



University of the  
Highlands and Islands  
Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd  
agus nan Eilean

# DSA Service Progress Report

2016/17 and 2017/18

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## Foreword

The University of the Highlands and Islands is committed to equality of opportunity and non-discrimination in all aspects of our learning and teaching provision and support for students. We take steps to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation;
- advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups; and
- foster good relations between people from different groups, tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

Being locally based, regional in structure and having national and international reach, we want to act as a force for economic, social and cultural change as well as meeting the needs of individual learners. We value and respect the differences there are between people and promote opportunity for all. In particular, we want our students to have the opportunity to study, to take up employment and to be involved in their community without discrimination and be treated with dignity and respect in all their dealings with the University. This requires support to overcome existing educational barriers and geographical isolation, and to provide opportunities that reflect the diversity of our student body.

The University's validation to conduct needs assessments with UHI students for the purposes of claiming Disabled Students' Allowance is an important part of us being able to deliver these aspirations and is a capability and responsibility that we take very seriously. This report demonstrates the ways in which we have done this in the last two years and we look forward to a continuance of this validation to allow us to support our students effectively in our distributed and wide-reaching institution.

Dr Iain Morrison  
Dean of Students

## **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is validated as an institution to conduct needs assessments with our own students for the purposes of claiming Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) from Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). This means that any UHI student can engage with the DSA needs assessment process from their campus or learning centre without necessarily travelling to an Access Centre elsewhere in Scotland.
- 1.2 As in previous years, most students assessed by the University in 2016/17 and 2017/18 were based at locations with an assessor 'on site'. However, communications technologies have been used to assess remote learners and overcome the barrier of geographical distance where appropriate. These technologies have also provided an assessment option where a student has particular difficulties travelling for face-to-face assessment, due their disclosed additional support needs.
- 1.3 In common with other validated DSA assessment centres, the University is accountable to the Scottish Government and, as such, must report to the Disabled Students' Advisory Group to maintain validation. Overall, the University is required to demonstrate an ability to provide high quality and timely needs assessments and recommend support that enables students to achieve their learning potential.
- 1.4 Whilst the Scottish Government's DSA revalidation process is currently under review, the University has clear evidence of continuous improvement in its DSA processes. The present report highlights key activities of the University DSA Service over the last two complete academic years, from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018.

## **2.0 Needs assessors**

- 2.1 The Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA)'s Professional Development Award in Advancing Equality and Diversity through inclusiveness has superseded SQA's legacy PDA as the standard qualification for new University DSA assessors. The fact that the new qualification aligns with the legacy PDA will enable existing staff build on elements of the legacy qualification already completed.
- 2.2 Thirteen disability practitioners located throughout the University partnership are qualified as DSA assessors. Twelve of these practitioners actively undertake DSA assessments, including the University's Disability Support Coordinator who can assess a limited number of students per year, peripatetically as required. In addition, one member of staff is currently engaged as a trainee needs assessor and will join the University's team of assessors once qualified. Several other practitioners have expressed an interest in undertaking, or continuing with, the PDA qualification. One colleague has experience from previous employment at an external DSA assessment centre.
- 2.3 One of the University's previous DSA assessors no longer has a student-facing role at her Academic Partner, whilst two others have since left the employment of their respective Academic Partners. The impact of the latter has been offset as these Academic Partners both now have a recently-qualified needs assessor in post.

