

DSA: Find Your Way

The **Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)** scheme aims to ensure everyone with a disability, long-term health condition, diagnosed mental health condition or specific language disorder has the support they need to succeed during their studies. However, knowing where to start or even what the DSA really is can be difficult.

This guide will give you the information you need to navigate the DSA application process and receive the support you're entitled to.

About the DSA

Who is this Find Your Way guide for?

While the overall process for accessing the DSA is similar across the UK, there are some differences for students outside of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This guide aims to be relevant to all students from across the UK, but you may find it useful to use this resource in conjunction with advice from your funding body.

What is the DSA?

Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) is a grant you don't need to repay. It funds support that will help you succeed in Higher Education by breaking down the barriers you may otherwise have faced, whether they're related to your studies, physical access, or wellbeing.

Although referred to as an 'allowance,' you won't receive money directly (unless you are a student from Scotland). For students outside of Scotland, once your DSA is approved, funding is allocated to your chosen support providers. This removes the need for you to handle the administrative tasks of contacting, paying for, and collecting receipts for your allocated support.

If you have a disability, mental health condition, neurodiversity, chronic illness and/or learning difference, you may be able to access the DSA. If you're unsure if you might be eligible, [check out our Eligibility FAQ](#) for further guidance.

Is it worth applying for DSA?

Students often ask if it's really worth them applying for the DSA. Let's unpack some of the key reasons you might choose not to apply and why we'd recommend applying!

"I've got through my life so far without any help, so why would I need support now?"

Studying in Higher Education brings its own unique set of challenges, experiences and opportunities. Accessing Disabled Students' Allowance is one such opportunity. Even if you're confident in your ability to study and live independently, DSA can expose you to new strategies and ways of working and learning that you might find beneficial!

"I don't need the support as much as other people; I don't want to take resources from those who might need them more."

There's enough funding to go around! Everyone is deserving of the support that will enable them to participate and thrive, no matter your disability or diagnosis.

"I don't identify as disabled."

Don't let the fact that you don't call yourself 'disabled' hold you back from applying; many different diagnoses and long-term conditions might make you eligible for the DSA. [Check out this FAQ](#) for more information to help you work out if you might qualify.

What type of support does the DSA fund?

The DSA funds a diverse range of support types, so you can access the support that feels most right for you.

To work out what support you could receive, your DSA application includes a 'needs assessment'. This is a conversation between you and a DSA needs assessor where you will discuss your course, your learning needs, and the barriers you might face. Once you have explored your needs, the assessor will create a 'report' that lists what different types of support they would recommend for you.

The support is broken down into four main areas:

Specialist Equipment Allowance

This can include ergonomic equipment and assistive technology (AT) that will provide suitable technical solutions to help you study more efficiently. Technology

includes hardware, like a laptop, and software such as advanced spelling and grammar checkers.

Non-medical helper allowance

Providing specialist one-to-one support from a qualified professional in one or more of the following fields:

- **Specialist Study Skills Support**
A study skills support (sometimes called a study skills tutor) help you understand your learning style, embrace your strengths, and work on study strategies to overcome challenges.
- **Specialist Mentoring**
A mental health or autistic spectrum mentor will help you to develop strategies to maintain positive mental health and ultimately feel happier and more confident while you're studying.
- **Assistive Technology Training**
An assistive technology trainer will teach you to use the software and equipment that you have been allocated. You will learn not only how to simply use the technology but also how to embed it alongside effective study strategies. The training will help you to get the most out of your software and equipment.
- **British Sign Language (BSL) Interpreter**
BSL/English interpreters will translate BSL into spoken English and spoken English into BSL for accessible communication while studying.
- **Specialist Notetaker**
A notetaker will make a comprehensive (although non-verbatim) record of the content of lectures, seminars and discussions in your preferred style and format.
- **Specialist Support Professional (SSP) for Students with Sensory Impairment**
This support is bespoke to your sensory impairment. An SSP supports you through language modification, explanation and revision of information. They also assist you to implement reasonable adjustments, plan workloads, structure assignments, access research sources and prepare effectively for assessments.

Covers day-to-day stationery costs such as:

- Photocopying
- Printing
- Ink cartridges
- Paper

This allowance helps with extra travel costs you may have to pay to get to university or college due to your disability or chronic illness. It can cover taxi fares or mileage costs to and from your home address to your university or college.

Who can access DSA?

DSA is available to students who:

- Have a disability, mental health condition, neurodiversity, chronic illness and/or learning difference;
- Are studying an undergraduate or postgraduate course (including Open University or distance learning);
- Are studying a full-time or part-time course that lasts at least one year, and;
- Are 'home students' (you are a student from England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland).

Many different factors affect whether or not you will be eligible for DSA. If you're unsure about your eligibility, you can:

- Check out the [DSA Eligibility FAQ](#)
- Talk to the Student Support Team: studentsupport@niot.org.uk

Even if you're not eligible for DSA, you may be able to access support through a similar scheme. Contact the Disability Support Services at your prospective or current university or college to discuss what support may be available to you.

