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2025/26

DSA

Bridging the Gap: A Guide to the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) in Higher Education



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INTRODUCTION

Who is this guide for?

This guide provides information about the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) for current and prospective students in higher education who are ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland.

If you are ordinarily resident in Scotland, England or Wales the arrangements may be different. You can find out more information relevant to where you live at one of these websites:

England – www.gov.uk/disabled-students-allowance-dsa

Wales – www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/undergraduate-finance/full-time/welsh-student/what-s-available/disabled-students-allowance/

Scotland – www.saas.gov.uk/guides/dsa

This booklet is for guidance only and does not cover all circumstances. It is not a statement of the law.



What is DSA for?

DSA is a grant to help pay for additional higher education study-related costs you may have to incur as a direct result of your disability, mental-health condition (such as depression or anxiety) or specific learning difficulty (such as dyslexia or dyspraxia). DSA is not a monetary grant but can help with the cost of a non-medical helper, items of specialist equipment, travel and other course-related costs.

DSA can be awarded to students who prove that they have a disability, mental-health condition or specific learning difficulty which affects their ability to study. They must also be studying:

- full-time or part-time undergraduate courses (such as degree, HNC or HND level courses) including Open University and other distance-learning courses
- certain full-time or part-time postgraduate courses (for which the entry requirement is at least a first degree or equivalent) including Open University and other distance-learning courses

This guide explains:

- what costs DSA can help with
- how to apply
- how you get paid
- who can help you with your application

Do I have to tell my university or college about my disability, mental-health condition or specific learning difficulty?

Yes, it is important that you make your university or college aware of your disability, mental-health condition or specific learning difficulty to ensure that you get the support that you need. This will enable them to put in place 'reasonable adjustments', to offer guidance in relation to applying for DSA, and (when the time comes) arrange for an assessment of your course-related needs for DSA purposes. If you are studying part-time and want to apply for DSA, you will also need to ask your university or college to certify that your average rate of study is at least 25% of an equivalent full-time course.

Your local Student Finance Northern Ireland (SFNI) Office and the university or college's Disability Adviser will keep any information about your disability, mental-health condition or specific learning difficulty confidential.

Without the involvement of a Disability Adviser, the process of getting DSA support might be more difficult. We recommend that the Disability Adviser is sent a copy of your DSA needs assessment report.



DO I QUALIFY?

Summary - what this section is about

This section gives some brief information about the rules governing whether you are eligible to receive DSA. For details about different types of student finance you should refer to our other publications – details of which can be found on page 20 of this guide.

To be eligible for DSA you must meet the personal eligibility conditions for receiving student finance and also must be:

- able to provide evidence of your disability, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty
- studying an eligible full-time undergraduate course (including a distance-learning course)
- studying an eligible part-time undergraduate course (including a distance-learning course)
- studying an eligible taught or research postgraduate course (including a distance-learning course)
- undertaking an Initial Teacher Training course



You cannot get DSA if you are:

- an EU student and are eligible only for support with your fees
- a sandwich-course student on a full-year paid placement (but you may still be able to get DSA if you are doing certain types of unpaid work experience in the public or voluntary sectors)
- eligible for a Department of Health (DoH), National Health Service (NHS) or other health care bursary
- a postgraduate student receiving a bursary or award from a research council
- a postgraduate student who will get the NHS Business Services Authority's bursary for students on postgraduate social work courses
- a postgraduate student receiving a bursary or award from your university or college which includes support that is equal to DSA

You should contact the provider of your bursary or award for advice on any extra support you may be entitled to because of your disability.

You cannot have DSA for more than one course at the same time.

Previous study will not affect your eligibility for DSA, even if you received financial support. However, if

you received any specialist equipment through the DSA for a previous course, this will be taken into consideration.

There is no age limit on receiving DSA, and if you are aged 60 or over you may be eligible for it even if you are not eligible for a Maintenance Loan.

Undergraduate and postgraduate NHS students

This guide is not intended for students who will get a healthcare bursary for their course (this does not include students with a DoH bursary). DSA is available as part of the healthcare bursary scheme, for which health care service bursary degree and diploma students may be eligible.

If you will receive an NHS bursary, or plan to apply for one, you should contact your university or college for details of the support that is available to disabled students under the NHS Bursary Scheme.

In Northern Ireland the SFNI Offices deal with the bursary arrangements on behalf of the DoH. Eligibility for any DSA will also be assessed by your local SFNI Office.

If you started your first primary degree course in medicine or dentistry in 2021, you will become eligible for a DoH bursary in September 2025.

Open University students

The Student Finance NI Office is also responsible for handling DSA applications from Northern Ireland domiciled Open University students.

You will need to send your completed form, and any necessary or relevant documents to:

Student Finance NI,
DSA Office, Ballee Centre,
Ballee Road West,
Ballymena BT42 2HS

Tel: 028 9047 0155

email: DSA-PT-PG@eani.org.uk

www.studentfinancenl.co.uk

How do I show that I am eligible?

