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Dyslexia: A Guide for Teachers

This guide is written by members of Keele’s teaching staff for the benefit of colleagues (especially those new to teaching) who may need a first point of reference when considering the needs of students who are dyslexic. The authors do not claim expertise in educational psychology but offer some hints and tips based on experience of teaching at Keele and elsewhere. References are provided at the end of the paper for those who might wish to study the subject more fully. As mentioned on p3, more extensive advice is available at all times from the Disability and Dyslexia Support Unit (within Student Support and Development Services) here: http://www.keele.ac.uk/dds/

Though the note is drafted primarily with undergraduates in mind, please be alert to the need to offer suitable support to postgraduate students who may also have to cope with the same problems outlined here.
Dyslexia - what is it?

“Dyslexia is really about information processing: dyslexic people may have difficulty processing and remembering information they see and hear. This can affect learning and the acquisition of literacy skills.”
(British Dyslexic Association)

Some students with dyslexia may experience a visual-perceptual discomfort and disturbance which is sometimes known as ‘Irlen Syndrome’. This affects their reading of print on white paper and slides and their use of a computer.

It is important to note that the condition is recognised in the American Psychiatric Association’s ‘Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV’ (DSM IV) as a ‘reading disorder’. It is proposed that the new (pending) DSM V will provide this definition of dyslexia:

“A. Difficulties in accuracy or fluency of reading that are not consistent with the person's chronological age, educational opportunities, or intellectual abilities...

B. The disturbance in Criterion A significantly interferes with academic achievement or activities of daily living that require reading skills.”

Note that a diagnosis of dyslexia will amount to a disability for the purpose of the Equality Act 2010 (the successor to the various Disability Discrimination Acts). (See p8.)
Dyslexia - what can you do about it?

First, deal sensitively and confidentially with any student who may have dyslexia in the same way as you would support a student with any other disability. Secondly, make sure the student has access to specialised advice as soon as possible. Thirdly, consider what teaching methods might assist or accommodate the student.

If your student has already been diagnosed as dyslexic before arriving at Keele, be prepared to refer him/her to the Disability and Dyslexia Support group. The DDS is the main repository of information on all aspects of specific learning difficulties (SpLD) and disability and can provide a great deal of advice for both students and staff. It is the first port of call for more detailed information on dyslexia. Start with their excellent brochure, ‘Information about Disability and Dyslexia Support’, available on their web page.

If a student asks for advice, considering him or herself to be possibly dyslexic, refer to your School’s Disability Link Officer or directly to DDS – it’s not your job to make a diagnosis.

If you suspect that a so far undiagnosed student is presenting with reading or writing difficulties and you believe s/he may benefit from expert assistance, speak privately to him/her and, if appropriate, refer to your DLO or directly to DDS who can provide various services including screening.
The ‘classic’ signs to look for are:

- A marked discrepancy between academic ability demonstrated in tutorial or practical class and the standard of work being produced for assessment.
- A persistent or severe problem with spelling, beyond the norm.
- Difficulties with comprehension as a result of slow reading speed.
- Poor short term memory, especially for language based information.
- Difficulties with organisation, classification and categorisation.
- Problems with note-taking due to spelling difficulties, poor short term memory and slow processing skills.
- Handwriting which is particularly poor and unformed, and shows consistent misplacing of particular letters.

Some practical steps

You can do some of the following. The decision is yours and (subject to the next section) it’s within your discretion as to how best to accommodate the particular student’s difficulties. The point is not to lower academic standards or confer privilege - markers cannot give marks for what is not present in an essay or for what is so unclear that no sense can be made of it. Rather, teachers can maintain standards by ensuring that, where necessary, the student receives differentiated teaching and assessment so as to give the individual a fair chance of being able to meet the ILOs of the particular module while ensuring that the work is comparable in quality to that of the non-disabled student and is marked accordingly.
Some ideas for teaching are:

- Upload all notes and other teaching materials to the KLE in advance of lectures.
- Produce lecture notes in clear font (Ariel, size 12 is ideal).
- Outline the structure of each lecture clearly at the start.
- Avoid, if possible, unusual grammatical constructions and, when introducing a new term, write it out and provide a definition.
- Provide a written glossary of terms in advance to students to explain complex terminology to be used in lectures.
- Avoid asking students to read aloud and make sure you give plenty of time when asking students to read documents, especially if you then propose to ask oral questions.
- Provide clear, step by step, written instructions to guide students through any practical work.
- Design your PowerPoint slides in an inclusive and accessible way, using a large and clear font. Limit each slide to a small number of key points and make effective use of diagrams, pictures, charts and other visual aids.
- Consider providing materials on a coloured background (pale yellow or pale blue) making the text easier to read.
- Allow plenty of opportunities for questions and feedback.
Some suggestions for designing assessment might include:

- Be clear about the assessment objectives of coursework assignments and design your modules creatively. Does it always have to be an unseen exam or essay? Presentations, for example, can be equally challenging and may be more ‘dyslexia friendly’.