- 2.4 The University continues to provide regular opportunities for trainee and qualified needs assessors to upgrade their skills. In July 2017, for instance, the Executive Office (EO) student support team facilitated an external demonstration of new technologies to support visual impairment. Similarly, the University's disability practitioners' development day in March 2018 included a session outlining current ways to optimise the accessibility of student-facing materials and documents.
- 2.5 Responses to an evaluation circulated to attendees after the development day in March 2018 indicated that its most positive aspect was that it provided a further opportunity to meet others from across the partnership and discuss common issues.
- "The Creating Accessible Materials session was very useful - practical and relevant advice on how to support students. As always, chatting to other practitioners about our roles was useful and interesting."
- 2.6 It is clear that disability practitioner development days should continue. Consideration will be given to proposed themes for future development days, and practitioner feedback will be used to develop sessions.
- 2.7 The University's Disability Practitioners' Group (DPG) remains a key forum to harmonise and standardise DSA for processes for the University partnership. In January 2017, for example, the EO student support team facilitated a practitioner-led review of best practice approaches to conducting technologically-mediated DSA assessments. This resulted in pan-UHI guidance being produced by and for staff involved in the University's internal DSA process.
- 2.8 In addition to annual practitioner development days and scheduled meetings of DPG, there are more informal opportunities for networking. Thus, needs assessors frequently share resources and seek advice from colleagues (e.g. via email) outside of scheduled meetings and consult with external agencies as required.
- 2.9 The University has positive relationships with external organisations, including Concept Northern and Sight and Sound Technology Limited. In November 2017, for instance, the University hosted a regional CPD certified disability awareness day run by Concept Northern for Skills Development Scotland.
- 2.10 Moreover, individual practitioners have an on-going commitment to continuing professional development. In April 2017, for example, one needs assessor took a trip under the Erasmus Programme to Brno in the Czech Republic to explore the provision in place for disabled students at Masaryk University. A second assessor is engaged in training to become certified to train students in the use of the Brain in Hand system<sup>1</sup>, and a third achieved qualification as an Associate Member of the British Dyslexia Association in 2018 and is therefore qualified to diagnose Specific Learning Difficulties.

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<sup>1</sup> Brain in Hand technology is a personalised support system designed to help students progress towards independence.

- 2.11 The University has been represented at sector conferences during the last two academic sessions and the online delivery of webinars continues to benefit the partnership. This is particularly true for colleagues who cannot ordinarily access such training opportunities due to geographical distance.

