

## Specific learning difficulties (SpLD): guidance for staff

### Introduction

Most staff will have experience of teaching and assessing students with dyslexia and be familiar with its common features. They may be less familiar with other disabilities which fall within the definition of specific learning difficulties. The purpose of this leaflet is to provide a brief description of their more common presenting features.

### What are the specific learning difficulties?

“Specific learning difficulty” is an umbrella term sometimes used as a synonym for dyslexia but now generally accepted as also including the following:

- Dyscalculia
- Dysgraphia
- Dyspraxia
- Attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD or ADHD)
- Asperger Syndrome

As with any disability, no two individuals experience the same combination of difficulties and some students may exhibit signs of more than one SpLD. However, these learning difficulties typically affect students' motor skills, information processing and memory and are often productive of high levels of anxiety. These difficulties are likely to be more acute in the examination/assessment situation.

**Dyscalculia** is characterised by difficulties with mathematical skills. People with dyscalculia may have normal language ability for the printed word but do not notice their common mistakes such as transposing, omitting and reversing numbers. Their approach to solving number problems may appear unconventional and limitations may be shown in the sequencing of calculations. They may also have difficulty with abstract concepts of time and direction, following sequential instructions, with the sequence of events and memory for names. They may lack “big picture” thinking, are confused by timetables and may often be late. They may have a poor sense of direction and can become lost.

**Dysgraphia** is a difficulty in writing resulting in written work which may be illegible and inaccurately spelled. Script may feature irregular letter sizes and shapes, a mixture of upper and lower case letters or of print and cursive letters. Dysgraphia contributes to difficulties in using writing as a communication tool, causes fatigue and

interferes with the communication of ideas. Written work appears at variance with the person's intelligence or their ability to read. People with dysgraphia often lack co-ordination and fine motor skills.

**Attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)** are characterised by disruptive behaviours that cannot be described as being of a psychiatric nature. People with ADD/ADHD have difficulty focussing their attention for long enough to complete a specific task, can be hyperactive and impulsive, and can suffer from mood swings and have under-developed social skills. There is research evidence showing that those with ADD are at higher risk of depression or anxiety whilst those with ADHD are more prone to behavioural problems.

**Asperger Syndrome** (also known as high functioning autism) gives rise to a variety of characteristics along a range of severity which may include difficulty dealing with change and difficulty reading non-verbal clues. The former can cause unexpected responses to surroundings and the latter gives rise to problems with social interactions. People with Asperger Syndrome (AS) may become preoccupied with a particular subject of interest or develop obsessive routines and may find it difficult to focus on a particular task. Difficulty in discriminating between relevant and irrelevant information, a literal approach to written work, acute anxiety and dyspraxia are common in students with AS.

## **Making 'reasonable adjustments'**

You can help students with specific learning difficulties towards equality of access to their courses by making adjustments to how you engage with them.

- Produce handouts on tinted paper. (People with SpLD often also experience a visual-perceptual discomfort and disturbance known as Meares-Irlen syndrome or scotopic sensitivity which causes black print to "dance" or blur on white paper.) There isn't a "correct" colour to choose but a pale buff shade seems to be helpful to most people.
- Provide handouts/lecture notes before lectures and/or post them on the Intranet.
- Use a sans serif font such as Arial in at least 12 pt for clarity.
- Welcome their use of a Dictaphone to record lectures/seminars.
- Ensure all guidelines for assignments or practical sessions are unambiguously written and clearly presented.
- In long reading lists direct students to core texts and chapters. Help them to access alternative forms of information if available, eg audio cassette or DVD.
- Be sympathetic towards an erratic style of presentation, looking first at the overall content of essays rather than errors in spelling, punctuation or grammar and syntax (unless these are learning outcomes of the course).

- Provide constructive feedback with a full explanation of what is needed to improve.

## **What other help is available?**

Most students who have been formally assessed as having a specific learning difficulty are able to apply to their funding body for Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) to meet the cost of support required to help them access the course on a comparable level with their peers. Subject to an assessment of need, DSAs can meet the cost of a computer with specialist software and a Dictaphone, and meet the cost of the additional photocopying and books which the students often require. DSAs can also meet the cost of one-to-one sessions with a specialist tutor or mentor, which can help students become more effective learners and, by improving their skills and confidence, enhance their future employability.

## **What you can do**

If you think that a student you teach may have a specific learning disability, please encourage them to arrange an appointment with one of the Dyslexia Tutors in the Dean of Students' Office to discuss their difficulties.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION OR ADVICE PLEASE CONTACT ONE OF THE DYSLEXIA TUTORS IN THE DEAN OF STUDENTS' OFFICE: ELLIE BAKER (ext 1877 or [e.baker@uea.ac.uk](mailto:e.baker@uea.ac.uk)) OR ANYESA SORRENTINO (ext 3826 or [a.sorrentino@uea.ac.uk](mailto:a.sorrentino@uea.ac.uk)).