Consultation on Disabled Students Allowance (DSA)

Submission from Colleges Scotland

Working with the College Development Network (CDN), a focus group was held with 18 members of college staff ranging from managers to senior staff with responsibility for student services. This allowed the opportunity to share views on the DSA system in relation to this consultation. Collectively, these staff have a huge amount of experience in supporting students to access DSA in the college sector. This consultation response is directly informed by those views.

Colleges Scotland agrees with the initial assessment of the Scottish Government that the DSA is an effective and integral part of supporting a diverse student population to attend college. Colleges Scotland therefore supports the view of Ministers that DSA is broadly '*fit for purpose*'.

In summary, Colleges Scotland agrees with the basic principles that some devolution of responsibility for DSA to colleges would be positive. Colleges Scotland agrees that this would give students a faster turn-around between assessment and receiving their funds. It would also allow funding to be used more effectively to support a more flexible, more strongly needs-based model, where students' needs are met on the basis of a professional's knowledge of local courses and knowledge of the student's individual needs. Colleges also provide a high-standard of support service to disabled students, and the devolution of funds would build upon what is already a high quality relationship between the student and the institution's support services.

However, Colleges Scotland is of the view that this devolution of responsibility needs to come with a series of protections for college students:

- DSA **funds are tightly ring-fenced** in their future allocation to institutions, and there is a clear and simple system of accountability from institutions of how they have allocated DSA funds.
- SAAS (or an alternative third-party) should retain **an appeals function**, in the event a student is unhappy with a college's decision.
- There is a strong system of **an 'exceptions fund'** or in year-redistribution, or similar, that allows institutions experiencing increased demand for funds to quickly draw-down extra funds to meet support requirements.
- In the context of increasing pressure on college budgets, and extra demands on colleges' efficiency, there should **not be significant increases of administrative burden** on colleges.
- **Development arrangements should be made**, to ensure the even implementation of the system across institutions, and to ensure that institutional staff are ready for new responsibilities.
- There needs to be continued **central collection/collation of data** on the DSA system at a national level, in order to ensure continued transparency and consistency for students from the DSA system.
- There should be **future, periodic review** of the DSA system built in, to ensure that the system continues to meet its objectives and outcomes.
- Consideration should be given to the **timing of changes** and how changes to the DSA system can best be **aligned to other changes in the funding methodology** for colleges.

Lastly, Colleges Scotland believes that this review of DSA represents an opportunity to review the assessment and verification processes for the DSA. With the regionalisation of the college sector, there is an opportunity to move to a regional system of validation and assessment. There is also an opportunity to consider closer working, with the possibility for increased effectiveness, between colleges and higher education institutions (HEIs).

Responses to specific questions are below:

1. Do you agree that budget responsibility should be devolved from SAAS?

Yes, in principle, however a series of protections for students with disabilities must be built in to the changed system, as listed earlier.

1.2 If you agree, what are the advantages?

- Devolving budgets to institutions would allow an enhanced needs-led model, based on thorough local knowledge, to ensure learners' needs are considered in the context of course requirements and available embedded mainstream support services.
- It should ensure a more streamlined process for students, allowing them to receive funds more quickly once support recommendations are made. There is currently a natural delay caused by the current time-consuming need to send appropriate documentation to an external agency and await a response.
- It would reduce the number of institutions a learner has to deal with. Colleges already provide a high quality of support to disabled students, often helping them to navigate the funding system, and devolution of funds would enable colleges to further extend their support to disabled students.
- There may be the opportunity for institutions to make more effective use of funds through negotiating on behalf of students for more competitive rates for certain goods from suppliers.
- There may be an opportunity to allow colleges to adopt equipment loan systems rather than, for example, individually purchasing laptops and more expensive technology. This would allow colleges to help students to make more effective use of support funds.
- There is opportunity for greater flexibility for institutions submitting reports. The current cut off dates can cause difficulties for students in colleges, many of whom are often studying for a far shorter time than students in universities. In some instances students do not receive any DSA support as there has been insufficient time to identify and respond to certain needs by the SAAS cut off points. Devolution of the system would allow greater flexibility for students whose needs are only identified part-way through a course.
- It may allow something closer to an effective 'needs led' system. Currently, there is often considerable negotiation required between colleges and SAAS, in terms of GP diagnosis. DSA assessors should in future be granted some flexibility to use their professional expertise to establish the effect of a student's disability on their particular programme of study. This would allow further progress away from a medical model based on diagnosis, to a 'needs-led' model based on the impact of disability on the learner in the specific context of their course of study.

2. If budget responsibility is devolved, how would this reach the Access Centres?

Consideration should be given to adopting a regional-based assessment and validation system for students with disabilities. Colleges Scotland's view is that the Scottish Government should work with institutions to ensure that there is at least one validated centre in each of the college regions. In particular, it should be ensured that a levelling-up approach is achieved through those college mergers that are taking place, with newly merged colleges supported to quickly achieve validated status, when at least one of the merging colleges is currently of validated status.

