

Queen's Register of Support Providers

Review of Note Taker Support

Note Taker support is one of the key one-to-one support mechanisms available to students with disabilities.

Note Taker support is funded through the students' Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) award and it is recommended for students who, because of their disability or long term condition, will have difficulties taking and/or making effective notes themselves.

The remit of a Note Taker is to attend class, take detailed notes of the areas covered / key points made, word process and return the notes to the student within an agreed timeframe. As each student will differ in terms of their disability or long term condition and therefore their note taking requirements, each is entitled to individualised sets of notes. As such, it is the student's responsibility to agree with their Note Taker the style they would prefer the notes to be written in (e.g. narrative vs bullet points), the format/structure they should take and any font size/style preferences.

The largest group of students referred for Note Taker support have Specific Learning Difficulties such as; dyslexia or dyspraxia. Note Taker support is also available to students with a range of other disabilities or long term conditions including; visual/hearing impairments, mobility difficulties (arthritis, cerebral palsy etc), mental health / anxiety issues and increasingly, students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Funding Provision

With regards to the funding available for Note Taker support, the Education Authority (EA) that administers DSA awards for local Northern Irish students has no immediate plans to withdraw funding for this form of support. Likewise, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS), the European Social Fund (ESF) (for Republic of Ireland students) and Student Finance Wales have, to date, made no indications that funding for Note Taker support will cease in the near future. However, from 2016/17, Student Finance England (SFE) will no longer fund manual Note Taker support (Band 1) for new students. Although those already in the system will continue to receive Note Taker funding for the duration of their course, new SFE-funded students will not be recommended for manual Note Taker support.

Benefits for Students with Disabilities

Note taking support ensures that eligible students have equal access to teaching and learning environments. Students in receipt of note-taking support are assured that they will receive a personalised, complete and coherent set of notes to reflect upon and utilise as a study aid, which in turn, allows the students to concentrate on the content of the lecture or tutorial and enables them to actively participate in discussion. As opposed to focusing all their efforts on capturing discussion in written notes which as outlined below can present as a barrier to learning for many students due to the impact of their disability or long term condition.

For students with dyslexia dividing concentration between listening, speaking and writing can be hugely challenging. Note taking support reduces this challenge by allowing the student to concentrate on the content of lectures and tutorials, better placing them to actively participate in discussion.

For students with physical / mobility issues the mechanical aspect of writing can present difficulties due to reduced mobility and capacity of fine motor skills. A note-taker removes this barrier by ensuring the mechanical process of writing is undertaken.

Note Taking support is also very important for students that experience difficulties with concentration, stamina and fatigue due to the effects of their disability or long term condition. A Note Taker capturing the content of the lecture eliminates the impact of these difficulties.

Although most students must be present in class when their Note Taker is in attendance, occasionally, because of the nature of their particular disability or long term condition, a student may be entitled to Note Taker support *in absentia*. When a Note Taker is permitted to attend in a student's absence, the student is able to keep up-to-date with their lectures if they have had to leave class early or they have missed classes because of their condition, hospital appointments etc.

The following quotes from student surveys illustrate how important Note Taker support is to students with disabilities:

Helped me to keep on top of my work.
Enabled me to keep up with my work even when I missed class.
Allowed me to engage more with lectures.
Allowed me to focus on listening in class.
Able to focus more in lectures and enjoy them more, rather than worrying about getting notes down.
Helped me to study better because I was able to have notes taken down for me in my lectures.
On days I could not focus in class I could read my note takers' notes to get the information I needed.
I learned a lot more than I would have...I used the notes a lot when studying as they summarised all the important points.
Took a lot of pressure off me knowing I had a note taker.
I am more confident in uni and have achieved all A's and B's - I don't think that would have been possible without the note taker.
Really found it helpful focusing on what the lecturers were saying in lectures and tutorials!!!!!!
Helped me to understand the lectures better and has helped me to pick up on topics that I may not have heard in the lecture.
Note Taker support does not bother anyone as there are others who avail of the service also.
It is extremely important for me to have personalised notes as it is a clear and good reassurance that if I miss something in a lecture, they will have got it down for me.
A great help to me for my studies.
I find it hard trying to follow the lecture and take notes at the same time so to have someone reliable to help me with this has been great.
The notes are remarkable. My grades have improved this year and I have been taking this year a lot more serious .
The notes themselves were quite helpful .

Challenges for Students with Note Takers

Although students with disabilities and long term conditions benefit from receiving detailed notes from professional Note Takers, the support provision is not without its difficulties.

Most commonly, it is challenging to secure suitably qualified/experienced Note Takers. Support is particularly difficult to source for students studying STEM subjects such as; Maths, Physics,

Engineering, Chemistry, Pharmacy, Medicine, Biology, Computer Science etc., as recent graduates from these disciplines tend to gain employment quickly in full-time positions. In addition, Note Takers are contracted on a freelance basis and as a result, typically have other commitments such as part-time jobs, family responsibilities and other self-employment opportunities meaning 100% note taking support cannot be guaranteed and cover can unfortunately be inconsistent and unreliable. This combined with the sheer volume of students and sessions to be covered makes it extremely difficult to assign one note taker to each student. Meaning it is not uncommon for a student to be assigned multiple Note Takers, which impacts on student experience as it's more difficult for them to manage their Note Taking support in terms of who is covering which class, with notes organisation and for Work Record sign-off etc.

