British Assistive Technology Association

Backing Disabled Students:

The DSA as a Foundation for Their Future

A Policy Roadmap on Assistive Technology, Innovation, and the Future of the Disabled Students' Allowance



bataonline.org

Contents

03 Executive Summary

SECTION ONE

05 The DSA: Assistive Technology That Works

1.1 What is the DSA and how does it work

1.2 The economic case

1.3 Risk of removing specialist technologies

SECTION TWO

10 Innovation Born from the DSA

2.1 Purpose-built for higher education

2.2 Assistive technology and the Government's innovation and growth ambitions

SECTION THREE

15 The Case for an Assistive Technology Passport

3.1 One person, three separate assessments

3.2 The model already exists: Ireland's AT Passport

3.3 What an AT Passport would deliver

3.4 What is at stake for disabled people and the Government

21 Conclusion

22 Summary of Recommendations

23 Notes and references

Executive Summary

The Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) is one of the UK's great success stories in higher education. For decades, it has opened the door for disabled students to participate, succeed and thrive, while laying the foundations for lifelong learning and employment.

Its power lies in being personal. Through specialist equipment, assistive technology, one-to-one support and individual adjustments, DSA helps students tackle barriers and build the skills, confidence and independence to succeed at university and beyond.

DSA is more than a source of funding. It is an investment in educational opportunity, employability and economic participation. By helping students stay on their courses, complete their qualifications and progress into work, it supports individual potential and a skilled, inclusive workforce.

DSA has evolved alongside student needs, technology and teaching. Its needs-led approach recognises that disability-related barriers are individual, often complex and can change between learning environments. It has supported the adoption and continued development of specialist assistive technology, helping create opportunities for innovation that can benefit disabled people beyond higher education.

Despite this success, important challenges remain. Disabled learners still face disruption when moving between education and employment. Information about needs, effective technology and successful adjustments is often lost at transition points, forcing people to repeat assessments, re-establish evidence and navigate new systems. Disabled young people are disproportionately likely to fall out of education and work. Around half of those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) have a health condition, compared with just over a quarter of all 16- to 24-year-olds. Without the right support, early disadvantage can become long-term exclusion.

Changes to DSA funding and provision must not undermine access to effective support, particularly where free or mainstream alternatives cannot adequately meet individual needs. Reform should build on DSA's strengths, helping learners develop confidence and independence that extend beyond their studies into working life.

This policy roadmap sets out three priorities for Government:

1. **Protect, modernise and strengthen the DSA.** Ensure disabled students continue to have access to appropriate specialist assistive technology, training and support that meets their individual requirements. Any proposed changes should be informed by robust evidence of their potential impact on students, educational outcomes and wider public services, while identifying opportunities to improve efficiency and value for money.

2. **Recognise and support the innovation enabled by DSA.** A strong and sustainable DSA system helps maintain a route through which specialist assistive technology reaches disabled students. This can support continued product development and innovation to help close the gap between disabled and non-disabled students and employees.

3. **Develop an Assistive Technology Passport across education and employment.** Establish and pilot a portable, individual-controlled record of assistive technology needs, recommended solutions and effective adjustments that can follow disabled people through school, further and higher education, apprenticeships and employment. This could improve continuity, reduce unnecessary duplication and support more timely access to appropriate support.

These priorities are connected. Protecting the DSA safeguards effective support today. Supporting specialist assistive technology innovation helps ensure that appropriate solutions continue to develop for future generations. Improving continuity between education and employment can help disabled people build on the skills, confidence and independence they have already gained. This roadmap asks the Government to publish a full analysis of what the DSA returns to the Exchequer before any funding decision is taken, to assess and publish the impact on disabled students before any change to specialist assistive technology, and to pilot an Assistive Technology Passport across education and employment, led jointly by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

By protecting the DSA, supporting innovation and exploring a more joined-up approach across education and employment, the UK can take meaningful steps towards improving opportunity, participation and independence for disabled people throughout their lives.



Jack Churchill OBE

Chair of the British Assistive Technology Association

01

SECTION ONE

The DSA: Assistive Technology That Works

"The needs assessment is what turns access to technology into support that works."