- Consider accepting coursework presented in alternative forms (for example, in a list of bullet points, or using diagrams, rather than a formal essay).

And for marking the assessment you may wish to:

- Focus on marking for content rather than form.

- When allocating marks, be prepared to discount difficulties with spelling, grammar, punctuation and syntax – provided the meaning remains clear. For the avoidance of doubt, this does not apply if correct grammar or lucid prose form an explicit part of what is being assessed - but in that event, consider what ‘reasonable adjustment’ might need to be made (see pp 8-10).

- If you have time, offer to see a partial draft of the coursework and offer some guidance on how to present the material.

- Give very direct feedback using specific examples of how a point could be developed or improved.
Note that:

- A student diagnosed with dyslexia will be supplied by DDS with stickers to place on assignments or exam papers to alert the examiner to the candidate’s disability.
- If the assessment method is a class test or an exam, the DDS, after assessment of the student’s needs, and if justified, may authorise modified exam arrangements. Ensure the student has been assessed accordingly.
- Further guidance on good practice in marking the work of students who have been identified as dyslexic is available from the DDS.

These suggestions are not all encompassing (there are other steps you can take) and they are certainly not mandatory; they simply represent examples of good practice. In essence, however, this is no more than you would do for good teaching generally. For more ideas, see some of the sources listed, particularly the Open University ‘Dyslexia Toolkit’, available on-line, and/or contact SSDS.
Dyslexia - what must you do?

Fundamentally, where the DDS has prepared an ‘Assessment of need’ for a student diagnosed as dyslexic and your DLO advises you of the identified requirements (including any need for ‘reasonable adjustments’ – see below), you must meet them.

You should also be aware of some of the provisions of statute law as they affect universities and be alert to the possible impact on your teaching activities.

The Equality Act 2010 introduced a general public sector equality duty, which public bodies, including universities, have to meet. The duty aims to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act; and
- advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups.

To ‘advance equality’ it is necessary to:

- remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics; and
- meet the needs of people with protected characteristics.
'Disability' is a 'protected characteristic' and, as indicated, diagnosed dyslexia will be considered a disability.

It is **direct** discrimination to treat a disabled person unfavourably because of something connected with their disability.

**Indirect** discrimination arises when a policy or practice unintentionally leads to people from a protected group being treated less favourably than other people.

There is a particular duty towards disabled people to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ where a disabled person is placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison to non-disabled people. This is easily seen in relation to the built environment where, for example, there must generally be means of access suitable to wheelchair users.

However, ‘reasonable adjustment’ also applies to teaching practice. So, typically, failing to provide printed materials in an alternative format for a visually impaired student would be indirect discrimination.

The extent to which ‘reasonable adjustments’ must be made is qualified by reference to resources, cost and practical considerations.

The impact of the Equality Act on your teaching of dyslexic students is probably very limited. However, concepts of discrimination and ‘reasonable adjustment’ are not straightforward so if in doubt, seek advice about any element of actual or proposed teaching practice or policy - before, rather than after, you have implemented any change.
Thus, in the earlier example, if your assessment is in ‘Creative Writing’, where lucid prose is (possibly) mandatory, take advice if a dyslexic student will obviously suffer disadvantage. The difficulty may be capable of resolution by reasonable adjustment, for example the provision of an audio recording instead of a written essay. Alternatively, you may perhaps legitimately conclude that it is indeed impractical to assess the module by any other means. Just be alert to your duties under the Act.
Sources

Texts in Keele Library


Pollak, D (2005) *Dyslexia, the self and higher education* (Based on qualitative research with students and considers the ‘identity’ of dyslexia)

Reid, G (2011) *Dyslexia* (An up to date, practical overview for teachers, though primarily concerned with school-age pupils)


Websites


[http://www.dsmiv.net/](http://www.dsmiv.net/) is the site for the American Psychiatric Association

[http://www.keele.ac.uk/studentsupport/](http://www.keele.ac.uk/studentsupport/) Keele’s Student Support & Development Services

[http://www.keele.ac.uk/dds/](http://www.keele.ac.uk/dds/) the Disability and Dyslexia Support unit within SSDS

[http://www3.open.ac.uk/near-you/yorkshire/objects/d2837.pdf](http://www3.open.ac.uk/near-you/yorkshire/objects/d2837.pdf) will take you to the Open University’s excellent ‘Dyslexia Toolkit’, providing lots of information for both students and teachers