Challenges experienced by Schools

During 2015/16, a number of Schools at Queen's highlighted that the presence of Note Takers in classes was having a negative impact on the natural dynamics of lectures and tutorials in terms of student participation and exchanges.

It was suggested that the presence of Note Takers can alter the dynamics of classes, particularly in smaller group meetings such as tutorials. It was felt that in the company of Note Takers, students can feel uncomfortable and therefore be reluctant to participate in discussion, they are discouraged from interacting, asking questions, giving opinions, responding and offering ideas, suggestions etc.

Similarly, it was suggested that lecturers can be discouraged by the presence of Note Takers in classes, particularly new staff who are not yet fully confident in their teaching abilities. Some also raised concerns around intellectual property rights, about being quoted or misquoted and having confidence that the notes being taken are an accurate representation of what is being said or inferred.

An alternative to Note Taker support is the use of Assistive Technology (AT) audio recording devices such as Dictaphones/digital recorders and Livescribe pens. However, this option is also not without its issues. Although students are supposed to ask lecturers/tutors in advance for their permission to record the class (even though non-disabled peers may also record lectures surreptitiously on their mobile 'phones), this does not always happen, leading to suspicion and resentment. Whilst some lecturers will not permit recordings at all, others will do so reluctantly as they feel uncomfortable being recorded. Peers may also resent being recorded. Similar to the presence of a Note Taker, awareness that the class is being recorded can change the dynamics of the class and lower levels of participation, particularly in small groups. With tutorials for example, audio recordings will not properly reflect the content so Note Takers are the best way of capturing a more realistic and accurate version of the dynamics of the discussions/debates that took place.

Levelling the playing field

The ability to take effective, meaningful notes is a crucial at university, both to record the information imparted and to help with the recall of facts, ideas, discussions, etc. However, effective note taking is a skill that many students can struggle with, especially as it is not a taught skill that students learn through their secondary education. Therefore, it can be argued that providing skilled note taker support to a restricted population of students disadvantages the larger population of students who are not eligible for the support.

In addition, the traditional lecture style of teaching and instruction presents challenges for many students. Firstly, the lengthy duration of lectures makes it difficult for students to effectively maintain their concentration and focus can, meaning it is likely that many will switch off or their concentration will waiver. Secondly, many students are questioning why their physical presence in

class is required at all. For instance, recordings of lectures made accessible via the web for distance learning courses now mean that students can choose to access their teaching when it is convenient to them and for the duration appropriate to their own attention span.

Alternatives

Although note taking support is valuable to those receiving it, it is recognised that the presence of a Note-Taker may inhibit students from participating in class debates and discussions. There are however, a number of alternatives to the traditional note taking approach:

- i. The Business Services Organisation (BSO) that administers the funding of note taking support for students on Nursing programmes is currently trialling the provision of peer note taking support to students on a group basis, as opposed to via external one-to-one support. This style of provision ensures that a person with a suitable knowledge base captures the content of lectures and eliminates the presence of external parties in lectures and tutorials. The disadvantage is that students receive a **generic copy of notes** that may not meet with their individual learning requirements.
- ii. From 2016/17 Student Finance England (SFE) will only fund **specialist Electronic Note Taking Support** aimed primarily at students who are deaf or have a substantial hearing impairment. The electronic Note Taker will be charged with making “comprehensive, although non-verbatim, live, typed records of the content of lectures, seminars, discussions, off-campus events, etc.”. Crucially, the support “can be used to support other students according to need”, suggesting that, similar to the BSO initiative, one Note Taker may be able to support a number of students in the same class.
- iii. **Copies of the lecturer’s notes and/or PowerPoint presentations** made available on Queen’s Online just before class are a common ‘reasonable adjustment’ request to allow students with disabilities time to familiarise themselves with the material in advance of the lecture. Although commonly recommended, this facility is not always put in place by Schools. By making PowerPoints and related notes available to all students either before or shortly after class Schools will be acting to level the playing field for all students and create inclusive learning and teaching environments.
- iv. A variety of **assistive technologies** such as the Livescribe recording pens, note taking apps (such as Simplenote, Evernote, GoodNotes, Note Taker HD, Notability, NeoNote) or digital recorders are available as alternatives to students in receipt of DSA. These forms of assistive technology support students to independently capture lecture and tutorial content without the need of additional external or internal supports. However, some students can struggle to use these due to their disability or long term condition and some lecturers and other students can object to being recorded.
- v. **Peer Note Taker support** is another solution undertaken across UK HEIs. Notes are taken by fellow class members who are paid to a nominal fee to provide this support for students with an identified need. In the USA, where funding similar to DSA is unavailable, voluntary peer Note Takers are not uncommon. Instead of being paid, peer note-takers earn credits towards certificates. This could be applied in Queen’s by peer note-takers being awarded credits towards Degree Plus or Peer Mentoring certificates.
- vi. **Note taking workshops** could be made available to all students. As a totally inclusive activity, this would ensure that the right tools and strategies for effective note taking are made available to everyone, regardless of their abilities.
- vii. Making **audio and video recordings of lectures** available on-line would eliminate the need for any form of additional note taking support and enable inclusive and accessible teaching and learning environments for all students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear from the review that note taking support is a valuable reasonable adjustment and as such, it is vital that the benefits and inclusivity it offers are recognised and considered alongside the challenges of implementation for Schools and the funding variations experienced by students from different domiciles.

