Mainstreaming Equality in the University of the Highlands and Islands

Team: **Student Services – Executive Office**

Protected characteristic: **Disability**

Advancing equality of opportunity/Fostering good relations

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| **Key area/example of where progress has been made with regard to equality and diversity:**

Institutional Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) accreditation |
| **Action we have taken to progress this key area:**

The University is validated, as an institution, to conduct needs assessments with students for the purposes of claiming Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) from Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). This has enabled the University to provide equitable access to the DSA assessment process for many students who would otherwise encounter difficulties engaging with face-to-face assessment.

The institutional nature of the University's DSA accreditation has enabled common procedures to be collectively developed and implemented for the University partnership. Ongoing improvements continue to be made in order to maintain and develop the University's internal DSA processes.

As in previous years, most students assessed by the University in 2015/16 were based at locations with a DSA assessor on campus. However, communications technologies can be used to assess remote learners and overcome the barrier of geographical distance if 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 needs. |
| **Measures we are using to monitor our progress:**

The University publishes an Annual report of its DSA Service (https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/students/support/disability-matters/dsa) and submits revalidation updates to the Scottish Government in order to provide evidence of the institution's ability to satisfy each of the Scottish Government's quality indicators in respect of DSA needs assessment. This is the key measure of the University's ongoing institutional accreditation.

After each internally validated needs assessment has been conducted, the assessor submits an internal online quality form to the University's DSA Service to confirm that the relevant documentation is in place. Each needs assessment is quality assured by the University DSA Service to ensure University and Scottish Government quality standards have been satisfied. |

The University offers a questionnaire survey to all students assessed by the University. The questionnaire is offered to students at the same time as the quality form is returned to the needs assessor. Students can also share their experiences of the needs assessment process via the University's Red Button Service (http://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/students/support/red-button).

- "I found the process uncomplicated ... and the assessor was extremely helpful ... This gave me a really good impression of UHI support services overall." (2015/16 recipient of DSA)

Staff feedback is mainly gathered through meetings of the University's Disability Practitioners Group and periodic review of internal DSA processes.

Evidence of progress that has been made:

The uptake of the University's DSA Service as increased year-on-year for the last five complete academic sessions:

Fig. 1 DSA assessments quality assured at UHI, by academic year and principal mode of delivery
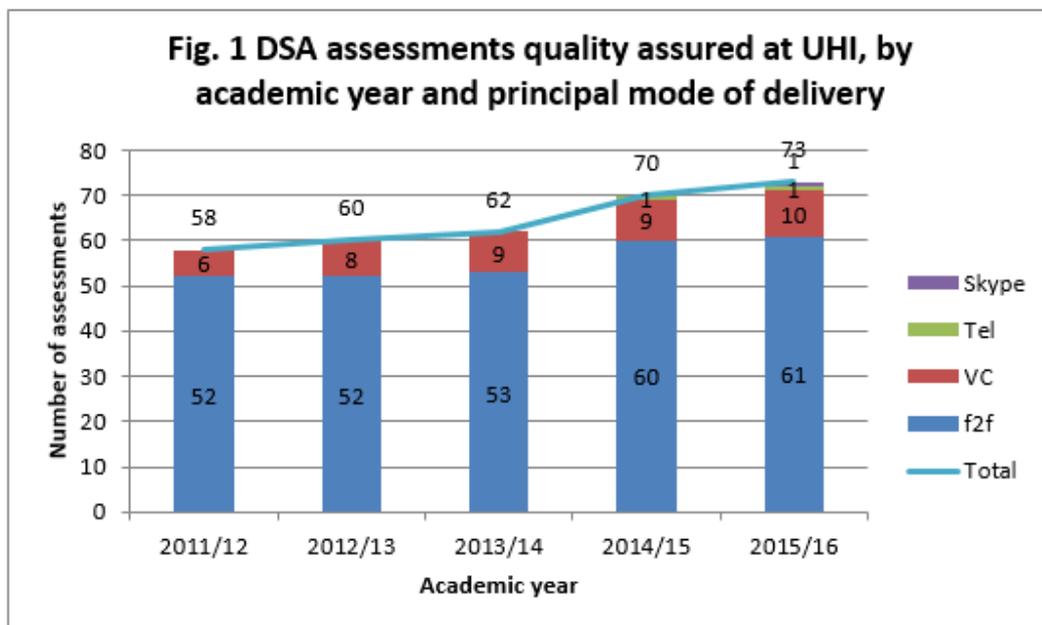
The University's Disability Support Coordinator participated in the scrutiny process associated with the University's application for Research Degree Awarding Powers. More recently, the University's Disability Coordinator contributed to the University's Enhancement-Led Institutional Review. The fact that the University DSA Service was represented at both of these strategically significant external reviews provided an opportunity to highlight the steps taken to strengthen the University's disability support provision in recent years, and the progress made in this regard. Other recent developments include:

- An increase in the number of qualified and trainee DSA assessors working in the University partnership, with others interested in undertaking the relevant qualification.

- A review of the University's internal DSA referral processes. Documentation has been introduced to assist the University DSA Service in prioritising referrals. This review was also significant because it provided a methodology which has since improved the identification and sharing of best practice amongst University DSA assessors, and enabled staff feedback to be gathered more systematically.
- The further development of the University's Additional Support Online System has assisted the University in collecting data to inform ongoing enhancement of the DSA Service.
- An improved dialogue with the University's Learning Information Services department and the introduction of an assistive technology student web page (https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/students/support/disability-matters/assistive-technology/assistive-technology). This online resource can be used by assessors when introducing technologies to students.
- Improvements in external representation. The University maintains good relationships with external organisations and is now represented on the Scottish Heads of Disability Services forum.
- A disability support development day took place in 2016, which included a demonstration of current assistive technologies and an overview of SAAS' DSA evidence requirements.

Challenges that have been faced in progressing this key area:

Practitioners have reported challenges in obtaining evidence of need from students for the purposes of claiming DSA, particularly where a student has been referred to the University DSA Service for assessment. The University's DSA staff guidance has therefore been updated to highlight the importance of obtaining the necessary documentation before a referral is made.

Further action we intend to take:

The University's Executive Office student support team intends to organise a disability practitioners' development day in 201/17. This will provide a further opportunity for networking amongst partnership staff involved in the DSA process and for practitioners to update their knowledge and skills, thus reflecting an ongoing commitment to continuing professional development.

The University's Disability Support Coordinator will facilitate a review of the University's approach to undertaking DSA Assessments by VC, with a view to identifying and sharing best practice amongst disability practitioners. Other aspects of University DSA processes will also be reviewed periodically as required, and consideration will be given to how the response rate to the student survey offered to assessed students might be improved in future years.