How can I access the DSA?

The most important thing is that you apply. This starts the process and lets your funding body know you're interested in accessing DSA.

After that, your funding body will guide you through the process, contacting you with information at each stage. Once you have accepted your place on a course, your university's disability service will also happily guide you through the process.

The process itself is straightforward. We'll break it down into four steps: **apply; be assessed; receive confirmation; take up support.**

We'll guide you through each step in more detail in a moment, but here's an overview of the four stages:

1. Apply

You [apply online](#), letting your funding body (for example, Student Finance England, Student Awards Agency for Scotland, Student Finance Wales, Student Finance Northern Ireland, or NHS Student Bursary) know you want to receive the DSA.

2. Be assessed

1. Your funding body contacts you back with instructions on how to arrange your DSA needs assessment.
2. You attend your needs assessment. This is not a test, but rather a space to discuss your study needs.
3. Your needs assessor provides you with a report outlining what support they recommend you receive.
4. Your needs assessor sends your report to your funding body.

3. Receive confirmation

You receive a confirmation email from your funding body, letting you know what support you have been awarded, along with instructions on how you can begin receiving it.

4. Take up support

You now have all the funding confirmed to begin taking up your recommended support. The support is available to you throughout your time as a student, and any equipment or hardware you receive is yours to keep!

Now that you have an overview of the process, let's look at it in more detail.

Already receiving Student Finance?

If you receive **Student Finance** from Student Finance England, Wales or Northern Ireland, you can sign in to your Student Finance [England](#), [Wales](#) or [Northern Ireland](#) account to start your DSA application. The application for DSA should be on your 'to-do list'.

Why you should apply for the DSA as early as possible

You don't need to have started your course to apply for the DSA; you don't even need to have a confirmed place at university. You can apply for the DSA as soon as your funding body's applications open (usually in February or March).

You can hit the ground running in your first term and focus on settling into a new environment and getting to grips with your course, knowing that all of your support is already in place.

Although you will have to show medical evidence to access your DSA, this shouldn't stop you from applying. Letting the DSA Team know that you are entitled to additional support is the first and most important stage.

Make sure you discuss all of your needs

If you have more than one diagnosis or condition, make sure you share each individual condition on your DSA application. You will only be able to access support for the diagnoses that you have highlighted on your application. Make sure you cover everything so you can get everything you need!

Application stage done. Amazing! Next up, let's see how you get allocated support.

Your Assessment

What will happen in my assessment?

The assessment is confidential and conducted in a **relaxed, informal and supportive environment**. Needs assessors have specialist experience in working with higher education students and discussing recommendations for support. You will have the opportunity to talk about your past experiences and any strategies you have developed to address challenges. Once your learning needs have been discussed and the barriers identified, the assessor will propose support that could benefit you.

Your needs assessment will usually include a discussion of the following areas of university life:

- Research and reading
- Writing and reviewing academic work
- Note-taking in lectures and seminars
- Managing time and organising work
- Access to and use of technology

- Practical sessions, placements, field trips and additional course activities
- Examinations and timed assessments
- Social interaction and communication
- Travel and access to your higher education environment
- Additional information

What do I need to bring with me to the assessment?

Your needs assessor may ask you to provide certain information before your appointment to help them understand your specific support needs.

They may request:

- Your DSA1 confirmation letter
- Your medical evidence
- Information about your computer or laptop, if you have one

The needs assessment is your opportunity to discuss any challenges you face in education. It's steered by the amount of information you share. You might consider making a short list of things you find challenging to ensure you remember to discuss them all.

To help you get in the right mindset for the session, consider asking yourself:

- What kind of support did I receive at school?
- Is there something I've struggled with in the past that has never been addressed?
- Is there anything about my course I'm anxious about?

Don't worry if you don't know the answers to these questions; remember that your needs assessor is there to help guide you to think about the particular challenges you might face and work with you to come up with solutions.

If you have a needs assessment after you enrol, it might also be helpful to send your needs assessor an outline of upcoming assignments, a course outline or a copy of your most recent timetable.

How long does an assessment take?

We recommend that you allow up to 2 hours for your assessment, but they are often completed sooner.

What won't my assessment cover?

DSA is specifically designed to support you with your university studies and alleviate the barriers you face that relate to your disability. This means that your DSA will not be able to cover the following:

- Costs that non-disabled students will also face, for example, course-specific costs like your textbooks and any course-specific software
- Costs that the university has a responsibility to cover, for example providing resources in accessible formats, and ensuring you have accessible accommodation
- Costs that you would face if you were not studying at university, for example, prescriptions, dietary requirements or mobility aids

What happens after my assessment?

After your needs assessment, your assessor will draft a report and send a copy to you within ten working days. If you are happy with everything on the draft, your assessor will send a final copy to your funding body for their approval.

Your assessor will ask for your permission to send a copy of your needs assessment report to the NIOT Student Support Team. We suggest you give permission because this helps your university arrange the adjustments, support and strategies recommended in the report.

Almost there! Let's now look at what happens when your funding body approves your support.

