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EPISODE 3 – DISABLED STUDENTS’ ALLOWANCE

Announcer: Welcome to the NatSIP podcast introduced by Lindsey Rousseau.

[Opening theme music plays]

Lindsey: Hello and welcome to the NatSIP podcast. I'm Lindsey Jane Rousseau, the NatSIP Facilitator.

Today's podcast is about Disabled Students' Allowance or DSA, as it is commonly known, DSA came up as a discussion subject in a previous NatSIP podcast which was following a joint event that NatSIP ran with VIEW in November last year. The event was supported by Thomas Pocklington Trust and was targeted at the professionals who work with students with vision impairment.

However, DSA is not restricted to students with a vision impairment, or even a sensory impairment, but can be applied for by any student with a disability.

With some changes on the horizon in how DSA will be administered, we felt that this was a good time to explore DSA in more depth and to encourage students for September 20220 to apply now.

Today we have with us two people with deep knowledge and experience of the subject of DSA. I'm joined by Tara Chattaway, who is Head of Education at Thomas Pocklington Trust, and by Martin McLean, who is Senior Policy Advisor at the National Deaf Children's Society. Martin is himself deaf and has personal experience of the DSA application process in support of his own studies. He is the lead for post-16 work at the NDCS.

Both TPT and the NDCS are NatSIP partner organizations and I'm delighted to be able to welcome both Tara and Martin today.

My first question to Tara Chattaway would be: Can you tell us about the Disabled Student Allowance? What is it, and who is it for?

Tara Hi, Lindsey. Thank you so much for having us today.

Disabled Students' Allowance is a grant for disabled students studying in higher education. So that's at university or colleges with university level courses. The courses have to be approved by an organization called Student Loans Company - they're the ones who administer Disabled Students' Allowance - and what I would say about DSA, which is what we call Disabled Students' Allowance, for short, is that it's a really, really important grant. You don't have to pay it back and it's there to help you to meet those additional costs of university and of studying.

It's split into three different parts. You get support around equipment - so that's a laptop, assistive technology, all sorts of equipment you might need to enable you to study on your course. You can also get support with something called non-medical help (NMH). So that's support in accessing your study - so note takers, library support, that kind of thing, and also you might get support with transport - so that's traveling to or from the university for your course. The money is all about study. So it has to be related to your study and the subject you're studying and it has to be related to your disability. So it's a really, really important benefit that's out there, and, as I said, you don't have to pay it back. So we would really recommend all disabled students going through the process and applying to see if they're eligible for Disabled Students' Allowance.

Lindsey: Thank you very much. Martin? Do you have anything to add, or has Tara covered it perfectly?

Martin: I've had the privilege of applying for Disabled Student Allowance three times in my lifetime. I can honestly say that if I hadn't applied for that grant, I don't think I could be certain that would have completed my studies.

I think it would have been an uphill struggle all the way. And the support provided by the Disabled Student Allowance enables you to get the most out of your studies.

It's a very different system from what we have in schools and colleges. The onus is on the disabled student themselves to apply for their own support, and have those discussions, and they have a lot of control over the support they can get.

There are some disadvantages to that. Of course, the emphasis is on the student to actually take the lead and organise things for themselves. But I think a lot of people would agree with me when I say it is probably a better system than perhaps what students have been used to in school and you don't have thresholds to receive support, as long as you can prove that you are a disabled person as defined under the Equality Act, that it has significant, long term impact on your life, then you should get the support you need.

Lindsey: Thank you. That's very clear. I'll stay with you, Martin, because I'd like to ask about non-medical help and that is the most significant thing, I think, that students with deafness may wish to be applying for. NatSIP, of course, is concerned with students with sensory impairment. And so how relevant to the sensory impairment sector is this part of the application?

Martin: It's very relevant. It's a horrible term, isn't it? Non-medical help... But that category includes a wide range of support that can be accessed, particularly by deaf students. So, that will include sign-language interpreters, speech to text reporters, note takers. It also includes study skills support, support from teachers of the deaf, or teachers of VI, it's all about that human support.

