Supporting students with disabilities

Key issues arising from a changing funding environment

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Circleresearch
The **B2B** experts

1.   Introduction

There has been much discussion and debate about the changes to the funding arrangements for disabled students - especially the withdrawal of DSA funding for Bands 1 and 2 support workers and the introduction of the "two quotes" scheme.

Randstad cares passionately about providing the very best form of support and wants to ensure that students with disabilities make the very most of the university experience and aren't disadvantaged in any way.

Aside from supporting 150 + universities and colleges and over 28,000 students per year, Randstad has also played a very active part in the debate about the new funding models introduced by BIS; it's lobbied against the changes; it's organized various roundtables and forums to discuss the changes and worked to support professional organisations such as NADP, AMOSSHE and the Association of NMH Providers.

In addition to these activities, Randstad has actively canvassed the views and opinions of those who will be affected by the changes in funding- namely the disability teams at universities. We interviewed 20 heads of disability support to generate the depth of insight and information that was required for the research. Half of the interviewees were from universities whom Randstad currently partner with and the other half were from universities whom Randstad do not currently work with.

The research was undertaken in February and March 2016 to answer three key questions:

- How are these changes viewed?

- How are universities responding to these changes?

- How can Randstad continue to support universities in this changing environment?

We are delighted to share the following pre-publication report, which is available only to those who kindly supported the research programme by taking part in an interview. In line with our on-going collaboration with the leading industry organisations, we are also planning to share these results with a wider audience at the AMOSSHE conference and NADP later this year.

On behalf of Randstad, our thanks are extended to all who contributed to the project and we hope that this report is of interest.

2.   Setting the scene

The changes to DSA funding are happening at a time when universities already have a number of competing priorities they need to tackle; attracting and retaining students, trying to maximize the 'student experience' at a time of growing competition, addressing the teaching excellence framework and taking steps to manage the inclusiveness agenda.

Inclusiveness is seen as a vitally important long-term initiative that is welcomed by the university disability teams, particularly as supporting students with disabilities has become ever more challenging:

- There has been a significant increase in the number of disabled students - partly because of greater disclosure and partly because of the growing impact of the Equality Act
- There has been a noticeable rise in the complexity of cases, including mental health conditions, mobility impairment and multiple conditions

Heads of disability also highlight the contradictions and challenges they face in trying to achieve this inclusiveness:

- It could actually penalize students with disabilities, such as those with dyslexia
- Reducing DSA funding from those who need it most is seen as being inconsistent with inclusive practices

Aside from the changes to DSA funding and challenges of inclusiveness, heads of disability identify a number of other issues that they face:
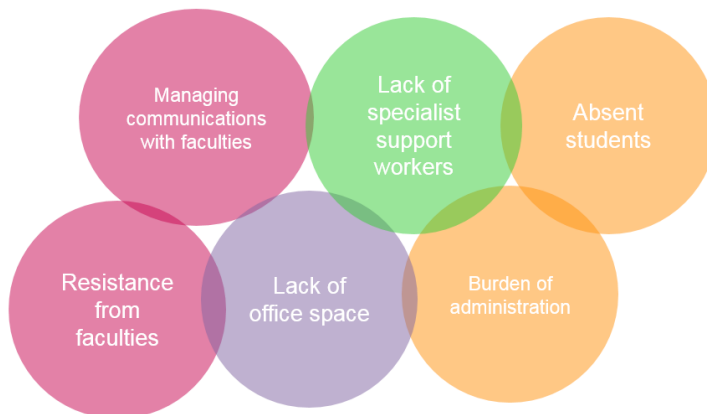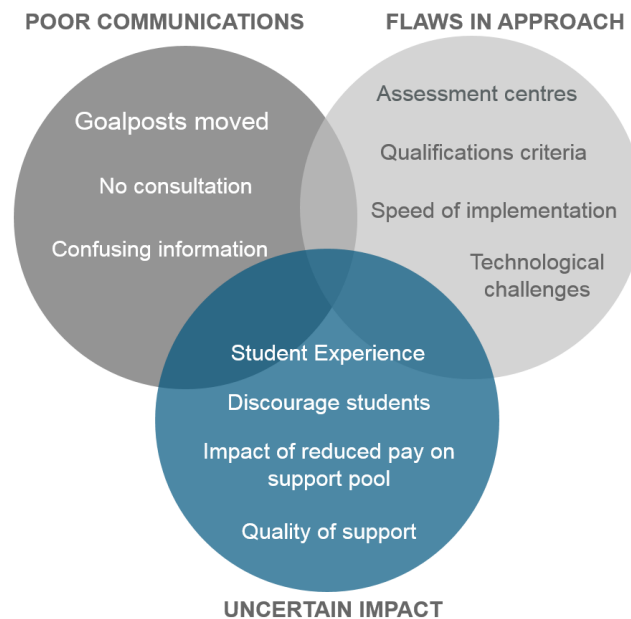

…and of course dealing with the DSA changes!