1.1 What is the DSA and how does it work

1.2 The economic case

1.3 Risk of removing specialist technologies

1.1 What is the DSA and how does it work

The Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) is a non-repayable grant that funds disability-related study support for eligible students in higher education. It helps remove the barriers to learning that arise from a student's disability, long-term health condition or mental health condition. It is a statutory entitlement for students who satisfy the criteria, rather than a charitable or discretionary payment, and it represents an investment in disabled students' participation, educational attainment and future opportunities.

88,000

DSA students in higher education in England, 2023/24

It is available to undergraduate and postgraduate students in England who have a disability, long-term health condition, mental health condition or specific learning difference. Part-time undergraduate students may also qualify where their course has a study intensity of at least 25% of the equivalent full-time course. There were approximately 88,000[1] DSA disabled students studying higher education in England in 2023/24. Support is needs-led rather than means-tested. Depending on the individual, it can include specialist assistive technology, non-medical helpers, British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters, mentoring, travel support and other disability-related adjustments.

The strength of DSA lies not simply in the support it funds, but in the individually assessed, needs-led approach through which that support is identified and recommended. Through individual assessments, students receive recommendations for specialist assistive technology, training and specialist support that reflect their disability-related barriers, course requirements and learning environment. This ensures support is tailored to the individual, rather than a one-size-fits-all solution.

Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and mainstream technology may appear to be opening up new possibilities for disabled people. But these are generalised tools, not designed with disabled people in mind. Access to a tool does not equate to effective study support. Whether a solution works depends on the purpose of the software and how it supports individual students' challenges with the tasks they have to undertake. The needs assessment is what turns access to technology into support that works. The next section sets out why this matters economically, given the outcomes for the disabled students it supports.

1.2 The economic case

The DSA should be regarded as an employment and productivity intervention, not just an educational support mechanism.

The value-for-money case:

£1,300

An illustrative example of a one-off investment in DSA-funded support per student reflecting the individual nature of the support and tailored recommendations*

£67,000

Average Exchequer return per student who starts a degree

Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies figures for DfE (2026), weighted for the DSA population

Long-term economic value: higher education generates substantial returns for graduates and the public purse.

Protecting outcomes: even modest improvements in retention and progression make targeted support a worthwhile investment.

*Actual costs vary depending on each student's assessed needs, the recommended assistive technology, and any associated training and/or specialist support, reflecting the personalised nature of DSA support provision.

The scale of this return is set out in figures the Institute for Fiscal Studies produced for DfE in 2026. Each student who starts a degree returns on average £48,000 to the Exchequer over their working life if they are a woman, and £107,000 if they are a man. Weighted for the predominantly female DSA population recorded in DfE's own impact assessment, that is around £67,000 per student. Because the cost of support is small and one-off, even a very small improvement in retention outweighs it.

50%

disabled graduates in full-time work

58%

graduates with no known disability

Disabled students are not yet achieving equal outcomes. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2023/24 Graduate Outcomes data shows that 15 months after graduating, 50% of graduates with a known disability were in full-time employment, compared with 58% of those with no known disability. Disabled graduates were also more likely to be in part-time employment (15% against 12%) and in further study, a pattern consistent with additional barriers to entering and sustaining full-time work[2]. This mirrors the wider labour market: in 2024 the employment rate[3] for disabled people was 53.1%, against 81.6% for non-disabled people, a gap of 28.5 percentage points[4].

59%

would not feel confident passing their course without DSA

91%

of DSA recipients continued their studies

Targeted support has an important role in addressing this gap. The DSA is an investment in disabled students' ability to complete their studies and progress into employment. The Government's 2019 evaluation of DSA[5] found that 59% of DSA recipients surveyed would not feel confident about passing their course without the allowance. Furthermore, Government-published findings[6] showed that 91% of DSA recipients continued their studies, compared with 90% of students without a disability. These findings highlight the importance of tailored support in enabling disabled students to participate and succeed in higher education.

Set against the potential long-term economic and social costs of unemployment, underemployment and economic inactivity, the value of DSA should be considered beyond the immediate cost of providing support.

The policy implication follows directly. Reducing access to support that delivers returns on this scale would be economically counterproductive. Free software has not been assessed as offering the same economic or social benefits and, without tailored support for disabled students, is unlikely to replicate the DSA's impact.

