



Preparing for your Needs Assessment



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About this factsheet

This factsheet was co-produced by Lead Scotland and a group of disabled students. It is for disabled students at college or university in Scotland. It will cover how to prepare for a discussion about your disability-related needs on a course. It will also look at reasonable adjustments, common assistive technology and self-advocacy.

A Note on Language

Lead Scotland subscribes to the [Social Model of Disability](#), which means we believe people are disabled by barriers in society, rather than by their impairment or difference. We therefore talk about disabled people having 'impairments' rather than 'people with disabilities'. However, the language used throughout this factsheet is based on the authors' preferred terminology. It therefore sometimes refers to 'your disability' rather than 'your impairment' as that is the language they both prefer and use.



Introduction

A needs assessment is an opportunity to discuss your support needs with a disability specialist at your college or university. Where possible, you should organise this as soon as you accept a place or at the start of your course, as the assessment and adjustments can take some time to arrange. However, you can arrange to do this at any time during your course.

The assessment helps you identify what equipment, support, and adjustments could assist with your studies. The assessor should produce a document afterwards with a list of reasonable adjustments and support that has been recommended for you.

In higher education (SCQF Level 7 or above), Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) can pay for some of the equipment and support you require. See our [DSA factsheet](#) for more information. If you are in further education at college (SCQF Level 6 or below), you may be able to access the Additional Support Needs for Learning Allowance (ASNLA) instead of DSA. See our [Supporting you at College guide](#) for more information.

Reasonable Adjustments

Colleges and universities have a legal duty to remove or reduce the barriers disabled students face in education. They must take proactive steps to ensure disabled students can fully participate on the course and access other benefits, facilities, and services. This is called 'making reasonable adjustments'. Education providers are required to make reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act 2010. A college or university cannot refuse to make a reasonable adjustment, it's either reasonable or it's not. Have a look at our [guide to the Equality Act](#) for further information.

Funds like DSA and the ASNLA can help to pay for equipment and support that might incur additional costs on top of the reasonable adjustments an institution may be expected to provide.

Here are some examples of reasonable adjustments colleges and universities make:

- Providing ramps, accessible toilets and lifts
- Providing handouts and materials in advance in accessible formats
- Recording lectures
- Providing reading and writing aids like coloured overlays
- Providing laptops and PCs with built in assistive software on campus

Reasonable adjustments for assessments

- Extra time and rest breaks during exams
- Exams delivered in an accessible or quiet room
- A scribe to write down your answers
- A reader to read the questions
- A prompter to keep you on time
- Use of a digital device to type your answers or zoom in to enlarge text
- Exam paper provided in accessible formats including enlarged print, digital or braille
- Extensions to assessment deadlines

Some common adjustments DSA or ASNLA might fund:

- Educational support workers, e.g., notetakers, mentors, and BSL interpreters
- Assistive technology, such as specialist computer hardware and software (see below)
- One-to-one support from a Learning or Study Support Assistant
- Specialist or ergonomic furniture to support your studies

Technology and computer software

There is a vast range of assistive technology and computer software available to support disabled students with reading, writing, spelling, concentration, and organisation. Here are some examples of common assistive technology used by disabled students:

- **A Screen reader** is a type of software used by blind or visually impaired people to read the text on a screen. E.g., JAWS for Windows, NVDA, or Voiceover.
- **Dragon Speech Recognition Software** allows users to control their computers with their voice. It has text-to-speech and recognition of spoken commands. Dictated words appear in a floating tooltip as they are spoken.
- **Texthelp Read and Write** offers help for tasks like reading text aloud, understanding unfamiliar words, and proofing written work.

- [ClaroRead](#) is an easy-to-use piece of software that helps to increase student confidence in reading and writing. It reads on-screen text out loud.
- [Mind Genius](#) is a mind mapping software tool that helps to plan and organise your work.
- [The Live Scribe Smartpen](#) is a pen that captures everything that you write or say. It has a camera that takes pictures of your notes as you write them and a microphone that records what is said.

Below, the team talk about some of the technology and adjustments they've found to be most effective in supporting their studies:

"The best piece of software I was given while studying was Texthelp Read and Write as it was easy to use, has a great spell checker, good text prediction, coloured overlays, proof-reader and helped me to organise my work."

"I find the Glean app to be the most useful for me. It allows me to upload documents or slides to take notes whilst also taking audio recordings at the side so that everything is in one place. You can also tag any audio you want to come back to later to save you listening to everything again. On top of this the audio can also be converted into text."

"I had provisions in place to get lecture materials in advance. It really helped me prepare, as did my university's policy on lecture capture, which meant I didn't have to worry so much about taking notes really quickly."

"Using text-to-speech software on academic papers really helps me understand them, as I can just press play and listen while doing other things. TextHelp has a browser extension for this which works well with minimal setup."



What to Expect

Most colleges and universities have trained staff on campus to carry out your needs assessment. The person having the discussion with you will be called a needs assessor or a disability advisor. The word 'assessment' might make you think you are being tested or diagnosed, however this is not the case. It is an informal meeting to discuss what support can be put in place to make it easier for you to access education and overcome any barriers you may face.

