KPMG
cutting through complexity

Evaluation of the Disability Support Program

Executive Summary

Department of Education and Training

May 2015

The evaluation considered the operation of the DSP across three domains

The disability support program consists of three components

Additional Support for Students with Disabilities (ASSD)

Provides funding support to eligible higher education providers to assist with high costs incurred in providing educational support and/or equipment to domestic students with disability with high cost needs.

Performance-based Disability Support Funding

The Performance-based Disability Support Funding component of the DSP is designed to encourage higher education institutions develop and implement local strategies to attract and support students with disability

The Australian Disability Clearinghouse of Education & Training (ADCET)

The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training is a website that provides information and other resources designed to promote inclusive teaching and learning practices for people with disability.

The evaluation considered three domains

Appropriateness – whether the program, given higher education providers ' legal obligations, is addressing the right needs of students with disability and is able to meet changing student requirements.

Effectiveness – including whether the program is meeting its stated objectives in terms of the contribution of the program in facilitating access to supports and equipment by students, and contribution of the program in facilitating the promotion of participation, access and inclusion.

Operational efficiency – including how the program is operating, what it is providing, and the management and administration of the Program from both a Departmental and higher education provider perspective.

The evaluation has been informed by primary and secondary data collection

Primary data collection

Online surveys of students and higher education providers

A total of 1,908 responses were received from students and 648 responses received from staff at higher education providers.

Individual telephone based interviews with students with disability attending university

A total of 40 students were interviewed from higher education providers across Australia

Consultation with a range of stakeholder groups.

KPMG facilitated 19 focus groups with university staff and students as well as organisations with an interest in the DSP

Secondary data collection

Document & policy review

A desktop based review of key documents provided by the Department including:
- Disability Standards for Education 2005
- Higher Education Support Act 2003 Other Grants Guidelines (Education) 2010

International policy review

KPMG also reviewed the international policy context to assess practice in other jurisdictions that might help inform reform options

Administrative and program data

KPMG analysed data relating to the administration of funds to higher education providers for the last two years.

Appropriateness – key findings

The objectives of the DSP align most strongly with higher education providers' legal obligations in relation to promoting participation and the provision of support services.

Eighty-five percent of DSP funding is provided to higher education providers via the ASSD component of the program. The majority of these funds are for the provision of educational support services such as note taking services, invigilation, participation assistants, Auslan services, accessible formatting and transcription services.

The ASSD generally meets about 50-60 percent of the costs claimed by higher education providers in any given year.

Sixty-seven percent of all educational support claims in 2013 were classified as 'high cost' (over $6,000 in value). These supports were often provided to a small proportion of students with significant disability such as visual or hearing impairment and other physical disabilities.

University staff generally perceived the DSP was supporting higher education providers to meet their obligations to students.

The disability profile of students is changing but funding is inadvertently focused on physical and sensory disabilities. The evaluation found that while more students with mental health issues and learning disorders are accessing university disability services, the bulk of funding under the program is still supporting students with hearing and visual impairments, and other physical disabilities.

Changes in educational practices and improvements in technology has meant that universal design principles are incorporated to a greater extent in contemporary higher education settings. Universal design refers to 'design of products and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or of specialised design'.

The introduction of the NDIS further reinforces the focus of the DSP on direct higher education costs such as equipment and education support. The NDIS will support students to physically access and attend higher education providers.

Breakdown of DSP funding, 2013
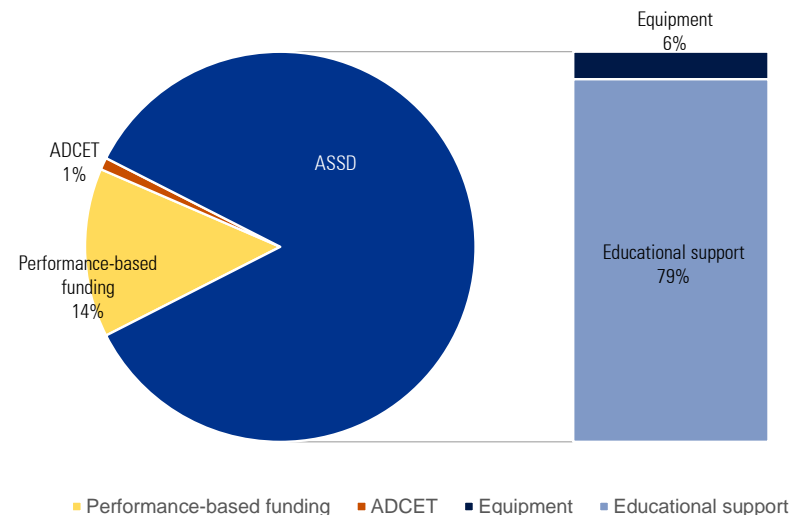
Source: KPMG analysis of unpublished Department of Education and Training data

Effectiveness – key findings

The DSP is supporting higher education providers to meet student needs in areas that are of particular concern to students - completing course assignments and exams and fully participating in lectures and tutorials.
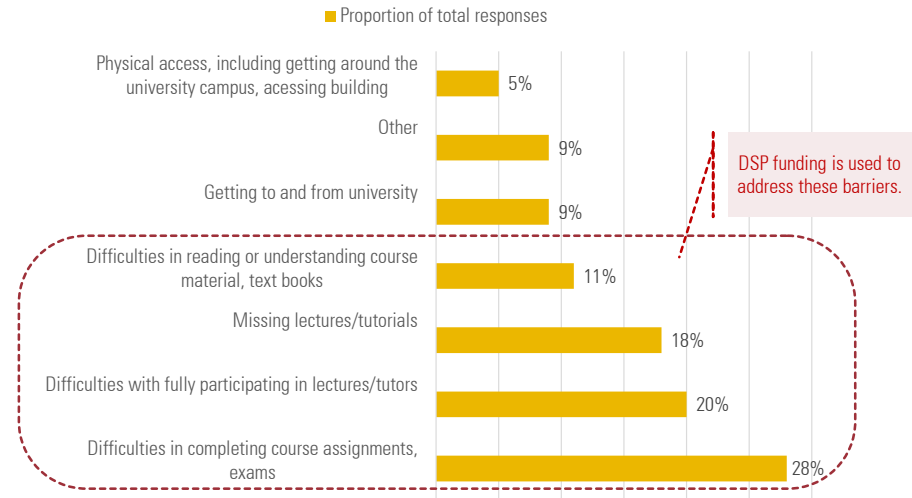
The DSP contributed to facilitating access to supports and equipment for students with a disability. Higher education providers are using ASSD funding to provide a range of equipment and educational supports to remove barriers and facilitate access and participation.

The DSP contributed to minimising or removing barriers for students with a disability to participate in higher education and has contributed to students with a disability being effectively supported in higher education throughout their studies. While students do not have a high level of awareness of the DSP they are generally positive about their experience at university and the support they receive.

DSP funding could be better utilised to improve higher education providers' capacity and resources to attract and retain students with disability.

The DSP contributed to building higher education providers' awareness of and access to contemporary research and practice materials relating to inclusive teaching and learning practices and support for students with a disability. This has primarily occurred via funding for ADCET.

Barriers to education identified by students when considering higher education

■ Proportion of total responses

Barrier	%
Physical access, including getting around the university campus, acessing building	5%
Other	9%
Getting to and from university	9%
Difficulties in reading or understanding course material, text books	11%
Missing lectures/tutorials	18%
Difficulties with fully participating in lectures/tutors	20%
Difficulties in completing course assignments, exams	28%

DSP funding is used to address these barriers.

Source: KPMG analysis of survey data

Operational efficiency – key findings

The DSPs objectives and guidelines are well understood by university staff who are involved in administering the program. Staff generally considered the program objectives and guidelines were clear with 60 percent of staff responding to the online survey either 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' with the statement 'the DSP program guidelines are accessible and easy to understand', while 93 percent felt they understood the programs objectives.

The evaluation found that while administration of the program can be considered as operationally efficient from the perspective of the Department, there are a range of opportunities to streamline the program and reduce the administrative burden on higher education providers.

Thirty one percent of respondents reported that it took their university more than 20 days to prepare the claim. Eighty-three percent of respondents reported that it took two to five people to prepare the claim.

Higher education providers are completing a large number of claims for small amounts of money. A review of 2013 claims for educational support carried out by KPMG found that 57 percent of claims accounts for only 6 percent of the total amount of funds provided.

The majority of claims by value are for a limited number of 'high cost' students. A review of 2012 and 2013 claims carried out by KPMG found that the bulk of claims for educational support was for services provided to 'high cost' students – those whose costs were $6,000 or more for the period 1 January to 31 December.