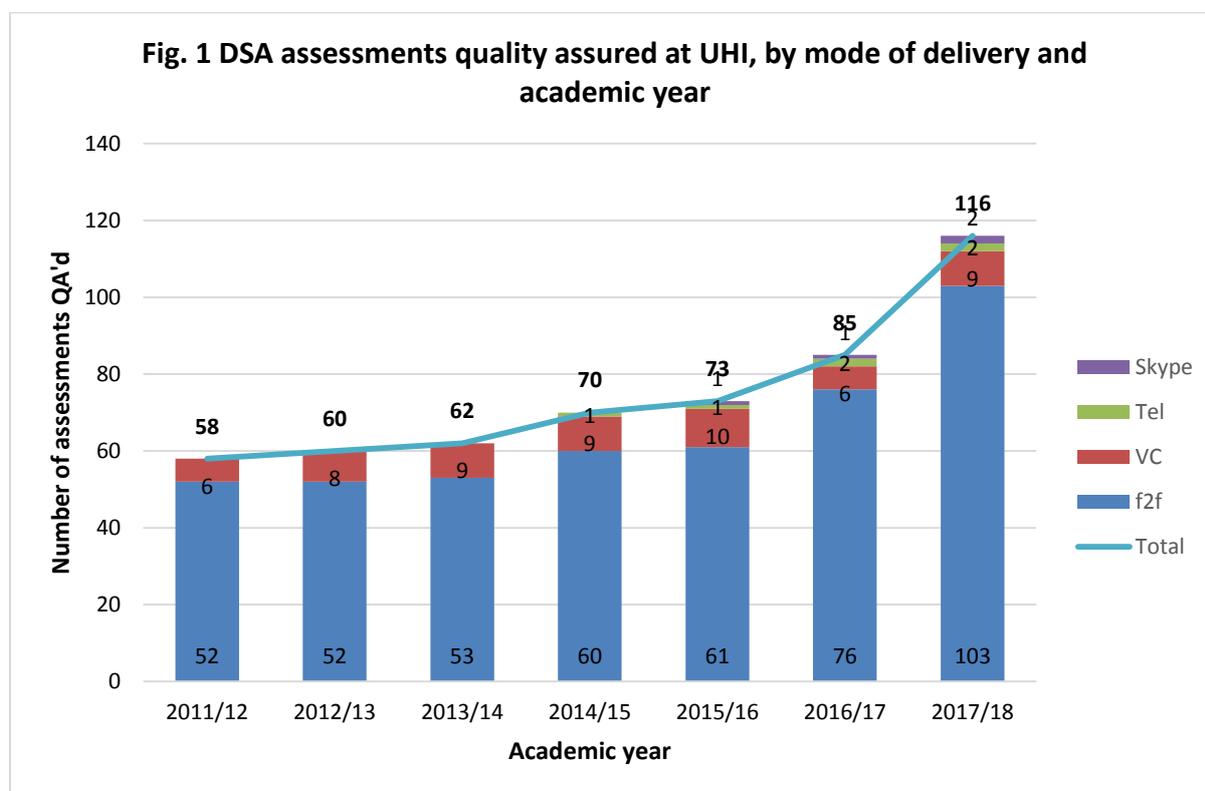
### **3.0 Quality assurance**

- 3.1 Agreed processes are in place to ensure that each needs assessment conducted internally satisfies University and Scottish Government quality standards. The same quality criteria apply to each needs assessment regardless of how it is conducted.
- 3.2 Once a student's needs assessment report has been finalised, the assessor provides an internal quality form to the University DSA Service as confirmation that the necessary documentation is in place. The DSA Service processes quality forms within two working days of receipt from the needs assessor, who then sends the student's application to SAAS for consideration.
- 3.3 The quality form has been reviewed regularly over the last two years. Recent updates include the addition of a mandatory section for the assessor to complete having undertaken assessed a UHI Nursing student for DSA purposes. This update provides confirmation that the assessor has engaged with staff in the University's Department of Nursing during the needs assessment process, which consequently ensures that the student's DSA assessment is contextualised to the specific requirements of the Nursing programme.
- 3.4 The EO student support team now uses a specific data report to monitor and evaluate the output of the University DSA Service on an ongoing basis. Nevertheless, individual quality forms capture valuable quantitative qualitative data in respect of individual assessments and are still used for quality assurance purposes. These forms will be retained by the University for as long as is necessary to satisfy internal and external reporting requirements.
- 3.5 The University DSA Service previously had no involvement in the quality assurance of needs assessments completed externally for our students. The EO student support team now requires quality forms to be submitted for assessments completed by freelance assessors for UHI students, given that these assessments will not have been quality assured through other channels. This process will also provide a more accurate indication of the number of University students assessed for DSA in a given year<sup>2</sup>.
- 3.6 The University quality assured 201 needs assessments internally in 2016/17 and 2017/18:
- 179 face-to-face assessments
  - 15 assessments conducted by Video Conference
  - 4 assessments conducted by telephone
  - 3 assessments conducted by Skype

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<sup>2</sup> In 2017/18 for example, 38 students registered at one Home Academic Partner had their needs assessed externally.

3.7 The number of needs assessments quality assured internally by the University has increased exponentially since the University first gained accreditation in 2011. Figure 1 illustrates this trend over the last five complete academic years.



3.8 Table 1 indicates that students at nine Home Academic Partners were assessed for DSA purposes by the University in 2016/17, with students at two additional locations being assessed in the following year.

**Table 1: Needs assessments quality assured by the University in 2016/2017 and 2017/18, by student's location**

Student's location (Home Academic Partner)	Needs assessments	
	2016/17	2017/18
Argyll College UHI	3	5
Highland Theological College UHI	2	1
Inverness College UHI	14	16
Lews Castle College UHI	3	2
Moray College UHI	19	12
North Highland College UHI	4	11
Orkney College UHI	3	5
Perth College UHI	33	57
West Highland College UHI	4	1
Shetland College UHI	0	2
Executive Office	0	4
	<b>85</b>	<b>116</b>

3.9 Table 2 indicates that the University has utilised its full complement of active DSA assessors over the last two academic years.