Needs assessments are usually one-to-one, however if you are nervous, you can bring a parent or friend with you, as long as you can still discuss your needs openly with the assessor. Throughout the meeting it is important you are honest about how your disability affects you, to ensure the assessor can make an informed decision and help you get the right support. During the meeting the assessor will explore the impact your disability might have on your studies.

The assessor may show you examples of some equipment or assistive technology available and how it works. They may let you try it out or you could be provided with training on how to use it at a later stage. If you're unsure of any of the functions or how it would help you, ask the assessor to explain.

After the meeting, the assessor should produce a document that will outline any support the university or college recommend. If you are applying for DSA, a formal report will be sent to SAAS. If you're at college, a document called a 'Personal Learning Support Plan' may also be developed. At university, you may get a 'Learning Profile' or something similar. You should have access to these documents for your own personal reference. You also have the right to let the college or university know if you disagree with the recommendations made and want to discuss alternatives.

Steps to take in Advance

If you haven't already, you should get in touch with the appropriate department at your university or college. In some cases, this will be a disability service you need to register with. At colleges, they may have a student support team or 'supported learning department' instead. Find out what your place of education has and what the process to get support is. If in doubt, ask someone in student advice services for help.

What you will need to register depends on your university or college. You may be asked for evidence of your disability from a medical professional, especially if you have a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD). Others may be able to offer you support or carry out a needs assessment without evidence or a formal diagnosis. When applying for DSA, you must have a formal diagnosis of a SpLD from an appropriate professional. See our [DSA factsheet](#) for more information about the evidence required.

When a needs assessment has been scheduled, here are some things you can do in advance to prepare:

- Check with your university/college as to what you need to do. This may include bringing specific paperwork with you or forms you should fill in beforehand.
- Think about the structure and delivery of your course. Doing this is especially important if your needs assessment is happening prior to the course starting or early enough into it that you aren't familiar with it. This means things like:
 - What classes do you have?
 - How often are they?
 - How long are they?
 - Where do they take place?
 - What tasks might you be expected to do?
 - How will assessments be carried out?

This step will be especially important if you're having a DSA needs assessment at an Access Centre, as the assessor may be unfamiliar with your specific course and campus. See our [DSA factsheet](#) for more information about Access Centres.

Think about or write down the answer to some of these questions, which you may be asked during the assessment:

- How does your disability impact you on a day-to-day basis?
- What type of equipment do you currently have access to? Do you find this helpful?
- What areas do you think you may need support in, for example reading, note-taking, concentration or getting around campus?
- What type of support have you received in the past, for example at school?

The person carrying out your needs assessment will help you with this, but it's good to have an idea of what areas you would like help in and if there's any specific support you would like to discuss.



Self Advocacy

Advocating for yourself at a needs assessment is about you getting to discuss what would be helpful to reach your full potential in education. This will mean it is more likely the adjustments recommended will actually make a difference. Self-advocacy also means communicating the extent of your condition and how it affects you.

Whether you're in college or university, you may feel a need to "just get by" without support, or to "be like everyone else". You may feel like you want to refuse support out of fear that getting it has underlying implications about your competence, agency, or job prospects. This is called "internalised ableism", which means projecting ableist ideas onto yourself as a disabled person, such as feeling entitled by asking for support that other people don't get.

However, the reason behind you getting support is so you can access education to the same level as everyone else. The needs assessment is exactly the place to lay out what you struggle with, and why.

It can be hard to think about the ways in which you struggle, especially if you don't consider yourself a disabled person or if you try to "overcome" your disability. However, this is an integral part of advocating for yourself.

It is important to understand how your disability affects you on a good day, an average day, and a bad day. Assessors know that disabled people have strategies to mitigate symptoms, and that not every day is a bad day. They also know that many disabled people try not to dwell on how their disability affects them. Importantly, assessors are aware of the difference between needing an adjustment to function, and finding it helpful. Just because you can go without an adjustment and still function, that doesn't mean that you shouldn't be provided with it.

Ultimately, you know your experience better than anyone else. The report and the assessor may recommend a specific piece of equipment or provision, but you might think something else is better suited. Assessors also understand that some disabilities make it harder to understand and communicate exactly how your disability affects you.

You are allowed to ask as many questions as you want to help the assessor develop a support plan that genuinely works for you.

You are the person who knows best how your disability affects you. Have confidence in your knowledge and do as much preparation as you feel would be helpful for you.

Top tips when preparing for a needs assessment

- **Be prepared** – having your assessment as soon as possible means you're more likely to have things in place at the start of the course, instead of trying to play catch up. The latest you can apply for DSA each year is the 31st of March. So, for example if you start in September 2023, the closing date to apply for DSA would be 31st March 2024.
- Don't downplay your needs – think about what would help you to **thrive** in education instead of just getting by.
- Make sure you bring a list of **your own questions** and something to take notes on so you can look back and remember any important information that was said.
- Ask to **try unfamiliar technology** before having it recommended as an adjustment.

Conclusion

A needs assessment is an integral part of your time as a disabled student. It allows you to have a conversation about the extra support you need, and helps you understand what will work best for you.

- You should do it as early as possible
- Make sure you are prepared
- Think about what you need to do in advance
- Have the courage to speak up for yourself




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