

Guidelines for Supporting Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

Background

Specific learning difficulties (SpLD), for example dyslexia and dyspraxia, revolve around problems encountered with one or more of the processes used in understanding and working with spoken or written language, or with the organisation of movement. They frequently occur in people of average or above average intelligence and the exact nature and extent of these difficulties will vary from one student to another. They are sometimes seen in isolation but often the student will have more than one SpLD.

Students with SpLD have to develop alternative approaches to learning. By the time a student reaches university they will have built strategies, probably without even realising it. However, planning and writing essays, note taking and effectively reading the volume of information required may be difficult and time consuming. Exams and revision may be daunting and extra stressful.

Funding and Support

Many students with SpLD who are UK residents have extra disability funding from their LEA via the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). This can fund a Student Helper employed through the ESO as a note-taker or library assistant. The DSA can also fund specialist one-to-one sessions with our qualified SpLD tutor.

The DSA can also fund specialist equipment such as:

- Computer with specialist SpLD software
- Mini-disc recorder

Non-UK residents are eligible to apply for a Student Helper and SpLD tutor support via the College-based fund; the International Students' Disability Support Grant.

Dyslexia means a 'difficulty with words' and is often considered in connection to phonological difficulties affecting reading, writing and spelling. However, a more complex range of difficulties confronts the average dyslexic student at University. Specific difficulties may include:

- Marked difficulty reading aloud – often hesitant and inaccurate
- Slow reading speed, no technical strategies
- Sensitive to print on white background; 'glare' from black ink on white, red pen gets lost on whiteboard
- Expressive language and word retrieval; they know the answer but cannot say it in time or cannot recall the words they want to use or write
- Receptive language; taking things literally or failing to interpret correctly what someone has said
- Poor comprehension – a text needs to be read multiple times

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- Taking notes – not only is it difficult to organise the information while listening, but the words must be remembered long enough to write them down
 - Copying is often slow, especially from a board, due to orientation or recall weakness
 - Essay writing – structure, spelling, grammar and punctuation
 - Finding it hard to follow discussions, oral instructions or directions
 - Generally keeping track of ideas when speaking, writing or listening
 - Poor memory: names, technical words, what to bring or where things have been put
 - General poor or ineffective organisation of work and life – failing to prioritise
 - Miss or confuse deadlines, appointments, meetings
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Dyspraxia is related to the organisation of movement and is associated to problems with language, thought and perception; it affects gross and fine motor co-ordination skills. Specific difficulties may include:

- Planning and organising thoughts – poor sequencing
- Poor memory, especially short term – easily forgetting or losing things, a difficulty in following more than one instruction at a time
- Balance, posture and hand-eye co-ordination; poorly formed or illegible handwriting
- Poor visual perception, lack of spatial awareness
- Poor concentration, easily distracted – often slow to complete a task through day dreaming or trying to do too much
- Accuracy problems leading to messy or cluttered work – poor proof-reading
- Poor perception of body language, non-verbal cues or spoken 'inference'
- Tendency to take things literally – may listen but not understand
- May find team work stressful, can be tactless and prone to interrupt
- Poor sense of time, speed, distance and direction
- Hesitant or awkward movement, 'clumsy', a tendency to trip or bump into things
- Inconclusive hand dominance – using either hand for different tasks

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- Speech and language may be repetitious, lack intonation, with uncontrolled pitch, volume and rate; can be extremely 'talkative'
 - Difficulty organising the content and sequence of spoken language
 - Eye movements may 'jump' disrupting reading or tracking moving objects
 - Oversensitivity to noise or light, difficulty with print on a white background
 - Tendency to get stressed, depressed or anxious – dislikes new or unpredictable situations and wants to opt out if something is perceived as too difficult
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Suggested Strategies

- A multi-sensory approach targeting visual, auditory and, if possible, kinaesthetic ('hands-on' experience) channels
- Encourage pre-reading – giving notes, handouts in advance
- Notes and handouts in large print with a clear font (e.g. Century Gothic) on buff/ivory coloured paper
- Left-justify typed material and use 1.5 spacing where possible
- Use clear headings and bullet points
- Use colour to distinguish important points
- Do not use a red pen for marking
- Be aware of the panic generated when unable to keep up with note taking or reading for information in seminars
- Emphasise short, frequent review sessions
- Elicit information when possible – students with SpLD are good at appearing to understand
- Try not to hasten an answer – give them time to organise and find the right word
- Try to find relevant points for praise
- Mark student's written work (assignments and exam scripts) according to the Assessment and Marking Guidelines; Specific Learning Difficulties (i.e. not unduly penalising errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation)