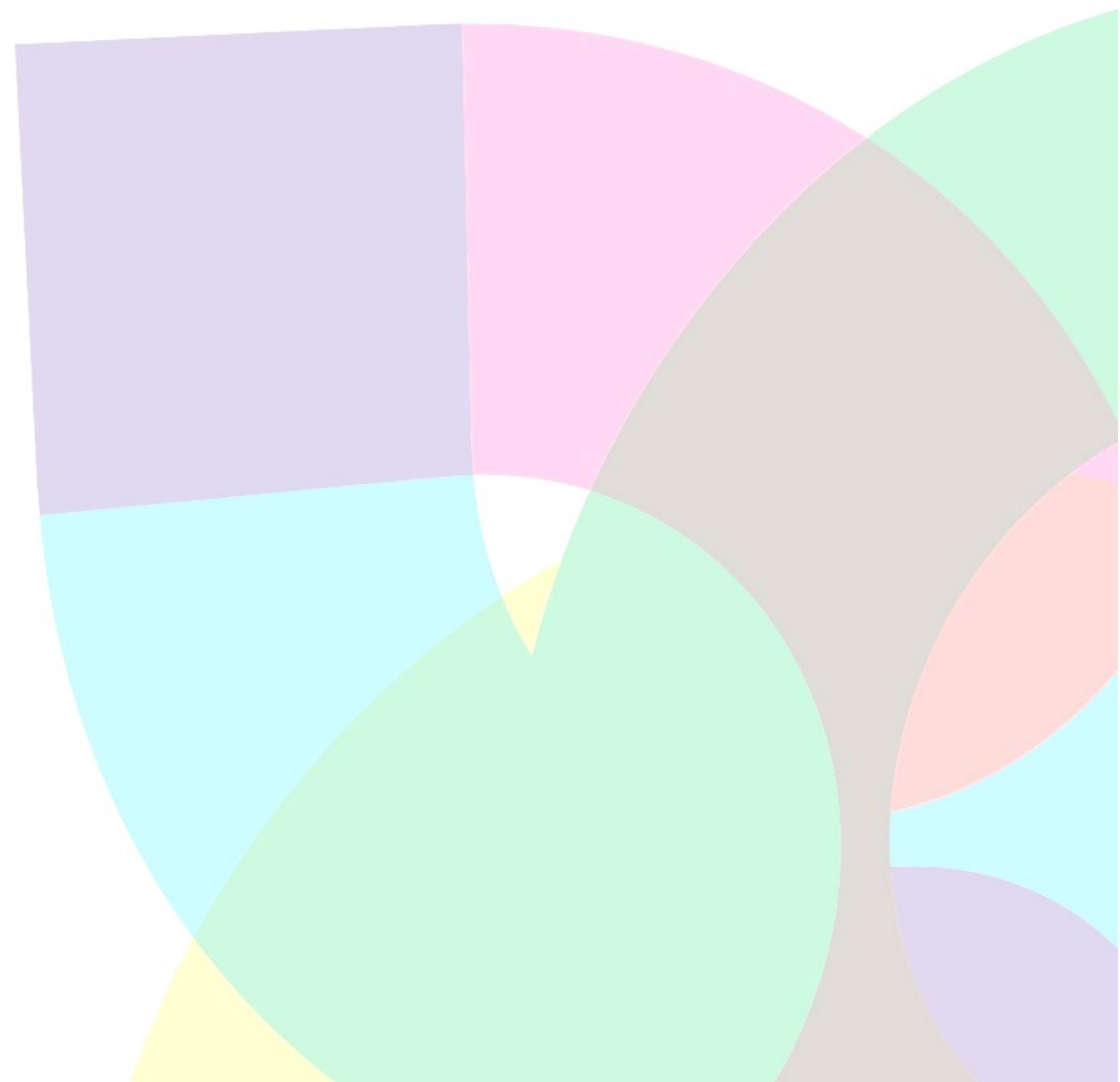


# HE Update Supporting Disabled Students in Higher Education

August 2021

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## Background

At the start of the new academic year (2021/22), we consider support arrangements for disabled students in receipt of Disabled Students Allowances (DSA). As students expect increased in-person delivery of teaching and campus services, it is important to contemplate how their specialist support will be delivered and whether their needs will be fully met. To ensure that institutions focus on the needs and expectations of disabled students, the following suggestions could be considered:

- A communication process should be put in place between the HEI and any external provider of support, to ensure individual disabled students' needs are being met.
- Where the HEI has responsibility for specialist support delivery, a framework should be in place to ensure that in-person support can be delivered.
- Disabled students should be given a clear process by which they can report any failings in their support, with a clear and effective process in place to ensure positive outcomes.
- Disabled students should be regularly asked for feedback on their support and be involved in any quality assurance framework.
- Ensure that there is a monitoring of remote support to ensure that it is effective and that safeguards are in place in relation to student safety and confidentiality.
- Consider that students' needs fluctuate and so support needs to demonstrate flexibility so that the student is regularly offered

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<sup>1</sup> [Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

opportunities to receive in-person support should this be their wish.

This paper sets out the likely limitations to the delivery and receipt of specialist support and the context for the above considerations in reducing the potential threats to disabled students in Higher Education (HE).

## Disabled Students

The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on a person's ability to do normal daily activities.<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have legal responsibilities to support disabled students, with the Equalities Act 2010 s20 stating that all further and higher education providers must ensure that disabled students are not treated less favourably than other students.

The number of disabled students in higher education has increased by 106,000 (47%) since 2014/15 to 332,300 in 2019/20, representing between 17% and 18% of all home students. Mental health diagnoses have increased more than 180% since 2014/15; however, the most commonly reported disability remains Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) which include dyslexia.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [Support for disabled students in higher education in England - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](http://parliament.uk)

Types of disabilities reported by HE students					
All modes and levels of study					
	2014/15	2018/19	2019/20	% of all disabilities in 19/20	Increase 14/15 to 19/20
A specific learning difficulty	105,550	110,795	111,820	34%	6%
Mental health condition	33,045	81,960	93,770	28%	184%
Two or more conditions	21,095	34,155	41,210	12%	95%
A long-standing illness or health condition	22,425	28,430	30,110	9%	34%
Another disability, impairment or medical condition	21,580	22,925	23,980	7%	11%
Social communication/Autistic spectrum disorder	6,755	12,815	14,120	4%	109%
A physical impairment or mobility issues	7,480	8,250	8,400	3%	12%
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment	5,065	5,485	5,675	2%	12%
Blind or a serious visual impairment	2,840	3,170	3,190	1%	12%
<b>Any disability</b>	<b>225,835</b>	<b>307,985</b>	<b>332,275</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>47%</b>

Source: HESA, [UK domiciled student enrolments by disability and sex 2014/15 to 2019/20](#)

Students with mental health conditions may be more vulnerable in comparison with the general population due to external stressors such as living independently and isolation. Some will also face the challenge of discontinuity of care when transitioning to university.

### Disabled students' outcomes

Disabled students experience worse outcomes from higher education and are also more likely to discontinue their course, or finish with lower classification results in comparison with non-disabled students. Additionally, disabled students are underrepresented within higher education and have worse employment outcomes than non-disabled peers. This is supported by the National Student Survey results for the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1a263fd6-b20a-4ac7-b268-0bbaa0c153a2/beyond-the-bare-minimum-are-universities-and-colleges-doing-enough-for-disabled-students.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b3e6669e-5337-4caa-9553-049b3e8e7803/insight-brief-mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported.pdf>

years between 2009 and 2013, which showed that disabled students have a consistently lower than average overall satisfaction rate, even when other factors including gender, ethnicity and subject choice were considered.<sup>3</sup>

### Reasonable Adjustments

HEIs provide support for disabled students through reasonable adjustment and disability services, some of which is funded through the Disabled Student Premium, and by the government through Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs). There is no standardisation of support for disabled students, with varying approaches taken among HEIs. However, many HEIs place considerable emphasis on their support services and have responded to campaigns such as the Universities UK 'step change' framework by intensifying efforts to support the wellbeing of their student populace through a whole-university approach. This includes ensuring that mental health considerations are embedded across all policies, cultures, curriculums and practices with links between in-house services and external services such as local primary care.<sup>4</sup>

Where a student feels that they have not been supported by their HEI, they can submit a complaint through the in-house procedure, moving to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator if they are dissatisfied with the HEI's response. As a last resort, the student may take formal legal action against their HEI. According to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, mental health issues feature significantly in recent cases against HEIs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b3e6669e-5337-4caa-9553-049b3e8e7803/insight-brief-mental-health-are-all-students-being-properly-supported.pdf>

## Disabled Students' Allowances

Disabled students' support is funded through the Disabled Student Premium and the government's Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs). 60,600 students from England received DSAs in 2018/19. DSA is non-repayable and is intended to cover some of the extra study-related costs disabled students may incur as a direct result of their disability.<sup>6</sup> Examples of DSA funded support are assistive technology and non-medical helper (NMH) support, which may be provided by the HEI or external suppliers.

## NMH Support

Examples of non-medical helper support include assistive technology training, practical support assistance, note taking, specialist mentoring and specialist study skills support. Throughout the pandemic, most non-medical helper support has been delivered remotely through video platforms.

## Remote learning and support

In anticipation of the academic year 2020/21, HEIs intended to deliver blended learning, with smaller groups (typically <30) being taught in-person and larger groups (typically >30) being delivered online. This resulted in a high percentage of course delivery being remote as opposed to in-person. Remote learning is being scaled back for the academic year 2021/22, although it is not being wholly discontinued, with Welsh universities having announced that for larger groups online

<sup>6</sup> [Disabled Students' Allowances \(DSAs\) | Undergraduate, Postgraduate, Conservatoires | UCAS](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Gavin Williamson: Universities not teaching in person shouldn't charge full fees | Evening Standard](#)

delivery will still be used and "Twenty of the 24 Russell Group universities, (reporting) that a proportion of undergraduate teaching will continue to be held online."<sup>7</sup>

When surveyed about the restrictions on in-person teaching, 73% of students felt that it had a strong or slightly negative impact on them feeling anxious.<sup>8</sup> HEIs recognise the disruption experienced by students during the Covid-19 pandemic and are working to ensure all students are supported for the new academic year and that transitioning to university will be a positive experience.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, despite the expectation that HEIs will provide tailored activities and increase in-person services on campus for the new academic year, potential threats to the wellbeing and academic progress of students, both disabled and non-disabled, are identified below (non-exhaustive list):

- Uncertainty of what to expect, or how the status quo may change
- Isolation, both externally and self-imposed
- Division between those who have been vaccinated and those who have not
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Mask wearing being enforced, or, where this is non-mandatory, students making different choices
- Online assessments
- Social distancing
- Blended/remote learning
- Restrictions on campus services
- Restrictions on social events and mixing on campus

<sup>8</sup> [Universities Seeking Clarity Over in-person Teaching | StuRents News](#)

<sup>9</sup> [support-for-new-students-case-studies.pdf \(universitiesuk.ac.uk\)](#)

In addition to those restrictions or threats experienced by the whole student populace, disabled students will potentially experience additional restrictions to their specialist support, with many HEIs and external providers looking to continue to provide their support services remotely.

The Association of Non-Medical Helper Providers (ANMHP) carried out an initial survey to collect disabled students' views on the efficacy of DSA support during the pandemic, with a follow up study to ascertain the impact of remote support on the ability of disabled students to engage with their academic studies.<sup>10</sup> Many students found remote support to be helpful, given the challenges arising from studying during a pandemic.

## Discussion

From the results, 68.85% of disabled students surveyed agreed that 'Remote online DSA support is effective for me', however, only 11.03% of students wanted purely remote support. The overwhelming majority - 89% - would prefer either face-to-face support or a blended approach. This suggests that whilst students who were surveyed provided positive feedback about remote specialist support, in-person support would be the majority preference.

Nonetheless, there appears to be an intention from many providers of specialist disability support and services to retain remote provision as the status quo. This raises the question of whether this form of service delivery is being promoted for the convenience of disability support providers, rather than to meet the needs of disabled students.

Whilst HEIs do not have responsibility for non-medical helper support provision being delivered by external companies, best practice would

dictate otherwise. Furthermore, many HEIs award contracts to external companies to deliver non-medical helper support on the university's behalf, and many more deliver their own support provision. Therefore, it is important for HEIs to be aware of the potential threat of a remote model of disabled student provision which is contrary to the expected standard of the Student Loans Company stated in its Student Support Information Note July 2021:

*All NMH providers should be able to provide remote or face to face NMH sessions, or a mixture of the two, as the student chooses. This means that NMH providers should ensure that for every student they take on, they are able to provide face to face as well as remote support should the student wish.<sup>11</sup>*

Identified threats to disabled students in receipt of remote support include safeguarding, as support workers cannot be sure that the student is on their own during the session. Instances have been reported of abusive partners being present during specialist support sessions (remotely delivered), unbeknown to the support worker, the content of which has triggered physical violence. Other safeguarding issues include disabled students expressing suicide ideation during remote support sessions, with the specialist support worker being less able to keep the student safe in the moment than if they were in the same physical space.

Concern has also been reported that for many disabled students with concentration or social communication difficulties, whilst they may express willingness to engage with remote support, this model is counterintuitive and will not be as effective in addressing aspects of the student's disability as that of in-person support.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The Association of Non-Medical Help Providers Published June 2021

<sup>11</sup> [ssin-0721-new-arrangements-for-remote-support-202122.pdf \(slc.co.uk\)](https://www.slsc.co.uk/~/media/SLSC/Support%20Information%20Notes/2021/2021-07-21-DSA-remote-support.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [Beacon Support Ltd.](#), working group report (draft)

## We can help

We have knowledge and experience of the DSA Quality Assurance Framework, which, since the closure in 2019 of DSA-QAG (the organisation responsible for auditing HEIs and independent providers of DSA-funded support) is still the DfE's expected standard for ensuring quality provision of support to disabled students. Currently, whilst HEIs are not subject to a formalised, ongoing audit of their DSA-funded provision, this is likely to change in the future when a successor to DSA-QAG is established.

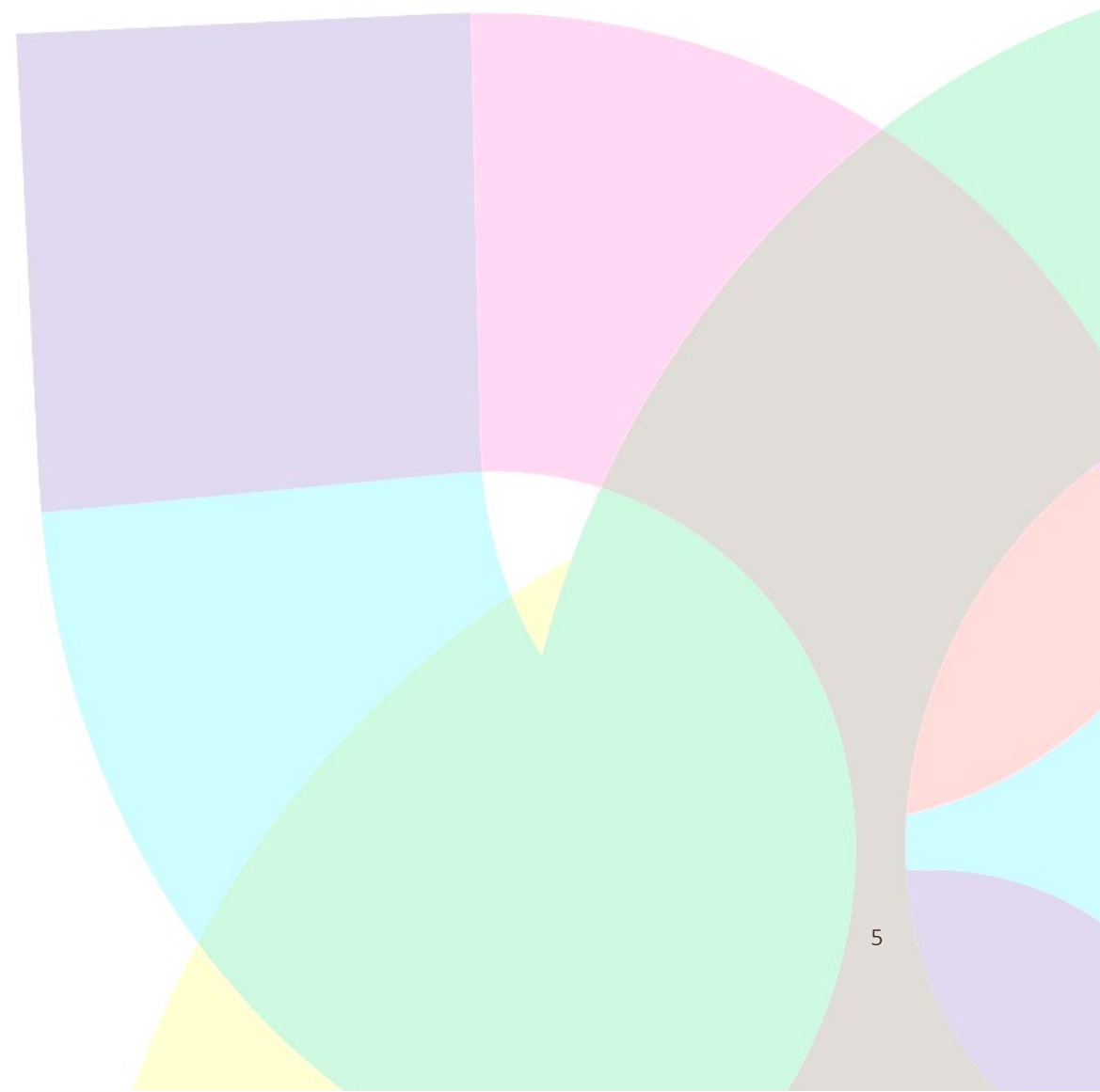
Uniac can provide an assessment of the current processes and controls in place to manage DSA-funded support to provide assurance that these comply with the DSA Quality Assurance Framework. For further information on how we can help, or for any other aspect of Uniac's internal audit and assurance service, please do get in touch.



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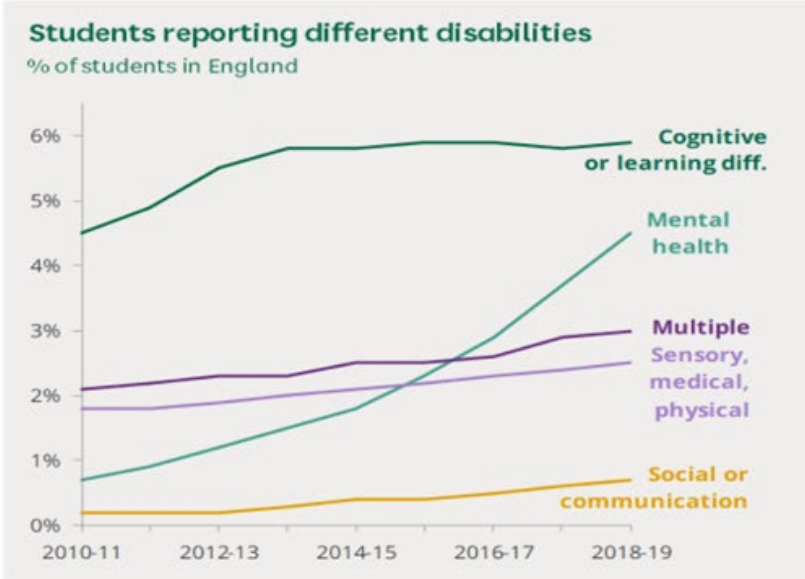
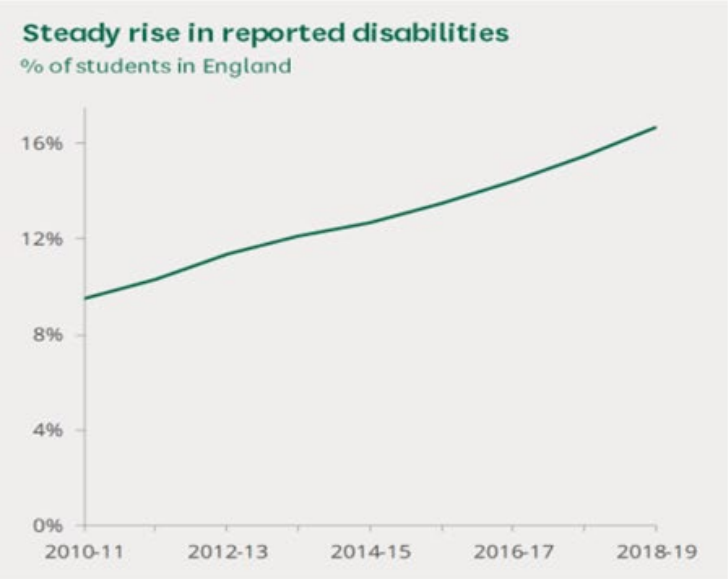