<b>Table 2: Needs assessments quality assured by the University in 2016/2017 and 2017/18, by assessor's location</b>		
<b>Assessor's location (Academic Partner)</b>	<i>Needs assessments</i>	
	<b>2016/17</b>	<b>2017/18</b>
Inverness College UHI	13	18
Moray College UHI	23	17
North Highland College UHI	4	11
Orkney College UHI	4	6
Perth College UHI	35	59
Shetland College UHI	1	3
West Highland College UHI	5	1
Executive Office	0	1
	<b>85</b>	<b>116</b>

## 4.0 Key developments

### Nursing transition

- 4.1 In September 2016, the University gained institutional and programme approval from the Nursing and Midwifery Council to take over the pre-registration nurse education programme for BSc mental health nursing and BSc adult nursing from the University of Stirling in Inverness and Stornoway from academic session 2017/18 onwards. Thus, UHI's Disability Support Coordinator collaborates with staff involved in the Nursing transition to develop, monitor and support relevant disability processes.
- 4.2 The DSA processes in place for UHI Nursing students have worked well to date. One member of staff who was involved in the initial stages of a DSA assessment for a UHI Nursing student in 2017 commented that:
- "I found it invaluable to be directly involved in the DSA assessment process. It not only allowed me to see the assessment process in action, it enabled me to contribute a nursing perspective, and feel part of the UHI disability practitioner network."
- 4.3 The disability processes associated with the Nursing transition will be reviewed annually.

### Planning for the General Data Protection Regulation

- 4.4 The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into effect in May 2018. The EO student support team reviewed our internal DSA processes in this context and found the advice and support from the University's Data Protection and Records Management Officers invaluable in ensuring compliance with GDPR requirements. We will continue to work together to review and refine University disability processes on an ongoing basis in the context of GDPR.
- 4.5 Further information on the University's handling of student data in respect of disclosed disabilities is available at [www.uhi.ac.uk/dm-privacy](http://www.uhi.ac.uk/dm-privacy). See also SAAS' privacy statement at <http://www.saas.gov.uk/privacy.htm>.

- 4.6 In tandem with the introduction of GDPR, the EO student support team has started the process of migrating internal and staff-facing documentation to the University's SharePoint site. This is likely to have significant benefits in terms of version control and in optimising practitioner access to relevant resources.

#### **External Representation**

- 4.7 The University's Disability Support Coordinator continues to contribute to the Scottish Heads Disability Services forum. This enhances the wider profile of the University whilst helping to ensure alignment between our policy and practice and that in place at other Scottish institutions, as appropriate. Membership of the forum also enables the University to keep abreast of relevant external developments relating to DSA provision and the HE sector more widely, and to offer feedback and/or shape related discussions as appropriate.
- 4.8 The University's Learning Information Services Department has been involved in external discussions to develop a common assistive technology procurement framework for the Scottish FE and HE sectors. UHI representation in these discussions ensures that the University is aware of sector development and procurement plans and will be helpful as work continues to consolidate the offering of assistive technologies within the UHI partnership.

#### **Disability Practitioners Group**

- 4.9 DPG continues to be recognised as an effective forum for discussion, networking and sharing of best practice between partnership staff, and was highlighted as such during an SQA systems verification visit to the University in 2017 and more recently by colleagues involved in the UHI Change Programme. Input from DPG has been key to the development of updated internal DSA procedures and guidance for staff who compile student Personal Learning Support Plans (PLSPs). The group now includes representation from the UHI Nursing Department, as well as student members whose input will ensure that student feedback continues to shape the development of the University DSA Service.
- 4.10 DPG works horizontally across the partnership and is tertiary in focus, in that it covers both FE and HE. Indeed, group members have had a key role in developing a UHI Tertiary Learner Support Policy, under the auspices of the University's Single Policy Environment project. DPG will also have a formal role in reviewing the procedures underpinning the policy to ensure alignment with current practice, including that relating to our internal DSA processes as relevant.