Lindsey: Thank you. Tara, is there anything specific about students with vision impairment to do with non-medical help?

Tara: There are some specific roles of non medical help. So, all of the support that you can receive from non medical help are defined. They want to make sure that everybody that supports a student through non-medical help is trained and has the right experience to deliver that support. For blind and partially sighted students, it may be that you receive support around note-taking, study support and, as Martin has already said as well, there's a specialist support that you can take. So that will be somebody who is a Qualified Teacher of Vision Impairment, usually, and what they will do is support you with advocacy and some of the complex transcription that you may need if you're studying STEM subjects where there's a lot of material that's needed.

But what's really important is, when you go through the assessment process, which we can talk about a bit later, the assessor will help you to explore what support you might need and help to make the right recommendations for you.

Lindsey: Thank you Tara.

I'm aware that there is some quite complex and specialist language used in relation to DSA and the application. There is a fact sheet accompanying this episode which explains some of the specialist terms that are used. You can download from the NatSIP website at <https://www.natsip.org.uk>.

Back to the overall DSA. Martin, are you able to tell us how you apply for it, please?

Martin: The first stage is to access the government's website. It's simple to find it. Google 'disabled student allowance'. You'll come up with the government information on it and there's a link there to the application form. You'll need to complete the application form and with that form you'll need to submit medical evidence of your disability.

This is something that we sometimes see issues with, with students trying to acquire that medical evidence. It can either be a letter from your GP, or a letter from a relevant hospital department confirming your disability. We've had situations where GPs want to charge for that letter, which isn't right. (Generally speaking, if they go to audiology department at the hospital, they don't get charged). But that shouldn't be happening. But it's something to bear in mind, because it can delay the application process. You might have the form all completed. But then you're having to wait to get this medical evidence come through, which is a bit frustrating for students.

So the sooner they do that, the better when they start the application process. Having completed, the form, they then submit it to the Student Loans Company - Student Finance England, if they're based in England. You will then get a letter back from the Student Loans Company to say that they've confirmed your application. Assuming everything is okay with it, and they're satisfied that you do have a disability as defined under the Equality Act, they will tell you to then find a DSA assessor. You can find a long list of assessment centres online.

The student is required to choose an assessment centre. It might not necessarily be obvious as to which assessment centre you should choose. Many students go with the centre that's in their locality. In the past couple of years that we've had this choice now between a face-to-face assessment and an online assessment.

If you want a face-to-face assessment, then you're probably going to choose a centre in your locality. You will meet a DSA assessor. It's not something you need to stress about – 'the assessor's going to be catching me out and making out I'm less disabled than I am...' - it's not like a PIP assessment or applying for disability benefits.

This should be a useful conversation. The assessor's going to be asking you about what support you might like at university. You might not be sure [so] talk about what support you've got to school or college. They can talk about what's available through Disabled Students' Allowance, what can be funded.

After that conversation the assessor will draw up a report and will make recommendations to Student Finance England for what should be funded. The next stage is for Student Finance England to accept those recommendations, and then they will write back to the student, confirming the support that had been agreed.

Lindsey: That letter is the DS2, which will tell them where they are. You've been very helpful and very clear in explaining how that process goes and how it can be quite an empowering process for the students as they go through and explicitly say what their needs are.

Tara what about blind and partially sighted students?

Tara: So everybody's experience is the same in terms of the process that you need to follow. And just to say as well, if you have multiple disabilities, you do need to get evidence for all of those disabilities and how it impacts on your ability to learn. Because when you receive your DS1 letter it will set out what DSA support you're entitled to, dependent on your disabilities. So when you go to the assessment centre, the assessor can only assess you on those approved disabilities.

So it's really important that if you do have a vision impairment and mental health, or learning disability, or dyslexia, or something else as well, make sure that that's all included when you go and apply for DSA because then you'll receive support for all of your disabilities.

And as Martin said, it's really important that when you go through to your assessment, to approach it in a positive way, because you've already been approved for DSA. This is a point to really look at what support you might need. So if you do have a QTVI, and you've got evidence that you can bring from them, and any information that you can bring at all to your assessment, it's going to put you in a really good position.