1.3 Risk of removing specialist technologies

With mainstream AI tools and free software more widely available, it is easy to assume they can replace DSA-funded support. They cannot, for four reasons:

1. **Specialist assistive technology is designed for disabled students.** It is built around the specific barriers that impairments create, such as reading, writing, organising information, hearing or processing language, and it replaces or scaffolds capacities that a student's disability affects. Mainstream AI tools and free software are designed for a general audience and a general purpose. They may include accessibility features, but these are secondary to what the product is for, and are not designed or tested around the demands of a disabled student's course.
2. **Needs are individual**. Disabilities present differently, and students need tailored combinations of software, hardware, training and specialist support based on their impairments and academic context. Free software cannot be tailored in this way.
3. **Removing specialist technology may displace costs rather than reduce them.** Where free or mainstream alternatives do not adequately meet students' needs, greater reliance on specialist support or other adjustments may shift costs elsewhere and reduce students' independence.
4. **Support must be ongoing.** Assistive technology works only when it is properly assessed, set up, taught and supported over time. A free tool that proves inappropriate, or cannot adapt to a student's changing needs, offers little practical benefit.

⚠ What is at risk

Replacing specialist assistive technology with free or mainstream alternatives that do not adequately meet students' needs risks becoming a false economy. Savings within the DSA budget may be offset by additional costs for universities, welfare, health and other public services.

The students most exposed are those with complex or multiple support needs, whose requirements cannot be met by free or mainstream alternatives. Without appropriate support, they are likely to find it harder to access learning materials, complete academic tasks and study independently.

This increases the likelihood of withdrawing, taking longer to complete their degrees and achieving lower outcomes. Some may decide not to enter higher education at all or may restrict their choice of course or institution according to the support they expect to be available. That is the opposite of what the DSA exists to achieve.

There are also implications for universities and for equality. The DSA sits alongside institutions' duties under the Equality Act 2010 and helps ensure disabled students can access education on an equitable basis with their peers. If DSA support is reduced, inequalities in participation and outcomes are likely to widen, and universities may face additional demands on their own disability services.

The consequences extend beyond higher education. Appropriate assistive technology helps disabled students build the skills, confidence and independence they need to move into work. If more students struggle to complete their studies, fewer disabled graduates are likely to enter the labour market, which risks widening the disability employment gap, reducing productivity and increasing pressure on welfare and health services.

Reducing access to appropriate DSA support risks creating barriers to learning and employment, widening inequalities, and increasing long-term costs across education, welfare and other public services. If the Government is serious about supporting disabled students into learning and employment, it should protect the DSA and, ideally, strengthen it.

02

SECTION TWO

Innovation Born from the DSA

"Assistive technology's purpose is not to reduce academic requirements, but to enable disabled students to access learning and participate on an equal basis with their peers."

2.1 Purpose-built for higher education

2.2 Assistive technology and the Government's innovation and growth ambitions

2.1

Purpose-built for higher education



Note-taking & captioning



Reading & writing



Planning & organising



Researching & referencing



Time & task management



Presentation support

The DSA has supported the provision and adoption of specialist assistive technology (AT) designed to remove barriers to participation in higher education. This also creates opportunities for innovation, as the assessment, provision and use of specialist technologies help identify emerging needs and opportunities for improvement. The importance of continued research, development and adoption of assistive technology is recognised in the Government's 2024–25 report on assistive technology research and development[7].

This section highlights an important point: the DSA's design, as a mechanism through which specialist AT is assessed, delivered and used, helps to create opportunities for the continued development and improvement of the technology available to disabled users.

Assistive technology[8] encompasses a wide range of solutions that help disabled people perform tasks that might otherwise be difficult or impossible. Within higher education, this includes speech-to-text and text-to-speech software, literacy support tools, digital note-taking technology, screen readers and specialist hardware such as adapted keyboards, ergonomic equipment and alternative input devices. Its purpose is not to reduce academic requirements, but to enable disabled students to access learning and participate on an equal basis with their peers.

Higher education places particular demands on students. Reading large volumes of academic material, producing extended written work, conducting independent research, participating in lectures and seminars, managing complex information and completing assessments can create barriers for some disabled students. The Government's evaluation of the DSA found that these barriers can affect participation and achievement and that DSA support helps reduce them[9].