#### **PLSP Quality Assurance Group**

- 4.11 The University has established a PLSP Quality Assurance Group (PQAG), whose remit is to examine the process applied across a self-selected and anonymised sample of student PLSPs, and to make recommendations to promote consistency of practice where appropriate. PQAG was piloted in 2017/18 and will report to DPG, as well as the University's Student Support Group and Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. The group's remit has been endorsed by these committees and groups as it demonstrates a clear link between

existing disability and quality processes, and will support Academic Partners to further promote equity of the student experience.

- 4.12 The role of PQAG is distinct from our DSA quality assurance process. Nevertheless. The PQAG process will provide an opportunity to explore and reflect upon how institutional adjustments included in a student's approved PLSP interact with support funded for the student under DSA. This, in turn, will provide a holistic and more complete understanding of the disabled student experience.

### **Additional Support Online**

- 4.13 The use of the University's web-based Additional Support Online system has become embedded across the partnership over the last two years. The fact that the system is in use at most campuses is significant because it contributes directly to equity of the student experience and helps the University to evaluate and evidence the value and impact of student support provision, whilst also allowing data reports to be generated to satisfy internal and external reporting requirements.
- 4.14 The EO student support team recommends the use of Additional Support Online wherever possible and can provide initial staff training where required. Furthermore, the EO student support team will facilitate a review of the system in the coming months to evaluate its usage and consider how its functionality might potentially be refined in to support the needs of other student groups.
- 4.15 The online system continues to be particularly helpful in establishing common disability support procedures for the University partnership, notwithstanding local variations in Academic Partner business processes. As before, for example, DSA assessors can use the system for a number of tasks, including to schedule appointments with a student at each stage of the needs assessment process and complete the University's internal DSA quality form.
- 4.16 A key benefit of the Additional Support Online system is that it continues to promote further transparency in the provision of student support and engages the student as an equal partner in this process.