And I think it's also important to think just because you've had one way of learning and using equipment and support before, you might be really confident that that's the support you need going forward... but actually the assessor might be able to suggest some new ideas for you, because when you go into university, it's a different way of learning. It might be lots more reading, there might be more complex diagrams. So it's really important to have that conversation and explore what your options are and to think about it.

Before the agreement of what's going to be provided goes off to the Student Loans Company, to Student Finance England, you should have a chance to look at it and to reply, so you're happy with that. So the process is still the same. I think people do need to see it in an empowering kind of way. It's a good opportunity to really get that support that you need.

Lindsey: Thank you. That's very helpful and very clear for people.
What happens next? How does the student actually receive their support? Martin?

Martin: Once you've got the letter confirming your DSA and what the Student Loans Company will fund, there are two ways in which the support can be organised.
Firstly, the university may organise your support for you, knowing what's been agreed. They will then book in communications support or note takers for your lectures and your classes.
Alternatively, your DSA assessor might recommend an agency, and the agency will, having received your timetable, they will put in place, the support that's been agreed for you.
There are some students who might actually get the funding directly to them, and they end up responsible for paying the support workers. Generally speaking, [with] deaf students, Student Finance England will pay the agency providing support directly. There are different ways it can work.

Lindsey: Thank you. That's very helpful. Tara, when we talked earlier, we talked about the non medical help and the equipment being too rather slightly separate strands. Are you able to tell us how that would work for all students with sensory impairment?

Tara: And just to complicate it, there will be a third element as well which will be your training for your equipment as well, so a trainer. As Martin said, you receive your letter and usually what happens for vision impaired students is that it will list who you need to contact. It will select the agency, so you don't have the choice of who you go out to provide your non-medical help support, or who provides your equipment. And this is the really, really important part - the onus is on you as the student to follow through the process. So there will be a phone number for you to call. So you will have to go and call and arrange all of that support to get in place.
So there's quite a lot of administrative work and at that point it might feel overwhelming, but it's so important that you do it as soon as possible, because when you do get that equipment and support it can make the difference in your experience of study. Do call them.
If there are any issues, so, for example, the non-medical help provider comes back and says 'we can't meet your needs', or the equipment provider comes back and says, 'well we can't provide that equipment', then you go back to your assessor. Or you can also talk to your university as well, but you go back to your assessor, and then they recommended a different provider. So you keep that relationship with your assessor. At the same time, build a relationship with your disability team as well and then you organise all of that support to be in place. So it's really important that students do that. It might be equipment, it might be non-medical help support, it might be training in how to use that equipment.
And if it's okay, I forgot to add that for non-medical help for blind and partially sighted students, one of the elements is mobility support. So this is a trained mobility specialist who will be recommended, they will come and support you in your routes around university or from your accommodation to university. It doesn't cover independence skills, it doesn't cover routes to shops or around the community, but it does cover your routes around university. So that's the mobility element there.
It could be that you are having to contact lots of different providers to get that support in place, even though it might seem overwhelming, I just want to emphasise - it's so important to follow up as soon as possible.

Lindsey: That's really good and very clear and we now understand how DSA works at the moment.
Don't forget that there is a fact sheet accompanying this episode, you can download it from the NatSIP website at: <https://www.natsip.org.uk> and also as part of the supporting material with this podcast.
Of course, having just learned how a system works and got it right, the Government have decided that there are going to be reforms, and these reforms are now well advanced - and they have already been announced.

Can you explain to us exactly how they will affect students starting in September this year? Thank you, Tara.

Tara: There are some DSA reforms. On the first of April, all the contract details will go out, then the [new] system will start as from September. But the important thing about the changes is that it's going to simplify the journey for students. So all of these different contact points that you have now, you won't have. You'll have one contact point. So it's basically looking at assessment centres, equipment, training, they will also have to provide a central point for the students. So you'll contact the Student Loans Company to make your application and then after that you contact a different contact centre so that's the plan – it's going to simplify the process. But obviously it's a big change so things take a while to be embedded.