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## Appendix A - Support for Disabled Students in HE in England

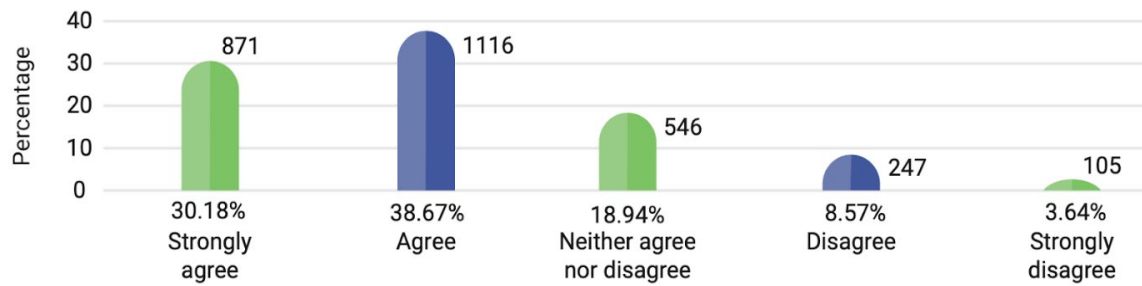
Support for disabled students in higher education in England (House of Commons Library) statistics:



## Appendix B - Efficacy of DSA Support during Covid-19

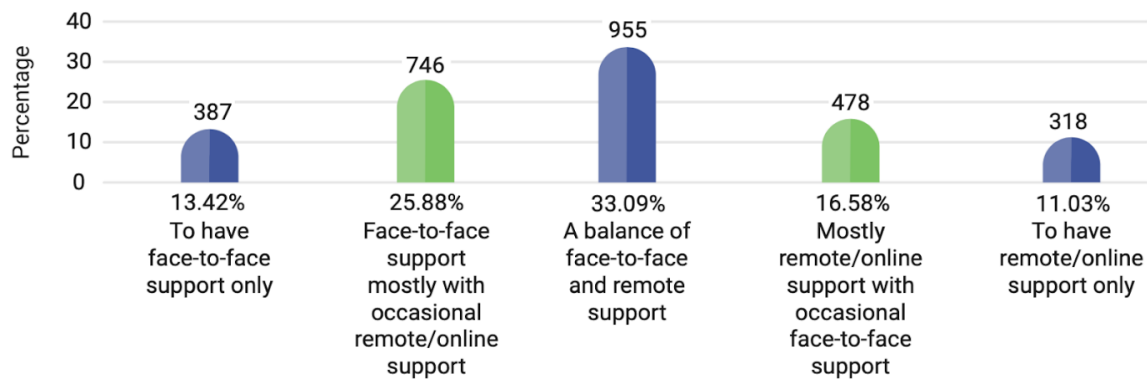
From the ANMHP follow-up survey (n=2,885) to collect views on the efficacy of DSA support during the pandemic and whether this has had an impact, be it positive or negative, on the ability of disabled students to engage with their academic studies:

*Remote online DSA support is effective for me:*



ANMHP, The DSA support and Covid-19 Student Survey 2, June 2021

*When face-to-face DSA support is allowed and unrestricted again, my preference would be:*



ANMHP, The DSA support and Covid-19 Student Survey 2, June 2021