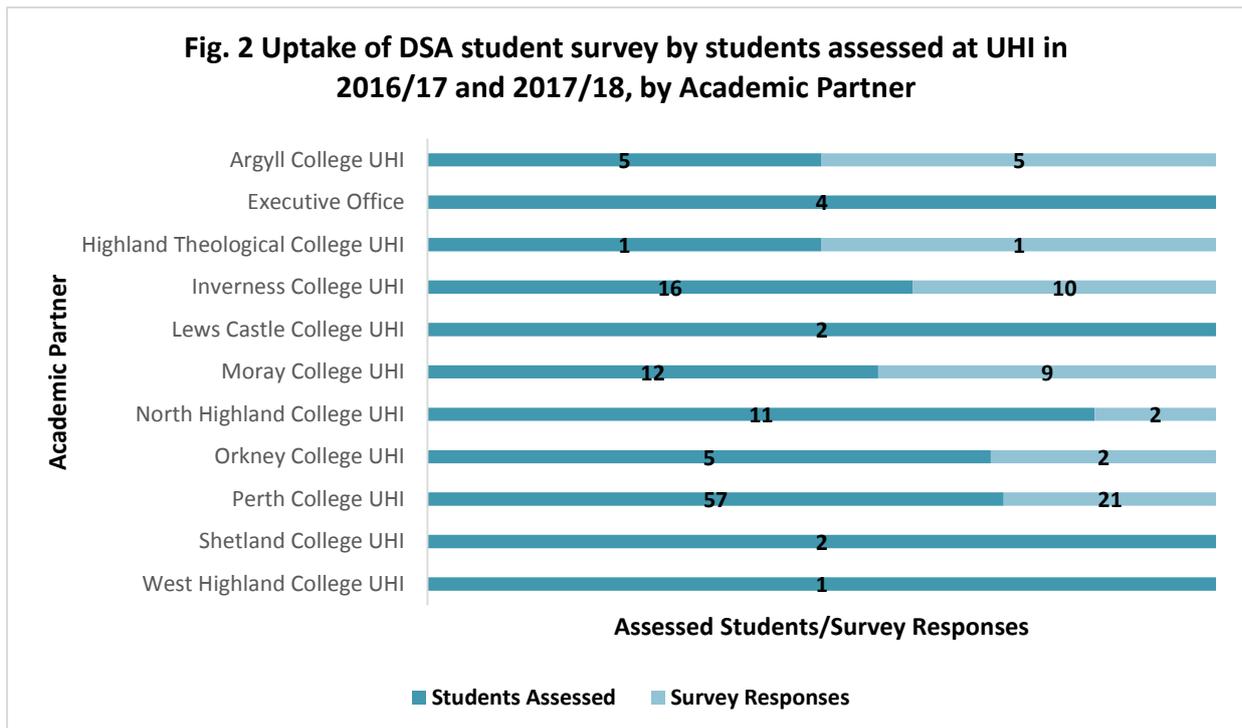
## **5.0 A student-centred service**

- 5.1 The learning experiences of the individual student continue to be at the heart of the needs assessment process, and students have several opportunities to shape the development of University DSA processes. Students routinely interact with Home Academic Partner Student Services and have opportunities to raise relevant issues whilst participating in periodic reviews of support. Students can also provide feedback directly to their assessor and share their experiences of University DSA processes via the University's Red Button<sup>3</sup>. The University's complaints process is available as an option of last resort.

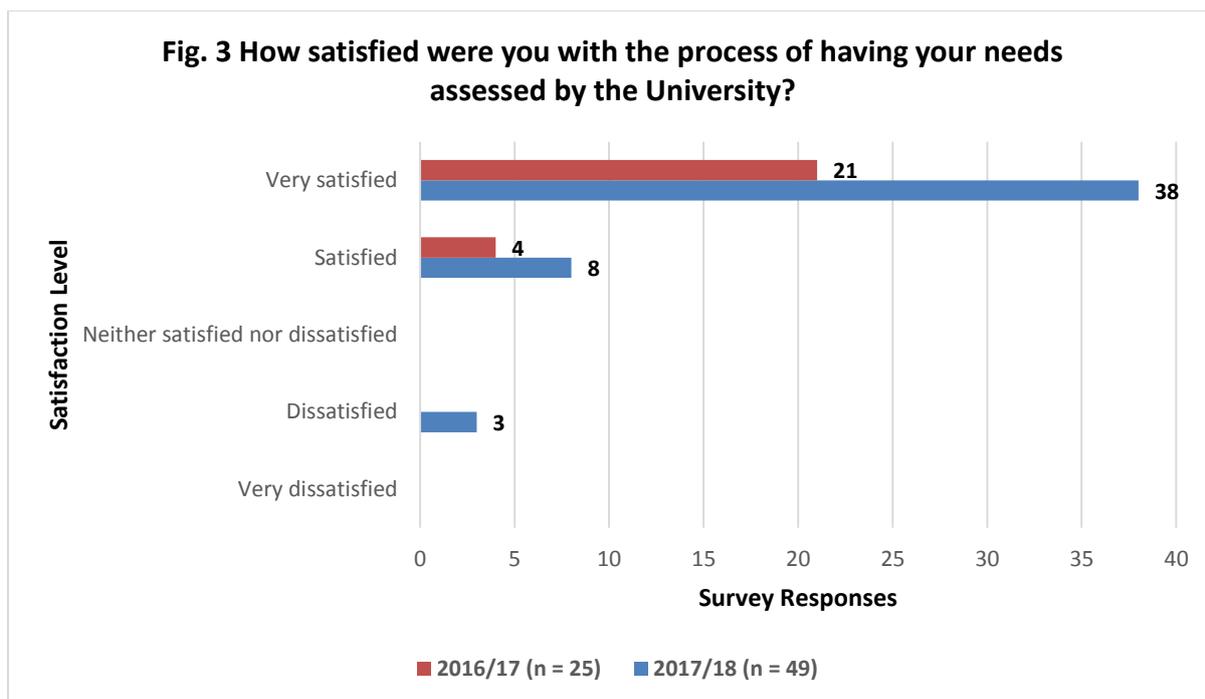
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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/students/support/red-button>