Speech-to-text and dictation software is one example of technology commonly recommended through the DSA. These tools allow students to convert spoken language into written text and can support students who experience barriers with handwriting, typing, spelling or written expression. This may include students with physical impairments, chronic pain or fatigue-related conditions, where producing written work through traditional methods can be difficult or unsustainable, as well as students with dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism[10] and other cognitive or processing differences, where typing may be possible but requires significantly greater cognitive effort.

Within higher education, speech-to-text can support activities such as producing essays, completing coursework and recording ideas during independent study. Emerging evidence[11] suggests that speech-to-text technology can improve writing fluency, text quality and learner confidence, demonstrating that its role extends beyond simple transcription.

Other specialist technologies support a wider range of access needs, including those associated with sensory impairments, complex disabilities, chronic health conditions and long-term illness. Screen readers, magnification and communication software can improve access to learning materials and academic activities. Digital note-taking, transcription and organisation tools can support students experiencing fatigue, pain, fluctuating symptoms or difficulties with concentration and information processing. Literacy and planning tools, including text-to-speech, proofreading and mind-mapping, can help students manage academic demands, organise information and work more independently.

Research has identified benefits including improved reading comprehension[12], as well as improvements in accuracy, engagement and confidence[13], motivation and independent learning[14].

68% of DSA recipients reported that the support they received enabled them to participate more fully in their course than they otherwise would have been able to

The Government's evaluation of the DSA found evidence that the DSA's needs-led approach significantly helps reduce barriers to learning. Around two-thirds (68%) of DSA recipients reported that the support they received enabled them to participate more fully in their course than they otherwise would have been able to, with the evaluation also examining significant positive effects on participation, retention and achievement.[15]

The international comparison also reinforces the uniqueness of the DSA. Many countries have strong disability rights frameworks requiring education institutions to make reasonable adjustments, but fewer have created a nationally funded mechanism that generates consistent demand for specialist assistive technology.

UNITED STATES

In the United States[16], disabled students are protected through the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which require higher education institutions to provide reasonable adjustments. However, responsibility for arranging support generally sits with individual institutions rather than through a national funding mechanism equivalent to the DSA.

AUSTRALIA

Similarly, in Australia[17], the Disability Standards for Education 2005 require providers to support disabled students through reasonable adjustments, but assistive technology provision is primarily managed through institutional disability support arrangements rather than a nationally coordinated funding model.

2.2 Assistive technology and the Government's innovation and growth ambitions

The DSA does more than deliver technology to individual students. It forms part of the wider environment in which specialist AT is developed, tested and refined, and that shapes whether the technology available to disabled students keeps improving.

Specialist AT is designed for small, diverse groups of users whose needs cannot be met by lightly adapted consumer products. It depends on expertise in accessibility, continued investment in user research, testing and product development, and close working between developers and the people who use it. Need alone does not guarantee that good technology exists or keeps improving: a product only gets better when it is tested, adopted and refined against real user experience.

The DSA creates this space. Following an individual needs assessment, specialist technology is selected, configured and supplied with training and support. Because disabled students use AT every day in real academic settings, developers can see what works, learn where tools fall short and refine their products in response.



This improvement matters first and foremost for disabled students. Each refinement made in response to student experience produces tools that are more accurate, more reliable and better suited to individual needs, narrowing the barriers students face in higher education. Those improved tools then return to students through the DSA, creating a cycle in which the technology keeps getting better for the people it is designed to support.

The same cycle has wider relevance. Technology refined with disabled students may be adapted for workplaces, schools and other sectors, and the expertise built through it may support UK companies seeking to grow. This is consistent with the Government's UK Modern Industrial Strategy (Department for Business and Trade, 2025), which emphasises strengthening UK business capability and helping businesses scale, and with the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Strategy 2026-2031, which prioritises translating research and innovation into real-world impact and connecting research, businesses and end users.

Any changes to the DSA should therefore be assessed not only for their immediate implications for students, but for whether they preserve the conditions in which specialist AT continues to be available, developed and improved. The DSA should also be considered not only within higher education policy, but in the context of the UK's wider ambitions for innovation and growth.

DRIVEN BY STUDENT EXPERIENCE

"Each refinement made in response to student experience produces tools that are more accurate, more reliable and better suited to individual needs, narrowing the barriers students face in higher education."

03

SECTION THREE

The Case for an Assistive Technology Passport

"Confidence in the tools someone depends on is itself part of what makes them work."

3.1 One person, three separate assessments

3.2 The model already exists: Ireland's AT Passport

3.3 What an AT Passport would deliver

3.4 What is at stake for disabled people and the Government

3.1 One person, three separate assessments

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), the DSA and Access to Work are distinct schemes, but they share a common purpose: ensuring disabled people can access the support they need throughout education and employment. In practice that means getting the right support to the right person, quickly and reliably, so that disability does not become a barrier.

Currently, each scheme requires a person to be assessed from scratch, often providing the same medical evidence and undergoing the same conversations about their needs three separate times, at school, on entry to higher education and on entry to work, with no continuity between them and no shared standard of timeliness, entitlement, or provision. A young person who has had consistent help throughout their time in higher education may find themselves being offered different software, or none at all, when they go into the workplace. This can be detrimental to everyone, especially the disabled person who has to either learn new actions for new software or pay for the software they depend on.

This is not simply an inconvenience. Confidence in the tools someone depends on is itself part of what makes them work. A disabled person who has built fluency with a particular piece of software over years of school and university loses more than time when it is swapped out; they lose the automaticity that let the tool disappear into the background of their work. Forcing them to rebuild that fluency at the exact moment they are also adapting to a new job or course compounds two transitions into one, at the worst possible time.

The British Assistive Technology Association (BATA) believes that the best way to support disabled people through education, into higher education or work, is to have an Assistive Technology Passport.

3.2 The model already exists: Ireland's AT Passport

A single AT Passport is not a hypothetical mechanism. A pilot Assistive Technology Passport is already being tested in Ireland. Developed in partnership with the Disability Federation of Ireland, St John of God Community Services, MS Ireland and Headway Ireland, the AT Passport is a digital record, owned by the individual, that brings together referral, assessment, the technology chosen, funding, training and ongoing support in one place and lets the holder decide who to share it with, whether a new school, employer or service provider.

Two versions have been piloted: one for people who already have access to a disability or AT service, and a second for adults who have AT needs but no existing route into support, closing exactly the kind of "no service, no passport" gap a UK model would need to avoid from the outset.

The Irish system is still a proof of concept and not yet available to the general public, and not itself attached to a statutory entitlement in the way DSA, SEND or Access to Work are.

That is the opportunity for the UK: rather than retrofitting portability onto three legacy schemes after the fact, a passport built on the DSA's proven assessment model could combine the continuity Ireland is piloting with the statutory turnaround and funded entitlement that Ireland's own scheme is still seeking backing to secure.

3.3 What an AT Passport would deliver

An AT Passport would follow the person rather than the institution:

School
SEND

At school (SEND): a needs assessment is carried out, generating a portable record of the support required. This could help reduce unnecessary duplication and improve continuity as young people move into further or higher education.

University
DSA

On entry to university (DSA): the passport is updated, not started from scratch, reducing the assessment to a confirmation of continued or changed need, rather than a full re-investigation.

Work
Access to Work

On entry to work (Access to Work): the same record transfers again, meaning an employer or DWP caseworker is confirming known, established needs rather than commissioning a fresh assessment months after someone has accepted a job offer.

The cost of not having this today is well evidenced for specific groups. The British Dyslexia Association's Pathway Interrupted report[18] found that only a third of dyslexic young people were diagnosed at primary school, that a large majority felt school had limited their education, training and career opportunities, and that dyslexic young people who had become NEET were especially likely to say their school experience had held them back.

The report calls for early screening and a national diagnosis pathway precisely because support currently resets, or is lost altogether, at each transition, the same discontinuity a passport is designed to close.

3.4 What is at stake for disabled people and the Government

52.8%
employment rate for disabled people, 2025

82.5%
for non-disabled people

66,000
Access to Work backlog, March 2026

The case for a passport is ultimately a case about people's lives, not simply administration. In 2025, the employment rate for working age disabled people stood at 52.8%, compared with 82.5% for non-disabled people; a gap of almost 30 percentage points[19]. Education is associated with a substantially narrower disability employment gap. Among people whose highest qualification is a degree, the employment gap falls to 11.5 percentage points, compared with 38.1 points among those with no qualifications. While a degree does not eliminate the disability employment gap, these findings highlight the importance of supporting disabled people to access and complete higher education and progress into employment. An Assistive Technology Passport could help protect that progression by improving continuity of support and reducing unnecessary duplication as people move between education and work.

Being in work matters just as much in its own right. Working-age disabled adults are almost twice as likely to live in poverty as their non-disabled peers, 33%, compared with 17%[20]. Even in work, disabled employees are paid less: the disability pay gap stood at 15.5% in 2025, with disabled staff earning on average £2.24 an hour less than non-disabled colleagues, equivalent to roughly £4,000 a year for someone working a 35-hour week[21].

Every disabled person who falls out of education, or out of work, because assistive software is provided under one scheme but not another, while waiting to be reassessed from scratch or because they are struggling to adapt to new software, is a person pushed further into these gaps rather than helped out of them. All of this could be prevented with an AT Passport.

An AT passport would also help the Government's current objectives. It speaks directly to the crisis inside Access to Work, where the backlog hit 66,000 cases in March 2026 and average processing time has stretched to 106 working days against a 25-day target, by stripping out the duplicated assessment work driving that queue[22].

The proposed Assistive Technology Passport also aligns with the Government's Youth Guarantee and Milburn Review agenda. In 2024/25, 29.6% of disabled young people aged 16-24 were NEET, compared with 8.7% of their non-disabled peers, a gap of nearly 21 percentage points that has barely moved in a decade[23]. These figures underline the importance of improving transitions between education, training and employment. A portable record of assistive technology needs, previously effective support and adjustments could help reduce unnecessary duplication, improve coordination between services, and support disabled young people.

Disabled young people who are NEET are also far more likely to remain so long-term. Two-thirds (67%) of disabled NEET young people are long-term NEET, compared with just 21% of their non-disabled peers[24]. A passport that travels with a disabled young person from school into DWP support, without resetting at each handover, is aimed directly at that stickiness, intervening before repeated re-assessment lets it set in. Research also highlights the risk of prolonged disengagement among disabled young people who become NEET. A portable record of assistive technology needs and previously effective support could contribute to a more coordinated transition between education, training and employment.

An Assistive Technology Passport could help reduce unnecessary repeat assessments, freeing up capacity within support services.

NEET, AGED 16-24, 2024/25

29.6% disabled young people

8.7% non-disabled peers

LONG-TERM NEET

67% of disabled NEET young people

21% of their non-disabled peers

7 in 10

young people claiming health and disability benefits remained claimants a decade later

The importance of improving transitions is reinforced by the Milburn Review[25], which found that young people first claiming health and disability benefits in 2019 were around a third more likely to remain NEET five years later than those who first claimed in 2010. It also reported that around seven in ten young people claiming health and disability benefits remained claimants a decade later.

A passport aimed at the education-to-work handover, the point where disabled young people are currently most likely to drop out and re-enter the assessment queue from scratch, is aimed directly at breaking that trajectory before it compounds. These findings highlight the importance of earlier, more coordinated support. By providing a portable record of assistive technology needs and previously effective adjustments, a passport could help improve continuity between education and employment, reduce unnecessary duplication and support more timely decisions.

A coordinated approach to assistive technology support could therefore contribute to wider Government ambitions to improve employment outcomes, strengthen transitions into work and make public services more efficient. The value of an AT Passport would lie in improving continuity and enabling more informed, timely support decisions, rather than replacing the need for individual assessment where circumstances or requirements have changed.

THE ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY PASSPORT

> "A passport aimed at the education-to-work handover … is aimed directly at breaking that trajectory before it compounds."

Conclusion

The evidence in this roadmap points the same way. The Disabled Students' Allowance works because it is personal, needs-led and individually assessed. By providing targeted support that enables disabled students to participate, succeed and progress into employment, it represents an important investment whose potential long-term educational, social and economic benefits extend well beyond the initial cost of support.

It also underpins a market for specialist assistive technology creating opportunities for continued innovation and improvement informed by the needs and experiences of disabled students. However, continuity of support can be lost at the points where disabled people move from school to university and from university to work.

The DSA works today because it is personal. Each student's support is identified through an individual needs assessment and delivered through a tailored combination of specialist technology, training and human support helping to remove barriers to participation, achievement, completion and progression. The DSA represents a valuable investment in disabled students' education, skills and independence, helping students stay on their courses, graduate, and carry the skills and independence they have built into the workplace. Furthermore, as disabled students use specialist assistive technology in real academic settings, their experiences can help identify gaps, inform product development and drive improvements that benefit future generations of disabled people. With continuity of support, which an Assistive Technology Passport would provide, the technology and know-how a student builds at university can follow them into work rather than being lost at the point of transition. Supporting specialist assistive technology through the DSA therefore has the potential to benefit disabled people well beyond graduation, and well beyond the students who receive it today.

Summary of Recommendations

1. **Commission a detailed assessment of how much the DSA saves the Exchequer:** The Government should publish a full fiscal analysis of the DSA's return to the public purse, led by DfE with HM Treasury and DWP.

   It should show whether the cost of support is absorbed as more disabled students stay on their courses, complete their degrees and move into work. This analysis should be completed and published before any decision is taken on DSA funding, eligibility or delivery.

2. **Require a thorough assessment of the impact on assistive technology before any decision is made:** Before any changes to DSA support for specialist assistive technology, such as any move towards free or mainstream software, the Government should carry out and publish a detailed assessment of the likely effects it will have on students, with concrete evidence.

   It should cover disabled students' access to effective support, retention and outcomes, the costs transferred to universities and other services, and the continued development of specialist technology. The Government should be required to demonstrate, with evidence from disabled students, assessors and specialist providers, that proposed changes will not harm disabled students or their future prospects.

3. **Develop and pilot an Assistive Technology Passport across education and employment:** The Government should commission a UK pilot of an AT Passport built on the DSA's proven assessment model. It would be a portable record, owned by the individual, that follows them from school through higher education and into work. Learning from Ireland's pilot, it should be designed to avoid a "no service, no passport" gap and to sit alongside statutory entitlements.

   The pilot should be led jointly by DfE and DWP, so that support is confirmed rather than reassessed at each transition. This would reduce duplicated assessment, help address the Access to Work backlog and support disabled young people at risk of becoming long-term NEET. It would not replace individual reassessment where a person's needs have changed.

Notes and references

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/student-support-for-higher-education-in-england-2025

2 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/04-06-2026/sb275-higher-education-graduate-outcomes-statistics/activities

3 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2024/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2024

4 https://thedisabilitypolicycentre.org/disabled-employment-gap

5 Evaluation of Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) - GOV.UK

6 Call for universities to improve support for disabled students - GOV.UK

7 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assistive-technology-research-and-development-work-2024-to-2025

8 https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049451?

9 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-disabled-students-allowances-dsas

10 https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36641779/

11 https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36863156/

12 https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37119436/

13 Draffan, E. A., Evans, D. G. and Blenkhorn, P. (2007). Use of assistive technology by students with dyslexia in post-secondary education. *Disability and Rehabilitation: Assistive Technology*, 2(2), 105–116.

14 https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1410263.pdf

15 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-disabled-students-allowances-dsas

16 Accommodation Use and Academic Outcomes for College Students With Disabilities - Julia Blasey, Cixin Wang, Ralph Blasey, 2023

17 Reasonable Adjustments in Assessment: Putting Law and Policy into Practice in Australia: International Journal of Disability, Development and Education: Vol 60, No 4

18 British Dyslexia Association - Pathway Interrupted Report, September 2026

19 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2025/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2025

20 https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-statistics/disability, January 2026

21 TUC – Disability pay gap means disabled workers effectively stop earning from today | TUC

22 The Public Accounts Committee's Sixth Report, The Access to Work scheme (HC 92, published 12 June 2026)

23 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2025/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2025

24 https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/YF-NEETS-TRENDS-ANALYSIS-OCT-DEC-2025.pdf

25 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report

British Assistive Technology Association

About BATA

BATA is a not-for-profit membership organisation with over 90 members across the UK. It ensures voices that care about AT are heard, from disabled advocates to the AT industry.

We believe in affordable, appropriate and available AT for every child and adult.

bataonline.org

info@bataonline.org