But I think that the key messages is – 'Don't worry about the changes...' Apply for the system as it is, now. The sooner you apply for Disabled Students' Allowance, the better. You have to name a university, but you can change that university at any point. It's much easier to change the name of the university you're going to, than it is to apply for DSA at a later stage. It's quite long journey, there's lots of different parts of the journey. So the sooner you apply for it, the better. Don't worry about the changes. Both Thomas Pocklington Trust and NDCS will be communicating to students, what those changes are, what they will look like. All of our support lines will still be there for students to talk them through it.

Don't wait until the changes. Apply now and please don't worry about them in the long term. It's going to improve the process and the journey for students. We are supportive of the changes. So please don't worry about them.

Lindsey: That is very reassuring. Thank you very much. Martin, do you have anything to add about the new reforms and the system as it will be from September 2022?

Martin: I think the changes are quite significant changes. There's inevitably going to be some disruption in the system, but we are hoping it doesn't affect disabled students too much. I think overall we can be fairly positive about the changes. It should make that journey more straightforward. And also there's a factor at the moment, when you choose an assessment centre, you've got no guarantee that your DSA assessor is going to have any knowledge about assessing a deaf or VI student and that can be a real problem when we think about, [e.g.] should you recommend a communication support worker over a sign language interpreter? Should you recommend an electronic note taker over a speech-to-text reporter? ...and to actually understand what it is that students might require, you to have a good understanding yourself to be able to have those conversations. And we hope that through the new system, that should be easier and more straightforward for a student to be matched with an assessor who does have that appropriate knowledge.

Lindsey: Thank you. That is most encouraging and it looks as a system once it is embedded and working, may be more beneficial to all students and to our students in particular.

Where can students find out more information? And importantly, where can the professionals and the practitioners who advise them find out more information? Martin, are you able to give us an overview of what the National Deaf Children's Society can offer?

Martin: We support to young people up to the age of 25 and young people themselves can get in touch with our help line in different ways. There's a live chat service, and email. If you require BSL interpreter, we can arrange video relay. We also have website pages aimed at young people – which provide information about DSA, what it is, how you apply - those links will be in the accompanying fact sheet.

If you are a professional supporting a deaf young person, then we have a NatSIP resource called 'Next Steps'. There is a section within that that provides professionals with a template to work through the sort of questions that students should be considering before they apply for DSA, or if they're thinking about which higher education provider to go to. That's a really useful resource for professionals to be aware of.

Lindsey: Thank you very much. Tara, are you able to help us with where the students and the practitioners can find out more information from TPT?

Tara: We run a student support service. Our service covers all students over the age of 11. We have no upper age limit and we support international students as well, as long as they have vision impairment, are either about to enter, or are in study. The way that we provide support - we have about 150-160 pages on our website, which have got all different information. There's a whole section about university. We can talk about getting money ready for university, what support that you can get from university, because as well as the DSA support, each university will have a disability team. We would recommend contacting them, as well, as early as possible to see what support they might be able to provide. And we also have a section for professionals as well as a starting point. Go to our website, see what you can find.

And then we have a dedicated support line. We've got a manned email address from Monday to Friday, and there's a phone line that's manned two days a week. So if you email studentsupport@pocklington-trust.org.uk, then a member of our team will pick that up. And then also we'll put on events and all sorts of things that are going on. We also have a community group for students aged 16+ on Facebook. So there's information about that on our website as well. Come check out our website and if you've got any questions and contact our student support service and we're more than happy to guide you through the process.

Lindsey: Thank you, Tara.

The go-to places are the NatSIP website, the Thomas Pocklington Trust website and the NDCS website. You can contact our two contributors today through the websites at their information addresses.

I'd like to thank you very much indeed for telling us about DSA. I've learned a lot. I think that the people listening will have learned a lot. Tara Chattaway, Martin McLean, thank you very much indeed.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the NatSIP podcast.

Don't forget that there is a fact sheet accompanying this episode available from the NatSIP website. That is: <https://www.natsip.org.uk>. It's also part of the supporting material with this podcast.

Until the next time, goodbye.

[Closing music plays]