- 5.2 The University offers a short questionnaire survey to students assessed internally for DSA purposes. It should be noted that the survey could only be offered to students for a limited time in 2016/17, due to the closure of the University SurveyMonkey account. Thus, there were 26 complete survey responses in total for 2016/17. The questionnaire was reinstated using the University’s institutional licence for JISC Online Surveys in August 2017.
- 5.3 The questionnaire continues to provide useful quantitative and qualitative data which can be used to evaluate and inform improvements to the University DSA Service. Figure 2 shows the uptake of the survey by internally-assessed students in 2017/18.



- 5.4 In 2017/18, 50 students completed our DSA student evaluation. The overall response rate therefore increased from 30% in 2016/17 to 43% in 2017/18. Consideration will be given to how this compares to response rates to equivalent student surveys offered at other Scottish Universities, and to how our response rate might be improved in future years.
- 5.5 Figure 3 shows that 100% of survey respondents were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the process of having their needs assessed by the University in 2016/17. 46 respondents (94%) reported this in the following year.



- “The process was easy and simple to complete.” (2016/17 recipient of DSA).
- “Very easy process. Staff are very helpful ...” (2017/18 recipient of DSA).

5.6 The availability of DSA support can have a transformative impact on the student experience as reflected in feedback from students assessed by the University over the last two years.

- “I felt that my assessor listened and understood my needs and made realistic suggestions for support which can only enhance my learning experience.” (2016/17 recipient of DSA).
- “I feel very understood and supported by the University, and ... a lot less anxious” (2017/18 recipient of DSA).

5.7 47 respondents (94%) were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the information available from the University regarding DSA in 2017/18. This is a marked improvement on the equivalent percentage (75%) highlighted in our previous Annual Report and compares favourably with the 92% satisfaction rate for 2016/17. Despite this, some respondents commented that they would have benefitted from better communication during the needs assessment process and more information on the steps involved in ordering the equipment awarded to them under DSA. The University has now liaised with two recommended DSA suppliers, who have each produced a bilingual leaflet (in English and Gaelic) aimed specifically at UHI DSA students. It would also be useful for the EO student support team to consider producing a statement of minimum standards, outlining what students can expect in their dealings with external DSA suppliers.

5.8 Whilst a very clear majority of survey respondents in 2016/17 and 2017/18 were satisfied with the University needs assessment process, several students felt that waiting times could have been improved. The University acknowledges that the last two years have been extremely busy for the partnership as a whole, and indeed for the sector more widely.

- 5.9 The University's process for managing and prioritising internal DSA referrals has worked well. Moreover, the University DSA Service has recently taken further steps to ensure that, wherever possible, appropriate evidence of need is in place for students prior to them being referred for assessment<sup>4</sup>. This in turn should help expedite the assessment and referral process for these students.
- 5.10 It is likely that student numbers will continue to grow. Thus, the EO student support team feels it would be helpful to review the content of our DSA student webpage and guidance to help manage student expectations at busier times of year (e.g. at the beginning of Semester 1 and at other known pressure points, when there is typically an upsurge in DSA referrals and in students requiring support).
- 5.11 The University has clear procedures in place to monitor the turnaround of internal DSA assessments and can therefore work with assessors to avoid undue delays in the process. The DSA Service also recognises that turnaround times can be influenced by a range of internal and external factors. Furthermore, the University will continue to utilise internal assessment expertise wherever possible but is comfortable to refer students to an outside assessment centre or freelance assessor by exception (e.g. where internal capacity to assess is limited).
- 5.12 SAAS business processes are entirely separate from internal University procedures. The University nevertheless maintains a positive relationship with SAAS and can work with the DSA team as necessary to help resolve individual issues.
- 5.13 Overall, it is encouraging that student feedback in respect of University DSA processes has been largely positive in 2016/17 and 2017/18. The University looks forward to building on progress to date to further develop its DSA processes.

## **6.0 How feedback is acted upon**

- 6.1 The University welcomes all feedback and has implemented several suggestions for improvement in the last two years.