The largest cohort of students registered with Disability Service are funded by Student Finance NI. These students will remain legally entitled to avail of specialist Note Taker support if it is clearly evidenced that this will minimise the impact of their disability or long term condition on their academic attainment. The NI Education Authority has confirmed that there is “no appetite” for change and it is likely to be 2017/18 before a wider review of DSA supports is undertaken in NI. While, the smaller cohort of new and existing students funded by SAAS, SFW and ESF will also remain legally entitled to receive this support, alongside existing students funded by SFE.

A. Short to Medium Term

To adhere to legal entitlement, Queen’s Disability Services recommends that in the short to medium term specialist note taking support remain available as a reasonable adjustment to those students who have a clearly demonstrated need for this support. This practice will be reviewed in line with all relevant legislative changes. In addition, as detailed below Disability Services will support and encourage the utilisation of other note taking supports:

- Continue to support the BSO with its ‘Copy of Notes’ Policy. As the Policy was not implemented until mid-2015/16, it has not been in place for a full academic year. As such, it is anticipated that the outcomes of the Policy will not be fully measurable until the close of 2016/17.
- Work alongside any Schools that wish to pilot alternatives to note taking provision for their students.
- Ensure the provision of specialist electronic note-taker support for students with an evidenced need and funded by SFE.
- Recommend the use of assistive technologies as an alternative to manual note-taker support.

B. Long Term

In the long term, it is envisaged that the need for specialist note taking support will significantly reduce. As highlighted in the University’s Education Strategy for 2016 – 2020, there will be much less emphasis on traditional teaching methods involving lecture/class-room based learning.

Ultimately, it will be the responsibility of Schools, with support from the University, to ensure accessibility and inclusivity in the form of a variety of alternative teaching methods and learning opportunities for all students. Taking precedence will be the harnessing and exploitation of technology to support the learning experience with the development of a digital learning portfolio to provide world class teaching through a range of learning opportunities (distance learning, blended learning) alongside more traditional classroom-based teaching methods. With significant investment in the development of digital literacy for staff and students to support the development of new technological solutions to deliver teaching and learning, the University is set to review the continued viability of the lecturers as the main means of course delivery.

With the benefit of time, Northern Irish institutions will be able to observe what strategies institutions in England have used to cope with the withdrawal of funding for specialist note taking support and the success of the initiatives they have put in place as alternatives.

Future Proofing

As specialist note taking support is set to remain in the short to medium term, the University should extend and develop existing 'best practices' that already demonstrate high levels of effectiveness.

Of these, inclusivity is key:

- Schools should raise awareness of the purpose and role of note taking support across their student population to increase understanding and ensure the presence of Note Takers in class is accepted.
- Similarly, increasing awareness amongst teaching staff is required to ensure Note Takers are accepted in teaching and learning environments.
- Disability awareness training for all lecturers is imperative, both to raise awareness of the needs of students with particular disabilities and to encourage the implementation of reasonable adjustments like making notes available on QOL and allowing students to record lectures.
- Providing lecture and class notes via QOL, increases the inclusivity of learning and teaching for all students.
- Engaging Peer Note Takers who are trustworthy, high-achieving students recommended by Schools, will act to reduce the presence of external providers and help to foster a participatory environment for all students. This will also provide students with an alternative way of contributing to self-development initiatives such as 'Degree Plus' and Peer Mentoring schemes.
- Assistive Technology options such as; Livescribe pens, note taking apps and Dictaphones/digital recorders should be championed as a viable alternatives to manual Note Takers, with the possibility that if students are going to be off for short periods for reasons relating to their disability, they make arrangements with peers to use their recording devices in their absence.
- Adoption of alternative teaching and learning methods. The Education Strategy for 2016 – 20 encourages the development of new forms of lecture delivery and capture for all students. With less emphasis on the lecture format across the University, new 'blended learning' approaches and opportunities to replace traditional classroom learning, the need for note taking on many programmes of study may eventually become a thing of the past for many students, not just those with a disability or long term condition.
- Use of digital technologies to capture teaching and learning opportunities. Angela Allen, Assistant Director of Education, School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering and Computer Science makes use of open broadcast software. With the discussion elements removed altogether, the recordings are not intended as a replacement for lectures. Rather, they offer instead study aids to everyone in the class.