Dyslexia & other specific learning difficulties (SpLDs)

Dyslexia is the most common Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs). Others include dyscalculia and dyspraxia, which can cause problems with mathematical concepts and the initiation, organization and performance of action respectively.

SpLD’s are caused by a difference in the way the brain receives and processes language and other kinds of information - they are not due to either lack of intelligence or desire to learn. Around 10% of the population have some degree of dyslexia and the exact nature of the condition varies widely, but students may experience some or all of the following:

- Reading hesitantly and/or misreading, so research and comprehension may be slowed down.
- Difficulty organising thoughts, or following the structure of sequential material (such as lectures). This may be caused by information-overload or too many associated ideas.
- Short-term memory vulnerability.
- Lack of fluency in expressing ideas: problems with vocabulary, punctuation or sequencing of information.
- Erratic spelling, correct use of punctuation and difficulty with note taking.
- Pronunciation or word finding difficulties, which may inhibit speaking in groups.
- Difficulties in prioritising and time-management, and in organisation generally.
- Expressing self coherently and logically in writing and/or verbally.
- Discrepancy between intelligence and ability displayed in class, and the quality of written work.

Any of these may lead to anxiety, perfectionism and a dependence on over-complex or inappropriate learning strategies.

How staff can help

Lectures and other teaching sessions

- Provide hand-outs (preferably electronically) in advance of lectures and seminars and display main points to be covered in each session. (Many dyslexic students find text easier to read if the background is a pale colour rather than white. e.g. cream/buff).
- Introduce multi-sensory learning material; e.g. visually presented information/colour coding can lead to greater understanding/retention; audio formats will work for other students.
- Introduce new concepts and vocabulary explicitly. Provide an overview of topics to emphasise the underlying structure and show how new material fits in with other parts of the subject.
- Use visual aids or examples to illustrate key points. Videos, diagrams, practical and experimental activities will also help to bring abstract concepts to life.
- Keep diagrams and slides clear and uncluttered, with limited content and in ‘plain English’ where possible.
- Help students to develop note-taking skills and encourage them to work in pairs or small groups after lectures to pool notes and review topics.
- Encourage the use of assistive technology, such as digital recorders or laptops, if students find them helpful. Allow audio recording of teaching sessions wherever possible to assist comprehension and revision.
• Give any instructions or explanations in a clear sequence, orally and in writing, and explain the purpose of whatever is to be done. Follow up verbal instructions with written information.

• Give the student time to think before answering questions in class, and enough time to read information before being expected to use or discuss it.

• Where possible, introduce these standards as common (good) practice, increasing inclusivity and improving the learning experience for all students.

General
• Give reading lists in advance, preferably annotated or with guidance to identify essential texts. Give exact references for research articles. Ensure the library has sufficient provisions of those reading lists to allow for the ‘long loan’ extensions for students with SpLD.

• Offer help with time management and give plenty of warning of deadlines.

• Provide adequate tutorials for students who may need help analysing and understanding assignment titles. Focus feedback on content and structure; encourage computer use to improve written presentation. Penalising poor spelling or handwriting just increases anxiety.

• Mark work for content as far as possible, ignoring errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation;

• Encourage the student to understand and build on their own strengths and ways of learning, e.g. developing their own vocabulary lists for new, unfamiliar and subject-specific terminology.

• Make sure coursework involves learning the skills needed to complete the course successfully. Encourage them to use module outlines/learning objectives to ensure their work is meeting essential criteria.

Assessment
• Address VOAMs with students as soon as possible. This process is new to them and can induce anxiety. As a result they can often overlook their responsibilities, e.g. organising extensions to deadlines.

• Be flexible about assessment where possible. Common recommendations include extra time allowance or the use of a computer in examinations.

• Alternative assessment formats, such as visual displays or multimedia presentations, may allow subject knowledge to be demonstrated just as well as written assignments, and can help to improve confidence and writing ability while developing other transferable skills. However, course teams will need to consider how to maintain parity and consistency of standards when deciding whether to vary assessment tasks. See Section G of the General Examination and Assessment Regulations (GEAR) for more information (accessible via staffcentral, the student handbook and the university website)

Further support

Within the University:
• The Disability and Dyslexia team can offer advice and help with Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA) applications, dyslexia screenings across all campuses, and referrals for educational psychologist's reports as well as individual learning support tuition.

• Students have the opportunity to access learning support tuition once they have received confirmation of their application for DSA.
Staff sharing consistent information is also helpful to ensure the student’s understanding of what is expected of them, and what they can expect from their support.

Teaching staff can also contact the Disability and Dyslexia Team for advice on identifying and referring students that you suspect may have dyslexia. We can arrange assessments for students who have not previously been assessed for dyslexia/SpLD, or those who need an up-to-date educational psychologist report. More information can be found on the web at www.brighton.ac.uk/disability

Beyond the University:

- **An introduction to students with dyslexia in higher education:**
  (www.jarmin.com/demos/course/dyslexia/): a staff disability-awareness learning module written by the DEMOS project.

- **The British Dyslexia Association** (www.bdadyslexia.org.uk): Publishes several useful Information Sheets, as well as guidance on issues such as Disabled Students' Allowances and a range of assistive technology such as screen readers and voice recognition software.

- **Dyslexia Action** (www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk): assesses and teaches people in Britain with dyslexia and trains specialist teachers.

- **The International Dyslexia Association** (www.interdys.org): is the oldest organisation in the USA dedicated to the study and treatment of dyslexia.

- **Dyslexia The Gift** (www.dyslexia.com): the website of Davis Dyslexia Association International (with HQ in the USA). Includes a forum for networking and sharing information about creative thinking, dyslexia and other learning differences.

- **Dyslexic Teachers’ Association** (www.thedta.tripod.com): an organisation supporting UK teachers with dyslexia and related SpLD.

- **Wikimediawww.encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/dyslexia**: Provides more than just a definition of dyslexia.

- **Adult Dyslexia Organisation** (www.adult-dyslexia.org): a British charity run by dyslexics, founded in 1991

- **Being dyslexic** (www.beingdyslexic.co.uk): an award-winning, user-friendly website. Contains on-line tests, as well as information mainly derived from the BDA