



Guidance for Good Practice: Institutional Marking Practices for Dyslexic Students

Background

On 1 September 2002 SENDA (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act) or Part IV of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1995) came into force. This Act requires Higher Educational Institutions to provide reasonable adjustments to enable disabled students, including dyslexic learners, to access the curriculum. It also states that an institution should not treat a disabled person **less favourably** than others for a reason that relates to their disability without justification. If the student is at a **substantial disadvantage** the educational provider is required to make **reasonable adjustments**. The QAA Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (1999) confirms that:

“Assessment and examination policies, practices and procedures should provide disabled students with the same opportunity as their peers to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes”.
(Section 3 precept 13)

Recommendations by the Singleton Report: Dyslexia in Higher Education (1999) supported the view that academic staff should discount as far as possible errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation in dyslexic students' work, and that marking instead should be based on content, ideas and critical acumen (Singleton *et al*, 1999).

Dyslexic learners are entering higher education in increasing numbers and institutions need to, by law, ensure that they are able to perform 'on a level playing field' with their non-dyslexic counterparts. Although dyslexia is a recognised disability, many students prefer to think of themselves as having a 'learning difference' rather than a 'learning disability'. Weaknesses exhibited in writing are explicable in terms of the nature of the student's Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) and are generally not the result of laziness or lack of time or attention.

Institutions therefore need to consider the best way of ensuring that dyslexic learners are not disadvantaged by the assessment process. This document asserts that consideration should be given to dyslexic students in the marking of their work. This is not an easy or straightforward proposal and there are a number of arguments and issues that surround this question. It is not the intention of this paper to suggest a policy that is applicable to all institutions, as circumstances related to specific institutions, subject areas and courses need to be considered. There are, however, a number of guiding principles and issues that need to be explored when attempting to develop such procedures.

Academic Standards

Assessors in Higher Education are naturally concerned about compromising academic standards when making allowances for dyslexia in the marking of coursework or examination scripts. They should be reassured that according to SENDA the need to maintain academic standards is a fundamental premise within the law. In fact, the terms of possible justification for treating a disabled student less favourably than other students are limited to the “necessity to maintain academic standards or the necessity to maintain standards of any other prescribed kind or occurring under prescribed circumstances.”

If, therefore, when reasonable adjustments have been made, a dyslexic student is not able to demonstrate academic competence as prescribed by the course requirements, he or she will not be able to complete the course successfully. Reasonable adjustments, which in the case of students with dyslexia may include differential marking criteria, cannot involve failure to penalise lack of knowledge.

The purpose of coursework and examinations is for students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding. There must be no difference in the requirement for students with dyslexia to provide evidence of learning than for their peers. However, as a direct result of their learning difficulty, the standard of written work of students with dyslexia may differ from that of their peers, and it is these subtle differences for which assessors may need to make adjustments.

Marking with due consideration for the effects of dyslexia

To ensure that students with dyslexia are not treated less favourably than other students for reasons of their disability it is important that assessors are aware of the manifestations of dyslexia in Higher Education. They will then be able to give due consideration to dyslexia-related factors when marking coursework or examination scripts.

Students with dyslexia typically experience difficulty producing written work as quickly as other students; they are likely to make more spelling errors even in word processed work; their punctuation and grammar may be weak and they often omit, repeat or insert small function words or word endings. While not without structure, dyslexic students’ written assignments may lack the “polish”

demonstrated by their peers. Assessors might reasonably, in normal circumstances, consider such work “shoddy” or careless, and might deduct marks for poor presentation. However, in the case of dyslexic students, such errors should be understood and overlooked unless accuracy is of vital importance in the subject being assessed (see subject differentiation below).

Coursework and examinations differentiation

There are differing views on whether coursework and examinations undertaken by dyslexic students should be treated in a similar way. One school of thought argues that the extra time granted to dyslexic candidates in an examination should be sufficient adjustment. The opposing view is that even with the provision of extra time in examinations, the dyslexic candidate is likely to make only marginal improvements to spelling, grammar and punctuation and will continue to exhibit difficulties with written expression. The Singleton Report (1999) argues that examiners marking the work of a dyslexic candidate should be alerted to those difficulties and take them into consideration when marking. This will, to some extent, contravene the principle of anonymity. However, it may be argued that without this the dyslexic candidate will be unfairly discriminated against and this in itself would contravene the principle of equality of opportunity. Students should therefore be given the option of whether or not to flag their work for markers.

