Improving non-medical help for disabled students in higher education call for evidence: London Higher response

7. What do you consider is working well for students in the current NMH system?

When non-medical help (NMH) provision for disabled students works well, it works very well. All roles under the NMH umbrella enable disabled students to get more out of their course than DSA-provided support alone. London Higher and AccessHE member institutions educate many students who rely on NMH to succeed in their studies.

Students benefit from the fact that NMH being arranged outside their individual institution means there is no gap between what larger, smaller, more or less well-resourced institutions are able to provide. Students at the smallest or newest institutions are able to benefit from the same support that larger institutions are able to provide.

Another benefit of the current system is that students are able to get support for their disabilities without having to disclose their needs to their institution. Every disabled student will be in a different situation and have a different attitude to sharing their situation with their institution. In the current system, students have a free choice of how much to disclose to their institution.

8. What do you consider is working well for HEPs in the current NMH system?

The current system gives space to higher education institutions (HEIs) to administrate some NMH support in-house while some is managed centrally by the Student Loans Company and Disabled Students' Allowance. One small performing arts specialist institution in London has seen significant benefits for students of being able to engage NMH specialists who are able to work around performance-specific working hours and match NMH availability to their own students' schedules. Any future system would benefit students where it respects differences between the needs of students on different pathways and allows HEIs to choose the NMH providers that fit their students best. In London, an environment dense with specialist providers and creative courses requiring specific timetables and skills, this would be of particular benefit.

10. What aspects of the current NMH system do you consider are not working well for students?

Several aspects of the current NHM system are not working well for students, and ways of improving them should be considered carefully to maximise disabled students' ability to live well and engage

with their studies, though it is not necessarily the case that reassigning responsibility for NMH to HEIs would solve these issues.

For students with some disabilities, particularly specific learning difficulties and autism, the long process to arrange NMH requiring many phone calls can be wearing and consume energy which would be better spent on their studies.

The support available under the current system does not support all groups of disabled students equally. For example, dyspraxic students do not have any support specifically available to them under the current NMH system.

11. What aspects of the current NMH system do you consider are not working well for HEPs?

The fact that the application system for support is so complex can lead to difficulties for the HEI staff helping students navigate an opaque system, with disability support teams already stretched thin and have many students to support.

The funding constraints of the current system are already challenging for HEIs. HEIs are already responsible for the full funding and administration of all support for disabled international students and home students who do not qualify for other support. With budgets already under great pressure in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and, in London, the ongoing impact of the loss of London weighting in 2022, the responsibility HEIs already have for supporting disabled students is a significant burden. Changes to the system should work to avoid compounding these existing issues.

13. Do you have any suggestions for how the current NMH system could be improved?

In addition to the changes mentioned in our responses to other questions, it would benefit disabled students if they were eligible to continue receiving NMH under the current system while out on placement as part of their course.

14. Do you consider it more important for a student to have an individual entitlement for more specialist NMH support or for a HEP to have overall responsibility for the whole of a student's NMH support?

- **Individual entitlement more important**
- **Overall HEP responsibility more important**
- **Other (please specify) [Free text box]**

Other

Either version of the NMH system has the capacity to help or hinder students' experiences, if attention is paid to making application and delivery processes streamlined and student-centred. The most important considerations for London Higher members are:

1. creating a system that respects and works with the full diversity of institution types and student bodies from the largest multi-faculty institution to the smallest conservatoire; and
2. having adequate funding in the system to deliver the support students need.

Without adequate funding available, it will not make a difference to student wellbeing whether their HEI or a centralised system is handling their support. While a system in which the HEI is responsible for organising NMH could be more efficient than the current system, the staffing costs alone would be a significant burden on HEIs to deliver and it is important to ensure support is not made worse by staffing and resource shortfalls.

Most importantly, any changes to the current system or steps towards a new system will require the input of HEI disability support staff at every stage as the details are worked out. HEI staff cannot know whether a new system will make their services work more or less successfully until they know the details of how funding, supplier procurement and auditing will work.

15. How do you think giving HEPs overall responsibility for the whole of a student's NMH support would affect the provision offered?

Giving HEIs overall responsibility for the whole of a student's NMH support would have two negative knock-on effects. Firstly, adding administrative burden and, secondly, potentially lowering the scale and quality of NMH support available to students. Even with continued support from Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) funding, the administrative weight of organising NMH support for students may well not be possible to achieve at many institutions. In particular, small institutions in London and elsewhere may not have the staff to deliver the scale of services their students need. This is especially true when we consider the stringent requirements the DSA currently has for assessing NMH providers. If HEIs were expected to replicate this, that would add a significant amount of work and cost for them, particularly in the context of other responsibilities HEIs may soon have to take on, such as management of freedom of speech and sexual misconduct reporting issues.

It should also be noted that where supplier shortages affect the current centralised system, shifting responsibility to HEIs would not solve these shortages. If there are not enough BSL interpreters for the centralised system to hire, there will not be enough BSL interpreters for individual institutions to hire.

16. Do you think a single approach will work for all students and HEPs?

A single approach could work well if it had enough resources behind it. A robust, well-funded system in which students can get the support they need with minimal organisational burden is one where all students can thrive. The emancipatory goals of the switch in approach as part of a shift from the medical model of disability to the social model of disability are best delivered by continued robust funding and an application system that centres the wellbeing of disabled students.

There is a potential issue with confidentiality. In instances where students choose not to share their disability to their institution in the current system, they would have to share their disabilities in the proposed new system. Careful planning would be needed to mitigate potential negative effects on students who would otherwise have preferred not to share their disabilities, for example, conflict of interest issues when HEIs learn about a disabled student with difficulties that put them at risk of failing exams or dropping out.