The issue of possible resistance from members of faculty relates principally to their reluctance to embrace technology to support students with disabilities:

- In some cases there has been push back from unions who believe that technology might potentially be used as a performance management tool
- Concern was also expressed about how the recording of lectures might infringe intellectual property, and could ultimately, in the long-term, also contribute to a fall in the number of lecturers

3. How the changes are viewed

There is widespread recognition that the DSA funding model was far from perfect, with many examples of inefficiencies and abuses to the system. The 'Plymouth factor' (involving abuses of funding at Plymouth University) was seen to give the government the ammunition it needed to bring about change, cut costs and transfer responsibility for funding to the universities.

So whilst there is recognition of the rationale for the reforms (and some sympathy), there is widespread criticism by universities of three specific aspects of the reforms:

POOR COMMUNICATIONS   **FLAWS IN APPROACH**

Goalposts moved

Assessment centres

No consultation

Qualifications criteria

Confusing information

Speed of implementation

Technological challenges

Student Experience

Discourage students

Impact of reduced pay on support pool

Quality of support

UNCERTAIN IMPACT

In terms of communications, there is concern that the goalposts have been moved as it appeared that BIS changed its mind about what it planned to do. The process has been characterised by a lack of consultation and the provision of information that was often confusing.

The perceived flaws in the approach relate to a number of areas, namely:

- Assessment Centres: there was some surprise that these organisations were not subject to reform given historic issues relating to quality and claims of over-charging

- Genuine concerns about new qualifications criteria required for Bands 3 and 4 support workers, potentially leading to the loss of highly experienced staff

- The unrealistically fast speed of implementation of the reforms

Many universities also believe that BIS may have under-estimated the technological challenges that universities face. There is an expectation that universities will look at different solutions and there is agreement –at least in principle- with some of the benefits of technology. But some fears exist:

- Human support continues to be absolutely essential and technology is not viewed as a substitute for this

- Some students are inevitably better equipped than others to use technology

- University infrastructures vary considerably and many older buildings, for example, are not suited to recording of lectures

Finally, there are real fears about the impact of the reforms on the student experience, attracting and retaining students, the quality of support that will actually be provided and the impact of a possible reduction in pay on the support pool available.

By contrast, there is widespread criticism and few perceived benefits of the 'two quotes' scheme, especially:

- A fear that the lowest price means the lowest quality

- Concerns that although universities are responsible for the well-being of students, they will not always be in control of the delivery of support

- Difficulties in managing multiple unknown providers on campus

- Lack of available facilities (e.g. individual offices for one-on-one support)

- Loss of relationships with tried and trusted providers

- Greater onus on students to organise support

4. How universities are responding to the changes

In keeping with the view that students should not be disadvantaged because of their disability, most universities expressed a clear intention that students won't be impacted by the changes in funding and simply 'won't notice'.

In most cases there is an expectation that:

- Universities will cover any shortfalls in funding, at least for the first year

- Beyond this it would be a question of 'wait and see'

Given the very recent nature of the changes, many questions remain unanswered:

- Will the withdrawal of DSA funding discourage students with disabilities from applying to university?

- What will happen in years two, three and four when the funding requirement will be even greater?

- Will DSA funding also be withdrawn for Bands 3 and 4?

- How will the quality of support be affected when disability teams may be unable to work with their preferred providers?

- Are the cost savings as a result of the change to the 'two quotes scheme' worthwhile given the limited lifespan of this change?

Unsurprisingly, there is a clear pre-occupation with dealing with pressing short-term issues which typically include:

- Calculating the resources required and consequent budget requirements for staff
- Seeking to secure sufficient funding from the university to continue providing the same level of support, at least for the next academic year
- Managing the qualifications process
- Formally registering as a provider
- Identifying external providers, where these may be required
- Preparing for the new academic year at a time of considerable uncertainty

5. Randstad's point of view

We believe that the research has provided some fascinating insights into the challenges facing universities at a time of significant change to the funding environment. We believe that there are several key learnings:

- Given both our own position as an employer and our considerable experience of working in the university sector, we understand the complexities of introducing inclusiveness into the workplace. But Randstad - like the university sector as a whole- is committed to encouraging and nurturing the inclusiveness agenda

- We recognise the importance of a 'fully connected' university world where faculties are supportive of the work carried out by the disability team and vice versa. Sharing experiences, aspirations and objectives is a natural start point for closer working relationships that will ultimately benefit all students

- We are well aware of the changes to the funding environment and what they mean to support for students with disabilities. Consequently, we feel we're uniquely placed to balance the provision of top quality support with the new commercial reality

- We believe that flexibility is all important in a changing world- flexibility in terms of what services are provided; the opportunity to 'mix and match' (part in-house, part external provider); and flexibility in term of the hours worked by staff

- We are anticipating a more challenging recruitment environment due to a possible reduction in the level of pay and more stringent qualifications required of support workers. However, given our experience in this sector we feel confident that we can continue to recruit outstanding people with the required qualifications to provide excellent on-going support in a more challenging environment

- We recognise that supporting students with disabilities is not a question of 'either/or' (human support or technology). We provide integrated services to offer students the very best possible university experience

We hope this summary document has been informative and if you would like to discuss the wider research results in more detail or you would like to clarify anything contained within this report, then please contact Ashley Garner at ashley.garner@randstad.co.uk