3. Receive confirmation

Your funding body will review the evidence in your needs assessment report and confirm the support they have agreed to fund. You will receive this confirmation in an email; like before, a letter will be attached. **The letter is called your DSA2 letter of entitlement and will be your key to getting your support set up.**

If you would like extra help arranging your confirmed support, the NIOT will be able to provide this. The first step is just to forward your DSA2 letter of entitlement to your university's disability services. You can often find their contact details by Googling your university's name, followed by 'disability services'. They will then contact you back to go through your DSA2 letter with you.

Final stage coming up! Let's get your support in place.

4. Take up support

You made it! It's time to begin receiving your support. The **second page** of your DSA2 letter of entitlement contains all the necessary information.

If you've been allocated Assistive Technology (AT) and training, your needs assessment centre will order your technology and schedule your training for you.

For all other support types, **contact the organisations** listed on the letter when you're ready. We've provided an example of what this will look like below.

You can receive support at any time throughout your course, although we would recommend starting sooner rather than later. That way, you can begin preparing for potential barriers before you even face them.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

We've compiled some of the most common questions we get about the DSA. If you have a question not covered below, you can get in touch with us via our social media channels or by email.

Am I a 'disabled student'?

Although the support is called 'Disabled Students' Allowance', you may be eligible even if you don't identify as disabled. The allowance covers a range of different experiences and diagnoses, including:

- Mental health conditions
- Specific learning difference
- Neurodiversity including Autism and/or ADHD.
- Physical disability
- Long-term health conditions
- Deafness
- Chronic illness and/or chronic pain

What makes a condition 'substantial' and 'long-term'?

"Substantial"

The Equality Act defines "substantial" as "more than minor or trivial".

Are the barriers you are experiencing different to those faced by people who don't have your diagnosis or condition? The Act gives the example of whether it takes

longer to “complete a daily task like getting dressed”. It may be helpful to think about this in the context of your university experience; do you notice that you find things harder than your peers, for example:

- Do you find it hard to complete your assignments on time?
- Do you have to work around physical barriers at your university, for example, using lifts, ramps or accessible entrances to buildings?
- Do you notice that your peers seem to find it easier to focus in lectures or classes?

“Long-term”

The Equality Act defines “long-term” as either:

- Has lasted more than 12 months, or
- Is likely to last at least 12 months.

For example, if you have a progressive condition like HIV or cancer, you will meet the definition from the moment you are diagnosed.

This also applies if you have a condition that fluctuates; for example, if you have a chronic pain condition that gets better and worse over time, you will meet the definition of disability as long as the effects are likely to continue for at least a year.

England, Wales and Northern Ireland

You can access DSA if you meet the [definition of disability in the 2010 Equality Act](#). This means you must have a “physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.”

Can I apply for DSA if I am neurodiverse or have Special Educational Needs?

If you have a diagnosis that falls under the umbrella of neurodiversity or received SEN support during your time at school, it’s likely that you will be eligible for DSA. This usually includes ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia and Dysgraphia (but this is not an exhaustive list).

Do I have to provide evidence of my disability?

If you have a disability, long-term health condition or mental health condition, you will need to provide a copy of:

- A letter or report from a doctor, **or**

- A disability evidence form completed by a medical professional

If you are neurodiverse/neurodivergent or have a specific learning difference, you will need to provide a copy of:

- A diagnostic assessment from a practitioner, psychologist or specialist teacher

Can I apply for DSA support if I'm a mature student?

Yes, there is no age limit for applying for DSA!

Is my degree type covered under DSA provisions?

You can access DSA if you are studying either an undergraduate or postgraduate degree.

Your degree must also be:

- Full-time, or
- Part-time, with a course intensity of 25% or more (this means that you complete at least 25% of an equivalent full-time course each year), and
- Lasting at least one year

Is my course at the NIOT covered under DSA provisions?

Yes – you can apply for DSA for Initial Teaching Training

You may be eligible for DSA if you are studying:

- A degree, for example, BA, BSc or BEd
- Foundation Degree
- Certificate of Higher Education
- Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE)
- Higher National Certificate (HNC)
- Higher National Diploma (HND)
- Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE)
- Initial Teacher Training

You also may be eligible if you're studying a Level 4 or 5 qualification with HTQ approval (eg Certificate, Diploma, NVQ).

Can I get DSA if I am studying an apprenticeship?

If you're studying for an apprenticeship, you will not be eligible for DSA support. However, you may be able to:

- [Apply for Access to Work](#) support to get adjustments during your apprenticeship
- Access support that is arranged through your university (speak to your university disability advisor for more information on this).

Do I have to wait until I have a confirmed place to apply for DSA?

No! You can apply for DSA as soon as you apply for student finance. If you are not applying for student finance, you can begin your DSA application as soon as student finance applications open (usually in February or March).

Do I have to be receiving student finance to get DSA?

You don't have to receive student finance to get DSA.

However, if you are receiving student finance, you can submit your DSA application as a part of your student finance application.

If you require help or support, contact: studentsupport@niot.org.uk