Educational support, Proportion of funding vs Proportion of claims, 2013

Opportunities for improvement
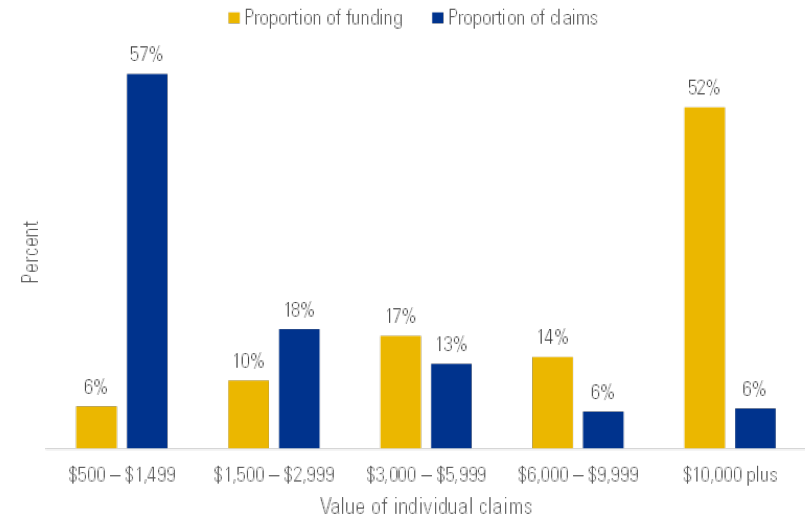
Improving administrative efficiency - Change reporting and/or eligibility thresholds	The evaluation has identified that higher education providers are making large numbers of low value claims especially for equipment provided to students. Changing the reporting and/or eligibility thresholds for the ASSD component can reduce the administrative burden on higher education providers and better target the funding. There are three options for increasing the threshold: 1) Increase the amount at which claims are paid from the current $500 to a higher amount and only pay amounts above the threshold. This would reward higher education providers for providing support to high cost students rather than meeting the basic needs of students. Analysis by KPMG found that raising the claims threshold to $3,000 would reduce the number of claims made by 75 percent while only reducing the amount of funding provided to higher education providers by 16 percent. 2) Set a threshold below which the Department automatically reimburses higher education providers without requiring acquittal. For example all individual claims for equipment support below $500 could be paid without the need to collect cost data at a micro-transactional level. 3) Cease funding for equipment and focus funding on educational support. While only 6 percent of funding was provided for equipment in 2013, acquitting these represents a significant administrative burden on higher education providers with 983 individual claims being made.
Improving administrative efficiency - Roll into HEPPP and 'ring-fence' funding for disability	Through its proposed amendments to the Higher Education Support Act 2003, the current government has signalled a broadening of focus for the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme (HEPPP) to include students with disability. It may be opportune to combine DSP funding into the wider administration of the HEPPP given both are managed by the same branch. While the DSP is dwarfed by the more that $110 million in funding available under the HEPPP, it would be preferable to quarantine DSP funding as there is no requirement compelling higher education providers to use HEPPP funds to support students with disability.
Improving effectiveness - Change reporting requirements for performance-based funding	Improving the reporting requirements for the performance-based funding component of the program could encourage higher education providers to identify specific initiatives they are implementing to improve efforts to attract and support students. Higher education providers could be required to submit a brief summary of their efforts to attract students with disability with a focus on those initiatives that are specifically aimed at students with disability. Higher education providers could also be encouraged to work with secondary schools to ensure smoother transitions for students from school to higher education. This would improve accountability for these funds and encourage higher education providers to improve their efforts to attract and support students.

Opportunities for improvement (cont.)

Improving administrative efficiency and effectiveness - Distribute all funding based on formula	The administrative burden associated with the program can be reduced and certainty around funding for higher education providers improved by distributing all funding under the DSP via a formula that accounts for the proportion of students with disability participating and completing higher education at each university. This also has the potential to improve the effectiveness of the program by rewarding good performance and driving a more outcomes based approach to the provision of support to students with disability. Depending on what indicators are used to develop a formula, there is an opportunity to promote efforts to mainstream services and employ 'universal design' principles by choosing indicators that reflect institution-wide outcomes.
Improving effectiveness - Expanded role for ADCET	The ADCET website provides an authoritative resource for disability support and teaching staff helping to inform responses to individual students and emerging issues. ADCET's role could be expanded to provide more consultative services where higher education providers can seek targeted advice to address specific issues or implement training programs to improve awareness and capability for their staff. It could also act as a centre for excellence promoting the sharing of best practice and undertaking research to improve outcomes for students.
Improving appropriateness - Change ratio of funding split between ASSD and performance based funding	As it has been more than 10 years since the DSP was first introduced it may be timely to consider the altering the proportion of funds provided between the ASSD and the performance based component. Providing more funding for the performance based component of the program has the potential to encourage higher education providers to focus on broader efforts to attract and support students rather than individual students. This would recognise institutional effort to provide high quality support in a cost effective manner by building institutional capacity to support students in an inclusive manner. It could also encourage higher education providers to better integrate principles of inclusive practice within curriculum design and delivery. A proportion of the funds could be quarantined to meet the needs of high cost students to ensure higher education providers are able to meet their needs with some degree of certainty around the level of funding they would receive for meeting these needs.
Improving appropriateness – Provide funding for staff training	Changing the programme guidelines to make funding available for staff training activities would improve the DSP ability to respond to changes in student needs. With the increasing numbers of students presenting with mental health and learning disorders, staff and students consulted during the evaluation noted that there were often lower levels of awareness about the impacts these disability had on students when compared with physical and sensory disabilities. Providing targeted funding to support awareness raising activities and training would help improve this situation.