

Dyslexia and Marking

The Effects of Dyslexia

Dyslexia is typically seen as a problem with verbal and text-based processing, defined by the British Dyslexia Association as:

A specific learning difficulty which mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills. It is likely to be present at birth and to be life-long in its effects. It is characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed, and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities. It tends to be resistant to conventional teaching methods, but its effects can be mitigated by appropriately specific intervention, including the application of information technology and supportive counselling (BDA, 2007)

Students with dyslexia or other specific learning difficulties (SpLD's) are likely to make more spelling and grammar errors, omit or repeat words and fail to use punctuation appropriately in written work. Slow reading and writing speeds also mean they often cannot produce written work as quickly as other students. Proof reading and editing work is also a difficult task resulting in submission of coursework that can also contain spelling and grammar errors. Added to this are difficulties with organisation, time management, short concentration span and sometimes the inability to clearly articulate a point of view in seminar/tutorial/presentation situations all of which can result in wider problems with consolidation of learning.

Reasonable Adjustment

Reasonable Adjustments are made with the aim that this 'puts the student on a level playing field with other students'. Reasonable adjustments for students with dyslexia normally include 25% extra in exams¹, extensions to coursework deadlines, a digital recorder to support note taking in lectures, text to speech software that can read work out (making it easier for a student with dyslexia to check their work), mind mapping software to assist in the organisation of work and access to specialist SpLD tuition where indicated, to enable strategy development for negotiated final project and dissertation topics and other summative assessment.

¹ The basis for additional time in exams is based on the knowledge that cognitive weakness in working memory and processing makes the processing of information more time consuming for students with a specific learning difficulty.

In considering the issue of reasonable adjustments we contacted 19 other Russell Group Universities, 16 of which responded. Responses to this issue vary significantly both between and within Universities, but overall their policies could be broken down as follows:

- All Universities put Reasonable Adjustments (as described above) in place as recommended in the student's Educational Psychology diagnostic assessment e.g. extra time in exams, use of a scribe etc.

Of the 16 Universities that responded one had no coherent University wide approach. Four Universities (in addition to Newcastle University) did not differentially identify the work of students with dyslexia. Of the other eleven, three Universities identified the exam papers of students with dyslexia but not their coursework. Eight further Universities used the 'sticker system' on all of the work of a student with dyslexia (and some for any student with all identified specific learning difficulties). Of those that used the sticker system:

- Some used the sticker to indicate that there should be no penalty for "grammar, spelling and layout" (and some added 'clumsiness' in the use of English).
- Others used it, not to impact on mark at all, but rather to encourage the staff marking the papers to give "more detailed constructive feedback".
- Others used it as a guidance to apply "sympathetic marking".
- There was an acknowledgement by a number of Universities that practices varied between departments (in terms of using the stickers or not, interpretation and application of guidance etc).

Differential Marking

In considering differential marking for students with dyslexia there are a number of issues which require consideration:

Equity: As reasonable adjustments are in place with the aim that this puts the student on a level playing field with other students, should further adjustments be made?

Severity of dyslexia: Dyslexia is diagnosed by an external Educational Psychologist. All diagnostic assessment is conducted in line with DfES SpLD guidelines 2005 to assess a range of cognitive, literacy, verbal and non-verbal skills. The reports sometimes, but not always, will comment on level of severity but level of severity does not mean a uniformity of difficulty within that categorisation. For instance, someone with 'mild dyslexia' may have difficulties in organisation and structure but less so in their spelling and grammar or vice versa. It would be extremely difficult to justify a certain percentage mark 'waiver' for different severities of dyslexia, yet the impact of very severe dyslexia is extremely different from that of mild dyslexia.

Sympathetic Marking: Dyslexia is not simply a difficulty pertaining to grammar and spelling but also relates to the ability to process and organise information. If we were to put stickers on students' work (exams and/or coursework) the marker would have to have some knowledge about dyslexia to make an informed judgement about how to mark the paper of a student with dyslexia. Given that tutors will have different levels of knowledge about dyslexia, then this is likely to result in inconsistency in marking. Whilst staff would benefit from training on what dyslexia is, how to 'mark for it' is less straightforward given the variances in severity, impact and the educational history of individual students. With this in mind it seems likely that sympathetic marking is going to be hard to defend in situations where a student challenges the fairness of the marking or the marking scheme etc. and particularly as one of the institutional assessment and feedback principles is that assessment is fair. Further information for staff is available from QuILT:

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/quilt/resources/assessment/>

Differential Marking

If differential marking for grammar, spelling and structure was applied for students with dyslexia then this could be deemed to be discriminatory. Examples could include, if we were to differentially mark for the spelling and grammatical mistakes for students with dyslexia but not for those who have similar cognitive weaknesses, e.g. as a result of brain injury or with conditions such as Chronic Fatigue where memory, processing and concentration are affected, or of some international students who are writing in English as a second language.

Recommendations

- 1) That Newcastle University continues not to identify the written work of students who have dyslexia or other specific learning difficulties, a language barrier or other conditions affecting clear expression of ideas in writing but instead the guidance for marking is that:

It acknowledges that students are likely to make minor errors under time pressure where the opportunity to check work is limited. Therefore in order to be equal across the whole student population minor² errors in spelling and grammar should not be penalised in written work completed under timed examination where they do not alter the meaning of what the student is saying. The exception to this is where spelling and grammar is an essential part of the learning outcomes for individual modules or the degree, e.g. spelling

² Minor is suggested to be related to types of errors that may readily be translated to clearly convey a logical account or response to the set question.

of distinct technical/subject specific terms, language courses or in relation to professional and/or work based assessments.³

- 2) That good quality constructive feedback is provided for all students, and this would include feedback on structure, spelling and grammar as well as academic content for all submitted assessed coursework. This would help the student with dyslexia improve the quality of their work, just as it would all other students and is therefore consistent and fair for all. Good quality constructive feedback would also help address the intangible impacts of SpLD that are now widely acknowledged to include increased anxiety levels, lower self-esteem and expectations regarding achievement. This inclusive approach would also assist those students with cognitive weaknesses as a result of brain injury or with conditions such as Chronic Fatigue where memory, processing and concentration is affected as well as international students who are often writing in a second language.

Dr Alison Oldam and Sandy Alden – Student Wellbeing Service

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³ A need to identify where normal tolerances do not apply is paramount alongside clear guidance on managing exceptions.