In terms of access centres, there should be a continued clear definition of which disabilities require assessment by a specialised access centre. If budget responsibility is in-effect to be devolved to validated institutions, students should be able to access funds (either from DSA

directly or from institution's discretionary student support funds) for undertaking a needs-assessment in an access centre. This should be another area in which devolution of funds could speed up the process, with the validated centre able, in clearly defined circumstances, to refer a student to an access centre for needs-assessment. The validated centre's devolved budget would be used to pay for the cost of assessment, in much the same way as is currently the case from the SAAS DSA budget.

In the medium to long-term there may be scope to further increase collaboration and co-operation between the college and university sector in this area.

3. **If a budget was to be devolved how should this budget be set?**

Budget setting could take place on a historical basis of uptake of DSA on an institution-by-institution basis. Our view is that this would be more effective than a proportional basis, as there is some institution to institution variation of numbers of disabled students, based on course make-up of institutions and so on.

However, Colleges Scotland is strongly of the view that there needs to be an effective exceptions fund or in-year redistribution of funds. There is the potential for variability from year to year in requirements for funds, as numbers of students and their needs may change from year to year. For example, there could be exceptional years when there is a great demand for students requiring non-medical personal help (NMPH), which can be extremely costly. Certain types of support are widely recognised as high cost, such as interpreter services for deaf learners.

It is essential that students are not disadvantaged because of pressure on a single institution's budget, so it would be important for institutions to be able to draw down funding quickly from a central budget (wherever that is held) so that a guarantee of funding can continue to be given to students, that they will be able to receive funds to meet their needs.

In effect, this might mean that rather than a full devolution of budgetary responsibility, this was actually much closer to a devolved responsibility to institutions to quickly make available funds to students. There needs to be plenty of flexibility built into any system of DSA support.

Lastly, it is crucial that the full extent of the DSA budget is devolved to institutions, including a fair proportion of the current administrative costs of the system, to reflect the small increased administrative burden on colleges.

4. **Within an institution, would it be necessary to protect (ringfence) budgets allocated for the purposes of supporting students with a disability? Would it be necessary to stipulate that budgets could only be used to support students and not to e.g. meet staff costs or other 'reasonable adjustments'.**

It is crucial that any new system of DSA support keeps DSA funds clearly ring-fenced. As the consultation highlights the DSA system is an important one that helps students' access education, and there needs to be a continued transparency over time about total, nation-wide spend on the DSA system.

Within institutions, there should be clear and simple system of accountability required for the allocation of DSA funds. There should be assurance for all that funds are protected for support to disabled students. There should be clear and simple guidance to institutions to support this, and that does not create an undue administrative burden. There should be a clear separation between funds that are devolved to colleges to be allocated as DSA funds to students, and the small amount of current overhead funds that needs to be devolved to colleges to cover the small increased administrative burden.

There is however some potential to allow greater effectiveness to be built into the system. Consideration should be given to how flexibility can be created for DSA funds, so that, for

example, institutions can support students to use collective bargaining power to drive down costs of frequently required products. There could also be some ability for institutions to make accessing their support easier for disabled students, for example by having an amount of NMPH available to students 'on-tap' from the institution.

5. Devolved budgets would be set in advance. How would budgetary increases be negotiated?

For the protection of students, it is important that there continues to be a DSA budget available that is able to respond to the needs of disabled students. Continued central collection of data on uptake of DSA would be a necessary component of any devolved system of DSA. This kind of data collection would allow a DSA budget to be set from year to year on an evidence-basis. As stated earlier, there is also a clear need for in-year redistribution or exception funds to be built into the system, so that the system can be responsive to the needs of individual students.

6. What sort of safety net would be required in order to support institutions dealing with exceptional cases? e.g. A scheme developed along the lines of Discretionary Fund allocations with in-year redistributions?
Retention of a top-slice by SAAS with a view to further demand-led allocations?

Some form of safety net will be very important to any reformed system of DSA, in order to provide assurance to students that they can access the support they require. Any safety net needs to be able to respond rapidly to student demands, which perhaps points to something closer to an exceptions fund that allows in-year, demand-led allocations.

Particularly for college students, the opportunity to access funds at different times of the year, as needs become identified, is a potential benefit of a reformed system.

9. In the event that budgetary responsibility was devolved, what would be the ongoing role of SAAS / Scottish Government, e.g. continuation of the Validation Panels? monitoring standards of assessment? handling appeals?

Colleges Scotland's view is that the continuation of an external appeal function is very important. This might be something where SAAS can retain a function that builds on existing expertise.

As stated earlier, there is a need for the Scottish Government to work to ensure that there is at least one validated centre per college region, to support a more regionalised system.

Lastly, there would be a developmental need amongst institutional staff, and developmental arrangements should be made in advance of implementing any new system. Partners like the CDN would have an important role to play in this kind of activity.

10. If a change to the way that budgets are managed was introduced, when do you think this should take effect from?

Colleges Scotland does not have a fixed position on when the new system should take effect on. However, consideration needs to be given as to how any change in the DSA system is best aligned with the timing of proposed changes to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC)'s funding methodology for colleges.

Consideration also needs to be given to the relationship between these proposals to devolve responsibility for DSA and the changes in financial year for colleges, which have come as a consequence of the college sector's reclassification as public bodies. As DSA is a system that is equally applicable to all higher education delivered, whether in a college or university, a devolved system may end up being a system that bridges two different financial years in colleges and universities.