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<sup>4</sup> The University DSA Service only has responsibility for making referrals where a student does not have access to a DSA assessor at their Home Academic Partner.

**Table 3: Some examples of how feedback has been acted upon in 2016/17 and 2017/18**

You said	We did
“Can research students apply for DSA?” (The University’s Graduate School Manager)	Guidance is currently being produced for the University’s Graduate School and DSA Assessors to clarify the DSA process for postgraduate research students. This has included developing a slightly different process for students funded by Research Councils UK, who are not eligible to apply for DSA from SAAS.
“What more can the University do to ensure that students have appropriate evidence of need in place before being referred for DSA assessment?” (University DSA Assessor)	The University’s internal DSA procedures have been updated to clarify that staff must supply appropriate evidence of need when making a referral. These procedures now also reference the role of the EO Disability Support Coordinator in reviewing evidence supplied, to ensure its suitability for DSA purposes.
“Which equipment suppliers do UHI DSA assessors recommend most often?” (External supplier)	The EO student support team offered a survey to University DSA assessors to identify commonly used suppliers. The University’s LIS team is also involved in external discussions to inform the development of a common procurement framework for the Scottish FE and HE sectors.

## 7.0 Conclusion

- 7.1 The last two years have been very successful for the University DSA Service, as exemplified in particular by positive feedback from assessed students throughout. Indeed, it is encouraging that the output of the DSA Service has continued to increase without a corresponding growth in overall assessment capacity. Our institutional accreditation has again been particularly significant for students at locations without a needs assessor ‘on-site’, who may well otherwise face considerable challenges in engaging with face-to-face needs assessment.
- 7.2 The University will continue to utilise internal assessment expertise wherever possible but will refer students to an outside assessor where necessary and appropriate. Furthermore, the EO student support team would encourage practitioners to undertake the SQA needs assessment qualification as this has considerable relevance beyond the context of DSA and would enable to the University to further strengthen its DSA assessment capacity in the longer term. Indeed, the fact that one member of staff is engaged a trainee will soon return the University’s assessment capacity to 2015/16 levels.
- 7.3 Institutional DSA accreditation remains of strategic importance for the University, as shown by developments such as the University’s Disability Coordinator’s involvement in relevant aspects of the Nursing transition. DSA accreditation demonstrates partnership working at its best, and its enduring success lies in its compatibility with existing student support business processes.
- 7.4 The increased uptake and ongoing development of the University’s Additional Support Online system has helped to harmonise DSA processes for the University partnership, as has

the development of updated staff guidance and procedures. The EO student support team's use of SharePoint going forward will also be significant in this regard.

- 7.6 The mainstream use of our online DSA quality in the last two years has been especially helpful in generating data to support DSA quality assurance, and in evaluating the value and impact of University DSA processes. The outcomes and recommendations of the PQAG process will also be helpful here and in providing further insight into the disabled student experience.
- 7.7 The effectiveness of DPG continues to be recognised both within the University and externally. Opportunities for formal and informal practitioner networking have again increased, and the group has noticeably become more practitioner-led, which has brought additional benefits for the wider student support community. The practitioner-led nature of the group will be particularly useful in reviewing DSA processes on an ongoing basis. It is also significant that DPG now has a more of a strategic focus, where relevant, as shown by its role in developing the University's Tertiary Learner Support Policy to date.
- 7.8 The University has maintained strong relationships with external organisations in the last two years. Our continued membership of the Scottish Heads of Disability Services forum and involvement in sectoral discussions of assistive technology procurement has also provided an opportunity for the University to collaborate with other Universities and shape relevant Scottish policy and practice.
- 7.9 The University wishes to thank everyone involved with carrying out DSA needs assessments with University students in 2016/17 and 2017/18, whose commitment is crucial to our ongoing success. In addition, the University is very grateful for the continued support of SAAS and the Scottish Government and looks forward to building on our achievements to date for the benefit of our students, student support practitioners and the University more widely.