

## The contribution made by the Disabled Students Allowance Assistive Technology provider companies to disabled students' success and the UK economy

### Executive Summary

- The Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) programme is a highly effective, value for money programme of support for disabled students studying in Higher Education (HE). Through access to individually-recommended specialist technologies, students are equipped to study alongside their non-disabled peers.
- Disabled students receiving DSA have similar retention rates and improved success rates compared with their non-disabled peers.
- Assistive Technology provider companies (AT providers) have supplied some 300,000 disabled students with specialist AT equipment, thus providing a key element of DSA success.
- Quality, innovation and expertise are the hallmarks of AT provider companies working under the DSA programme.
- Several UK DSA AT provider companies have developed innovative products that benefit disabled people whether in education or work, and now have worldwide export customers.
- 750 people are employed in high-quality professional jobs within the AT provider companies, generating in excess of £55m in revenues per annum (DSA only). This business activity and ambition is a significant boost to the UK economy.
- Amongst the AT provider companies there is a reservoir of unmatched knowledge and expertise of assistive and enabling technologies that benefit disabled people.
- Beyond DSA, many of the AT providers engage with schemes such as Access to Work and school SEN supply, all making a difference to disabled people's learning and training, and contributing to them finding and retaining employment.
- Students have a high degree of satisfaction (87.6%) with the DSA programme.

## Introduction

Disabled Student Allowances (DSAs) are grants to help students with the extra costs they might face as a result of a disability, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty. Part of the allowance can cover the cost of specialist equipment to support a student's study.

Since its beginnings in 1996 the DSA programme has constantly evolved to a point where it is now widely seen as a great success story, particularly in terms of the widening access and participation agenda. At the UKTI's 'Britain is Great' event during the 2012 Paralympic Games, Executive Director of the British Assistive Technology Association (BATA), Barbara Phillips, gave a presentation <sup>[1]</sup> to an international audience in which she described the DSA programme as...

*"a world-leading approach to levelling the playing field in Higher Education... that 0.5% of (total Higher Education) spend bought an awful lot of effectiveness..."*

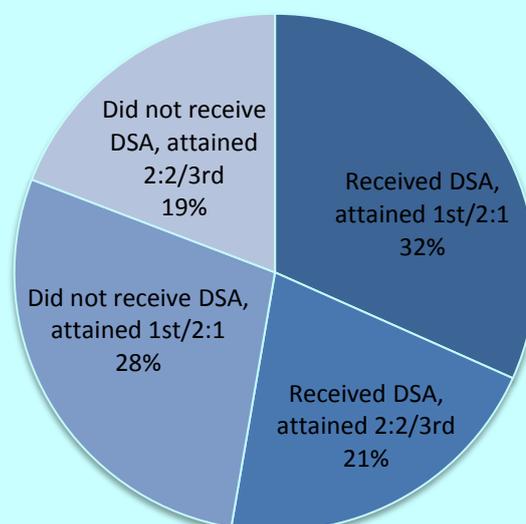


Barbara Phillips CBE  
Executive Director, BATA

In 2010/11 some 170,000 HE students (7.6% of the student population) declared a disability <sup>[1]</sup>. A broad range of disabilities are reported, with approximately half represented by learning difficulties, but all are different and each individual student may be challenged in their studies or disadvantaged without the correct support.

The evidence of the effectiveness of DSA is compelling. HE students who declare a disability and receive DSA are more likely to obtain a first- or upper second-class honours degree (60.2%) than disabled students who do not receive DSA <sup>[2]</sup>. Overall, the retention, completion and success of disabled students receiving DSA is comparable to their non-disabled colleagues and better than students who disclose a disability but do not receive DSA <sup>[2]</sup>. It should also be noted that disabled HE students tend to have lower qualifications on entry than those without disabilities <sup>[3]</sup>.

### Degree attainment of students declaring a disability



The benefits to students of disclosing an impairment and accessing DSA has been emphasised by the Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Wales and Scotland <sup>[4]</sup>.

The additional contribution to the Exchequer of a graduate compared to an individual with A-levels over a working lifetime is approximately £180,000 <sup>[5]</sup>, and so for the 300,000 students supported through DSA an additional £54bn has been added to GDP.

A vital component of the DSA support that disabled students receive is the assistive and enabling technologies supplied and supported by the BATA-DSA AT providers.

## Assistive Technology Providers

The AT provider companies have made a major contribution to the development of the DSA programme; currently there are 21 accredited AT providers. Accreditation is overseen by the Disabled Students Allowance Quality Assurance Group (DSA-QAG), who validate, audit and monitor the standards of products and services delivered by the AT provider companies.

