. Research Organisations must therefore satisfy themselves that a student will by reason of a disability incur additional expenditure in undertaking their postgraduate study. Research Councils will not cover costs that apply to all students undertaking the course or costs that would apply for any student undertaking a particular research programme. Research Councils will not provide funding for equipment or resources that are already being provided or should be provided through another route.

6. As part of the regular review of our processes, we are introducing some changes to the DSA application guidance. We are aware of the guidance that Student Finance England issued for students applying for DSA for the first time for the academic year 2015/16 and have reflected this guidance, where we felt it was appropriate in the context of RCUK-funded students. These changes do not mean a change to the process for applying for DSA: this remains as outlined below.
7. This guidance will apply for students who are applying for DSA for the first time in respect of an academic year beginning on or after 1 October 2016. Continuing RCUK-funded students will continue on their agreed package of support. Continuing Students who are assessed for DSA prior to 1 October 2016 but, who have not yet received RCUK-funding (due to the timing of the reimbursement process), do not need to be reassessed.

Accountability

8. 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 or Officers

9. A Disability Adviser, or Officer or a named contact (collectively called 'Disability Adviser' in the rest of the document) should be available at all Research Organisations to advise on disability matters. 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:

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- Offer disabled students advice on other sources of funding and support that may be available advise students on all aspects of DSA funding
- 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 the Research Organisation's policy for exams, physical access and field work
- Contribute to the development and implementation of the Research Organisation's disability strategies.

Evidence of a Disability

10. 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 12 on non-disclosure).

11. 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

12. 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

13. 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

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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

14. Once a DSA needs assessment has been completed, the Disability Adviser should identify the DSA funds that are claimable from Research Councils and should arrange with the Research Organisation for the support to be provided to the student. A record should be retained of all payments that are eligible for Research Council DSA funding, to allow costs to be reclaimed at the end of the academic year. Costs need to be claimed against the grant on which the student is primarily supported, i.e. from which 50% or more of his or her costs were provided. Claims can be made against a different grant in subsequent years if the student support moves to another grant.
15. At the end of the academic year a separate claim form for each eligible student should be submitted as an attachment via Je-S Grant Maintenance. DSA Claim forms are available on the RCUK website: <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/skills/training/> Please complete only one form per student. Claims for more than one student from the same grant should be submitted as a single, multi-page document. Research Councils reserve the right to request further information and/or to decline to provide costs which it deems to be ineligible. Please ensure that the student's details have been entered on Je-S, against the correct grant, otherwise the claim will be rejected. The Research Organisation's Finance Services will be notified of the outcome of the claim. This payment will be included in the next scheduled grant payment as an additional funding stream to the specified grant.
16. For continuing students, claims should be submitted on an annual basis at the end of each academic year. Where there is six months or less remaining on the training grant the claim should be included as a claim within the Final Expenditure Statement (FES) rather than as a separate claim.
17. 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. It is recommended that receipts are retained for any items or resource purchased through DSA support as this expenditure will be included in the final reconciliation on the grant and DSA may also be covered under RCUK Assurance Process visits.

Types of Funds Available

18. Resources which are eligible under DSA are detailed below. Where a Disability Adviser believes there is a resource which falls outside of these areas but, which may be eligible because of the student's particular requirements, or if it is not clear whether or not a cost is eligible, he/she is advised to contact the Research Council to

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discuss this before costs are incurred. Councils will not reimburse costs that they deem to be ineligible. Contact details are included at Annex 1.

19. Research Councils do not have set rates for DSA but the Disability Adviser must ensure that all costs requested are justifiable and reasonable. It is the Research Organisation's responsibility to ensure that value for money principles are followed when spending public funds and they must ensure that costs are appropriate for the student's needs and the course or programme of study or research. Where there is a choice of options, the Disability Adviser should recommend the cheapest option or the lowest specification of item that meets the student's needs. Please see Annex 3 for some examples of eligible and ineligible costs.

Needs Assessment

20. The costs of a needs assessment will be provided where the Disability Adviser deems it to be necessary.

Specialist Equipment and Insurance

21. This may cover items of equipment (hardware and software) 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. For example, assistive technology equipment or specially adapted furniture that is required for study purposes in the student's own residence. For the latter, this would be provided where, as a result of the disability, it is necessary for the student to study at their own residence. Assistive software can be provided where it is required solely due to the student's disability. Standard software costs can only be covered where this is needed to enable use of the assistive software.
22. Where training is required in the use of the specialist equipment or software that is provided, these costs will be met from DSA funds. Various options for delivery of the training should be considered, e.g. the availability of online training which, provided it meets the student's needs, might be cheaper.
23. 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 or extended warranty or the insurance or warranty becomes invalid, and equipment is subsequently lost, stolen or damaged, any replacement or repair 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.
24. Research Councils are unable to provide items of furniture for the office, library, laboratory etc. at the Research Organisation.

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25. Items of equipment (hardware or software) that almost all students would be expected to own, such as, entry-level specification computers, standard software, smartphones, tablets, portable media players, and equivalent, will not be provided. Where a computer of a higher specification is considered to be essential, the costs, minus a £200 contribution, can be claimed². We are also unable to provide costs for items which the student requires for general use, such as tinted spectacles.
26. We are unable to cover the cost of a higher specification computer where this is linked to a requirement for the course or programme of study, in other words, where any student on the course or programme would require this specification. Where the need for a higher specification arises solely from the disability e.g. in order to run disability-related software, then it will be possible for costs, minus a £200 contribution, to be claimed.