If you are physically disabled, blind, partially sighted, deaf, hard of hearing or have a long-term health condition or a mental-health condition, you will need to provide up to date signed medical proof of this. A Disability Evidence Form is available for download from the Student Finance NI website (www.studentfinancenl.co.uk) and should be completed by your doctor or specialist or you can provide a detailed report or letter from your GP or other qualified specialist which gives information about your long-term health condition or mental-health condition, and likely effect of that on your academic performance.

If you have a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia or dyscalculia, you must provide evidence in the form of a signed 'diagnostic assessment' from a psychologist or suitably qualified specialist teacher.

You will have to pay for any tests to establish your eligibility for DSA. If you need a test but cannot afford to pay for it, you may be able to get financial help through your university or college's Support Fund/ Financial Contingency Fund.

The table on page 12 shows what you need to send us.

<p>For disabilities and medical conditions</p>	<p>A completed Disability Evidence Form (available for download from www.studentfinancenl.co.uk) or a signed up to date detailed report or letter from your GP or other qualified specialist which gives information about your disability or long-term health condition, and the likely effect of that on your academic performance.</p>
<p>For specific learning difficulties</p>	<p>For students with dyslexia or dyscalculia, a written signed diagnostic report will be required from a Chartered or Practitioner Psychologist, or a specialist teacher holding a SpLD Assessment Practising Certificate.</p> <p>Asperger's/Autism can be confirmed by a Clinical Psychologist.</p> <p>For students with Dyspraxia, AD(H)D, Acquired Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Speech and Language Disorder, Auditory Processing Disorder or Tourette's a completed Disability Evidence Form (available for download from www.studentfinancenl.co.uk) or a standard medical evidence letter from a GP will be acceptable.</p>
<p>For mental-health conditions</p>	<p>A completed Disability Evidence Form (available for download from www.studentfinancenl.co.uk) or a signed up to date detailed report or letter from your GP or other qualified specialist which gives information about your mental-health condition, and the effect of the condition on your academic performance.</p>



WHAT HELP CAN I GET?

Summary – what this section is about

DSA can help pay for the extra study related costs that you may have because of a disability, mental-health condition or specific learning difficulty.

For full-time and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students

The maximum amount of DSA available to undergraduate and postgraduate students has been aligned. There is now a single DSA allowance of up to £25,000 a year towards course-related costs for both full-time and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students. This support can be used for specialist equipment, non-medical helpers, extra travel costs or other course-related costs that you face as a direct result of a disability, mental-health condition or specific learning difficulty.

Please note that the amount of DSA you can get does not depend on your income or that of your family, but it will depend on your needs assessment, reflecting your individual needs and will be subject to the approval of the Education Authority.

Travel Grant exception

Full-time and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students who have reached their maximum annual allowance but have high annual travel costs due to their disability may be able to access additional DSA support above the £25,000 maximum to pay for their additional travel costs, subject to the recommended amount of DSA support for travel in their DSA Needs Assessment.

Any approved expenditure for disability-related travel costs that result in DSA spend exceeding the £25,000 maximum will be payable by the SFNI Offices in the Education Authority.

Benefits

Most full-time students are not eligible to receive income-related benefits such as Universal Credit, income-based Employment and Support Allowance or Housing Benefit. However certain groups (including single parents, student couples with dependent children and some disabled students) may be eligible for income-related benefits while they are studying. Your local Jobs and Benefits Office will take account of any Maintenance Loan (and some student grants) that you are entitled to. If you receive the Special Support Grant this will not be taken into account.

Your local Jobs and Benefits Office will be able to provide more advice on benefit entitlement.



HOW DO I APPLY?

Summary – what this section is about

This section tells you how and when to apply for DSA, who you should return your application form to and how to have a Needs Assessment.

Full time undergraduate students



Step 1

Make sure you apply for your maintenance and tuition fee loans, bursaries and other grants before 30 April 2025. You can apply online or download a paper application form from **www.studentfinancenl.co.uk**

When you are applying for student finance, the application form asks if you want to apply for DSA.

There is no deadline for applying for DSA but the sooner you apply, the greater the chance of having everything you need in place at the start of your course.

If you have stated on the application form for student finance that you want to apply for DSA, your local SFNI Office will send you a separate paper DSA application form for you to provide information about your disability, mental-health condition, or specific learning difficulty.

If you indicate on your online application for student finance that you want to apply for DSA, you will be prompted to print off the DSA1 Slimline application form. If you don't have access to a printer, alternative arrangements can be put in place through SFNI upon request.

SFNI Offices each have a named DSA Officer who deals with applications for DSA (see page 21 for contact details).

You may wish to contact the DSA Officer at your local SFNI Office before you send in your application as they will be able to offer advice and give guidance on the DSA process.



Important: You must return your form to your local SFNI Office with evidence of your disability, mental-health condition or specific learning difficulty (see 'How do I show that I am eligible?' on page 11).

If you are applying for DSA only, you can download the full DSA1 application form at **www.studentfinancenl.co.uk**. You can also get copies from your local SFNI Office or by phoning our publication line on 0141 243 3686. You can get versions in large print, in Braille and on audio by phoning our publication line.