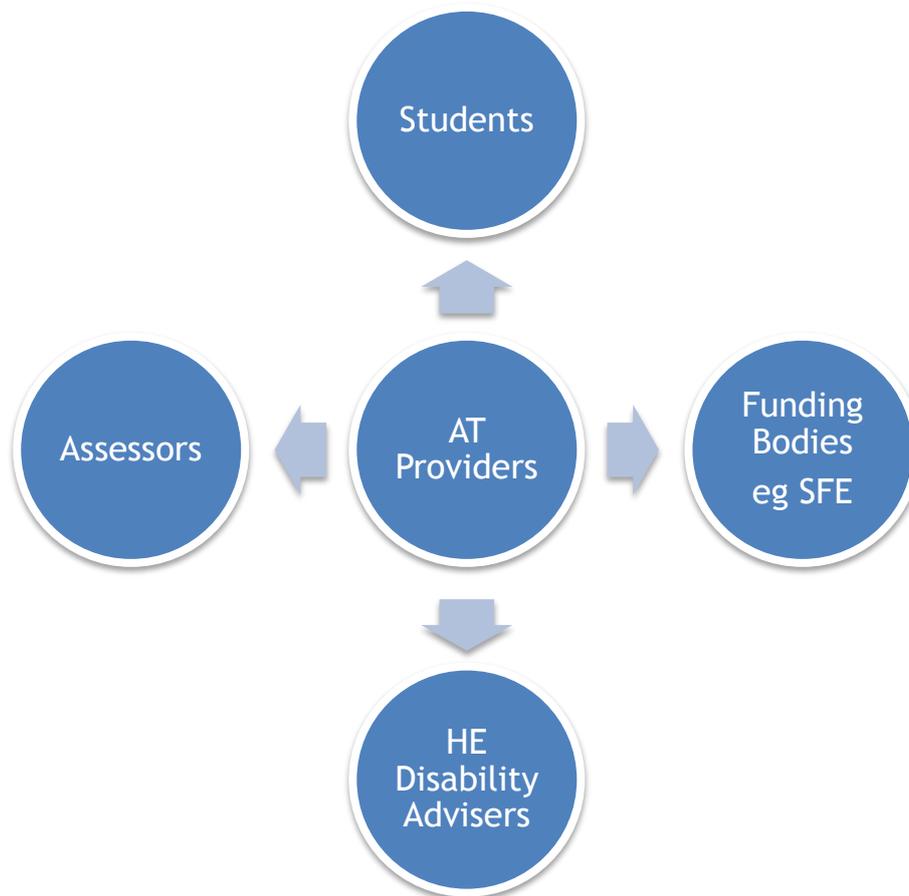
### *AT providers...*

- ...have supplied AT equipment, support and advice to more than 300,000 students since the inception of the DSA programme (estimate from Student Loans Company data).
- ...give 'course-long' support services to students receiving DSA. The unique concept of course-long support includes technical advice and troubleshooting, insurance, warranty, loans and repair services.
- ...receive approximately 5000 support calls every month (source: BATA-DSA AT providers group).
- ...prepare in excess of 100,000 bespoke quotations for AT equipment each year (source: BATA-DSA AT providers group).
- ...source, configure and install a package of equipment specific to each student's needs, often dealing with multiple suppliers from the UK and abroad. Delivery and training is student-centred, with the time and place decided by the student.
- ...demonstrate working practices that encourage a cohesive team approach across the private, public and voluntary sectors. All AT providers work in a cooperative and collaborative way with DSA assessors, disability advisers based at universities and colleges, funding bodies (eg Student Finance England), and other stakeholders.

Paul Doyle, Access Centre Manager at Hereward College says:

*"In my experience as an Assessment Centre Manager, DSA Assessors appreciate AT providers reaching out to engage with and consult them, seeking their opinions and suggestions.*

*"Working in this cooperative and inclusive manner ensures student issues and changes in teaching and learning practices are quickly and efficiently embedded into the product and service development process."*



- ...maintain a product portfolio comprising hundreds of assistive and enabling technologies
- ...understand all types of disability. From a visual disturbance due to dyslexia to someone with complex physical and health needs, suppliers provide informed, expert solutions and empathetic advice. In a Guardian article of January 2012 <sup>[6]</sup> a disabled student says...

*...without the support of welfare benefits and the academic support provided through DSAs university would have been out of the question. "It wouldn't have been possible."*

- ...regularly support other DSA disability professionals through product updates, training and accredited courses; all contributing to their continuous professional development.
- ...all have links to and support other organisations, nationally recognised schemes and quality programmes, such as National Association of Disability Practitioners, Two Ticks, ISO 9000, British Educational Supplier's Association, Training for Good, Mindful Employer, Go On, British Dyslexia Association, The Employers' Forum – Disability Standard.