Non-Medical Assistance

27. 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 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

28. DSA is not intended to cover every day travel costs that any student undertaking postgraduate study would incur. DSA will meet 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. In this case, we will only provide the difference in the cost between the taxi and public transport, not the full cost of the taxi fare.

General disabled students' allowance

29. These funds may be used to contribute towards other disability-related needs e.g. specific consumables such as tapes and Braille paper. Funds are not provided to cover general items such as printer cartridges, paper or books or to cover internet access

² This is in line with the SFE guidance. Entry-level computers, costing £200 or less, are considered to be products that most students would own. DSA will provide the difference between the mainstream costs (£200) and the higher specification.

30. Research Councils are unable to cover costs which are not associated with the student's postgraduate study e.g. dietary needs.

Period of Eligibility for DSA Funds

31. DSA funds are linked to the funded 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 Research Organisation may submit a claim only for those eligible costs incurred whilst the student was registered and funded by the Research Council. The claim would be in accordance with the general process described earlier.
32. Undergraduate students who have just graduated and are proceeding directly to postgraduate study from undergraduate study or students proceeding from Master's level to doctoral study may 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 met from DSA funds. If the new assessment identifies equipment support, the Disability Adviser should consider 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

33. We recognise that some students may not wish to disclose their disability but, where they need support, we encourage them to apply for it as early as possible so that they can gain full benefit throughout the course. 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 equipment should be considered.
34. DSA claims cannot be backdated to cover costs incurred prior to the academic year in which the student is deemed eligible for this support.

Student leaves a course after receiving equipment

35. 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

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

- a) Providing information on particular disabilities
- b) Assessing students' needs
- c) Helping with the training of Student Support Officers
- d) Increasing awareness of DSA in their own constituent groups
- e) 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.
- v. Student Finance England – SSIN 01/15 Changes to Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) for students applying for DSA for the first time in respect of an academic year beginning on or after 1 September 2015

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Annex 1: Research Council Studentship Contacts

Research Council	Contact
Arts and Humanities Research Council	pso@ahrc.ac.uk
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research	gfmt@bbsrc.ac.uk
Economic and Social Research Council	tdbpolicy@esrc.ac.uk
Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council	DSAClaims@epsrc.ac.uk
Medical Research Council	MRCpolicy&ops@headoffice.mrc.ac.uk
Natural Environment Research Council	stag@nerc.ac.uk
Science and Technology Facilities Council	studentships@stfc.ac.uk

Annex 2: List of updates

The table below highlights the main changes made to the guidance. It does not include minor changes of wording that have been made for clarification.

Section	Paragraph number	Change	Updated
Introduction	1-3	Wording updated	January 2016
	4	Reference to Equality Act 2010 added	January 2016
	5	Reference to reasonable adjustment added	January 2016
	6 & 7	Notification of changes and timing	January 2016
Type of funds available	19	Additional clarification	January 2016
	21	Additional information on assistive and standard software	January 2016
	22	Additional information on training	January 2016
	23	Clarification on insurance and warranties	January 2016
	25 & 26	Update to guidance on computing equipment	January 2016
	29	Amendment to general allowance	January 2016
DSA support in final stages of course	34	Addition of clause on backdating payments	January 2016
Annex 3		Table providing examples of eligible and ineligible costs	September 2016

Annex 3: Additional guidance

The table below provides a summary and examples of eligible and ineligible costs. This is intended as a guide to support DSOs in determining whether a cost can be claimed from the Research Council. In exceptional circumstances the DSO should contact the relevant Research Council contact listed in Annex 1 to discuss specific cases.

Allowed	Not allowed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The cost of the needs assessment to identify the study-related support required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Costs not recommended in the needs assessment. Costs claimed in advance, rather than in arrears.
Specialist equipment needs	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Items of equipment (hardware and software) 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. For example, assistive technology equipment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Items of equipment (hardware or software) that almost all students would be expected to own, such as, entry-level specification computers, standard software, smartphones, tablets, portable media players, and equivalent.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specially adapted furniture that is required for study purposes in the student's own residence because, as a result of the disability, it is necessary for the student to study at there. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Items of furniture for the office, library, laboratory etc. at the Research Organisation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistive software required solely due to the student's disability. Standard software costs can only be covered where this is needed to enable use of the assistive software. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Costs of training in the use of the specialist equipment or software that is provided. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Replacement or repair of equipment where insurance or an extended warranty was not taken out or where the insurance or warranty becomes invalid, and equipment is subsequently lost, stolen or damaged.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where a computer of a higher specification is considered to be essential, the costs, minus a £200 contribution, can be claimed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The cost of a higher specification computer where this is linked to a requirement for the course or programme of study, in other words, where any student on the course or programme would require this specification. This includes the purchase of products such as Macbooks rather than standard PCs or laptops.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Items which the student requires for general use, such as tinted spectacles.

Non-medical personal support	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 postgraduate study. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specialist study skills support where the support is provided by a specialist tutor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funds to support extra subject tuition.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specialist study skills support where the support is provided by a specialist tutor 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-medical assistance that would have been incurred irrespective of a student's attendance on a studentship programme.
Miscellaneous	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. The difference in the cost between the taxi and public transport can be claimed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every day travel costs that any student undertaking postgraduate study would incur
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other disability-related needs e.g. specific consumables such as tapes and Braille paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General items such as printer cartridges, paper or books or to cover internet access
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost which are not associated with the student's postgraduate study e.g. dietary needs.