Step 2

Your local SFNI Office will assess your application and send you a letter to let you know if you are eligible for DSA. If you are eligible for DSA your SFNI Office will ask you to have a Needs Assessment carried out so that the help you need on your course can be identified.

A Needs Assessment is an informal meeting with an experienced Needs Assessor to discuss what equipment and support we can provide to help you during your time at university or college. The Needs Assessment can be arranged well before the start of term, and even before you have a confirmed place at university or college. However, you should not arrange for a DSA Needs Assessment until your local SFNI Office agree for you to do so.

If SFNI approve your application for DSA support, they will write to you to advise you where your Needs Assessment can be carried out.



Step 3

After you attend a Needs Assessment you will receive a report which identifies the types of equipment and other support you will need, how much it will cost and where to get it from. The report will also identify any training you might need to make best use of the equipment recommended.



Step 4

Your local SFNI Office will send you a letter to tell you whether any equipment and other support that has been recommended in your Needs Assessment Report can be paid for from DSA. You can then order the equipment directly from the supplier.



Step 5

If you apply for DSA along with your main application for student finance, you won't have to re-apply for DSA for each year of your course. However, if you are applying for DSA only you need to re-apply each year.



Step 6

If you leave or suspend your studies, or if your needs change, you must contact the DSA Officer at your local SFNI Office as soon as possible.

DSA Only Students

If you want to apply for DSA only, you should fill in the Disabled Students' Allowance Application Form (full DSA1 form) and ask your institution to complete the relevant section. But if you are also applying for additional Student Finance (e.g. Tuition Fee Loan) you only need to complete the DSA1 Slimline form.

You can download the form from our website at **www.studentfinancenl.co.uk** or get one by phoning our publication line on 0141 243 3686.

You can get versions in large print, in Braille and on audio by phoning our publication line. You should then follow steps 2–4 as detailed on pages 17–18.



HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

You can get extra copies of this guide and the following student finance guides by visiting the Student Finance NI website at www.studentfinancenl.co.uk and downloading a copy or calling our Publication Line on 0141 243 3686.

Information for full-time

students: Download '2025/26 Full-time - A Guide to Financial Support for Full Time Students in Higher Education'.

Information for part-time

students: Download '2025/26 Part-Time - A Guide to Financial Support for Part-Time Students in Higher Education'.

Information for students with children or adult dependants:

Download '2025/26 Dependants' Grants - A Guide to Dependants' Grants for Full Time Student Parents in Higher Education'.

Information about financial entitlement for students:

Download '2025/26 How you are Paid - Full Time Higher Education Student Finance - A Guide to Entitlement to Support and Payment'.

Information about student loans:

Download '2025/26 Terms and Conditions - Student Loans - A Guide to Terms and Conditions'.

Download Full DSA1 form

2025/26 – for students wishing to apply for Disabled Students' Allowance only.

Download DSA1 Slimline form

2025/26 – for students who have completed, or are in the middle of completing, an application for student finance and also want to apply for Disabled Students' Allowance.

You can also get copies in Braille, on audio and in large print.



OTHER USEFUL CONTACTS

Address of Student Finance NI Offices	Covering local Government District(s)
Sarah Donnelly (Miss) DSA Officer, Student Finance NI, 40 Academy Street, Belfast, BT1 2NQ Tel: 028 9047 0155 E-mail: dsa.officer-belfast@eani.org.uk	Belfast
Deborah Gamble (Mrs) DSA Officer, Student Finance NI, DSA Office, Ballee Centre, Ballee Road West, Ballymena, BT42 2HS Tel: 028 9047 0155 E-mail: dsa.officer-ballymena@eani.org.uk	Antrim, Ballymena Ballymoney Carrickfergus Coleraine Larne, Magherafelt Moyle, Newtownabbey
Conor McCrory (Mr) DSA Officer, Student Finance NI, 1 Hospital Road, Omagh, Co Tyrone, BT79 0AW Tel: 028 9047 0155 E-mail: dsa.officer-omagh@eani.org.uk	Fermanagh Limavady, Londonderry Omagh Strabane
Judith Shivers (Mrs) DSA Officer, Student Finance NI, Grahamsbridge Road, Dundonald, BT16 2HS Tel: 028 9047 0155 E-mail: dsa.officer-dundonald@eani.org.uk	Ards Castlereagh Down Lisburn North Down
Emily Moffatt (Mrs) DSA Officer, Student Finance NI, 3 Charlemont Place, The Mall, Armagh, BT61 9AX Tel: 028 9047 0155 E-mail: dsa.officer-armagh@eani.org.uk	Armagh, Banbridge Cookstown, Craigavon Dungannon Newry and Mourne
Jacinta Dixon (Miss) DSA Officer (responsible for OU/PT/PG), Student Finance NI, DSA Office, Ballee Centre, Ballee Road West, Ballymena, BT42 2HS Tel: 028 9047 0155 E-mail: DSA-PT-PG@eani.org.uk	Responsible for DSA for all students in Northern Ireland in relation to Open University, Part- time and Postgraduate study.







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Published by the Department for the Economy

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ISBN 978-1-907768-93-4