***87.6% of students recently surveyed showed a high degree of satisfaction with the DSA programme <sup>[6]</sup>***

## Quality service

- AT providers were the first to develop the quality assurance framework under the DSA programme, and continue to be at the forefront of improving this.
- As well as submitting monthly Key Performance Indicators, all AT providers undergo an annual audit by BDO to quality assure against the agreed standards (audit takes up to four days)
- In a presentation by Viney, Draffan and Wilkinson (2012) <sup>[7]</sup>, following a survey of almost 1300 students who have received DSA, student satisfaction levels were high and the use of AT equipment was considered an important part of a student's success.

***89% of DSA recipients surveyed used their AT equipment daily or often*** <sup>[6]</sup>

## Innovation and expertise

- The AT provider companies embody a concentration of expertise and experience in assistive and enabling technologies. The impact of this reservoir of knowledge has extended beyond disabled students in HE through to support for disabled people in all walks of life, for example in the workplace, to school-age children and to the elderly.
- As well as developing and marketing specialist products of their own, AT providers have been vital in the success of several UK companies that now have world class reputations and export products across the globe.
- Mark McCusker is the CEO of Texthelp, a software company that exports to many English-speaking countries. He says:

*"...the core engine is based upon the technology solution for the UK. The UK solution has evolved over a number of years; however one of the primary markets within the UK is the DSA. New products/updates often have their origins in a need identified for the DSA market.*

*"An intangible, but very valuable and exportable product developed from working within the DSA is the knowledge of the challenges faced by students with disabilities and how assistive technology can be applied to resolve these challenges. Although we tend not to recognise this, the UK is a world leader in this area and that this knowledge is arguably as valuable as the technology solutions. Indeed, without the knowledge, it would be impossible to sell the technology."*

- Other innovative technologies that benefit disabled people generally have originated in DSA, including software products such as ClaroRead, Sonocent Audio Notetaker, Global AutoCorrect and others.

## UK plc

- AT provider companies employ some 750 people in high quality professional jobs (source: BATA –DSA AT providers group).
- A further 500 skilled, accredited and disability-aware people work on a self-employed basis in conjunction with AT providers (source: BATA –DSA AT providers group).
- The 21 accredited AT provider companies are all small to medium enterprises, and generate revenues of around £55m per annum (source: BATA–DSA AT providers group).
- With projections indicating a rise in the number of disabled younger adults through to 2030 <sup>[9]</sup>, coupled with the demographic shift to an older population, the people who could benefit from using assistive technology will rise. AT providers can have a key role in advising and supplying innovative technology to support disabled people in leading independent lives.
- If the employment rate for disabled people was moved to the national average, an estimated additional 1.3 million disabled people would be in work, boosting the UK GDP by at least £13 billion<sup>[8]</sup>

## The challenges and hopes of BATA-DSA AT providers

- To see further evolution of quality measures.
- The current decision making on which DSA-AT provider supplies does not allow for choice and/or quality to be considered; it has created an entirely price-driven system that sacrifices quality for low cost.
- Investment, innovation and finding creative solutions are curtailed under the current system.
- The uptake and completion of student training could be improved, so that disabled students can benefit from the full potential of assistive technology.

### Summary

DSA is a highly effective, value-for-money programme of support for students with disabilities and challenges. Through access to individually-recommended specialist technologies, students are equipped to study alongside their non-disabled peers.

AT providers give a unique and skilled service built on the foundation of decades of accumulated knowledge and expertise. Using this they support disabled students with technological solutions that promote success, achievement and employability.

AT providers have and continue to make a significant contribution to the UK economy, to provide high quality employment and to innovate through new and commercially viable products.

## Note

The BATA-DSA AT providers is a subgroup of BATA, with agreed aims and objectives:

- 1) To campaign for the rights and interests of disabled students and others who need assistive technology in order to access learning, particularly in the UK.
- 2) To provide expert and impartial support and advice to government departments, agencies and the public on the benefits of assistive technology and how it can best be used to ensure access to education.
- 3) To promote the highest standards of ethics and service quality in supplying assistive technology, specialist support and training to students and others with disabilities.
- 4) To take all steps necessary to ensure that we are able to work with high standards and to create long-term sustainable organisations that offer value for money and meet the needs of all stakeholders including individual customers , employees, professionals , suppliers, partners, funders and our environment.

## References

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