There are similar concerns expressed over differentiated marking for coursework and assignments. One point of view is that, without the time-constraints of the exam, students are able to spend more time proof-reading their own work and making corrections. Those students eligible for the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) are able to access software such as textHelp, a program which reads aloud work typed on the computer, which can help with proof-reading. Many students also have access to support from specialist dyslexia tutors. Thus, with support mechanisms in place, the dyslexic student should be on a par with non-dyslexic colleagues. The counter argument to this is that not all dyslexic students will be eligible for the DSA. It is also a common misunderstanding that the role of the dyslexia tutor is to correct errors in their students’ work. The dyslexia tutor is employed to *teach* the dyslexic student strategies that they can employ themselves; the role is *not* to proofread a student’s work. In reality, even with the use of special software and support from a dyslexia tutor, many students with dyslexia will still be unable to correct their errors despite their best efforts.

Subject and Professional Differentiation

One of the important principles of SENDA is that any accommodation made for the dyslexic candidate should not undermine academic standards. The issue of differential marking may pose more difficulties for some subject areas than others. Certain subject areas (e.g. languages) may be explicitly assessing competence with grammar, spelling and written expression. There may also be professional considerations in some areas, such as law, education, medicine and allied subjects, where accrediting bodies external to the institution have expectations as to standards and formats of written

expression. However, it is not for the individual lecturer to make decisions on this. Each programme needs to have clear aims and objectives, taking into consideration professional considerations. These aims and objectives should then give weighting as to the importance of written language skills. This will allow programmes to consider the extent to which dyslexia, and any other disability, can be taken into consideration and the type of accommodation that can be allowed. The marking criteria need to be made explicit to all applicants to the course or programme.

Institutional Procedures

Individual support needs of students with dyslexia vary, and the institution must ensure that support appropriate to the students' needs is offered. Therefore, in order to ensure equity (i.e. that like cases receive the same treatment), it is important that institutions develop clear policies and procedures for the identification of students with dyslexia, and the evaluation of their support needs. Singleton *et al* (1999) recommends that a suitable member of staff is identified as the Dyslexia Coordinator, to coordinate support provision and help ensure parity of provision across the institution.

It is proposed that any procedures developed should include the following elements:

- Students should be required to provide appropriate evidence of their dyslexia to the Dyslexia Coordinator
- Prior to disclosure of any information contained in the assessment (even within the institution) the student should give explicit consent to disclosure
- The Dyslexia Coordinator should recommend appropriate academic allowances in accordance with the nature of the individual's learning profile
- Recommendations for academic allowances should be notified in writing to programme staff and any central assessment body, with a copy of this notification being issued to the student

It is also highly desirable that a central record is kept of any recommendations made, and that the effectiveness of the process is monitored.

In addition, to ensure all staff are aware of the issues, staff development should accompany the introduction of new procedures.

Alternative Forms of Assessment

In the small number of cases where students are severely affected by dyslexia, the academic allowances commonly made may not be sufficient to provide appropriate support. It could therefore be necessary to consider

alternative modes of assessment – for example, a *viva voce* rather than written work. When deciding whether an alternative format for assessment is appropriate, it is important to consider the learning outcomes against which students are assessed. It may be the case that, due to professional requirements or the need to demonstrate a particular skill (for example, well structured written arguments), alternative assessment cannot be offered. The important aspect here is that consideration of alternative forms of assessment should be informed both by student need and the maintenance of academic standards/professional requirements. An unambiguous academic rationale should be available for the final decision, so that the student is clear about the grounds on which the alternative assessment was/was not arranged.

When differential assessment is offered institutions should not disclose this to anyone outside the institution without the student's consent. If, for example, such information is included in a reference, Singleton indicates that a positive approach should be adopted; that the student has had the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge. In cases where the student refuses permission to disclose, it may be that the referee cannot supply a reference.

The importance of detailed and specific general marking guidelines

It is good, and increasingly general practice for course coordinators to devise very clear marking criteria and guidelines for coursework and examinations, so that there is consistency between markers in the awarding of grades. Such guidelines normally stipulate the information and knowledge that needs to be conveyed in order to be awarded grades A to F. It is rare for spelling to be included as a marking criterion and therefore students, whether dyslexic or not, should not be penalised for spelling errors. The same would apply to minor inaccuracies and errors in punctuation frequently made by students with dyslexia. The same principle applies to other possible marking criteria such as grammar and punctuation. There should be no need to differentiate between the scripts of dyslexic and non-dyslexic students on the basis of these features of their writing if they are not being assessed explicitly.

In subjects such as Pharmacology or English Language, in which correct spelling is deemed important, the number of marks that can be lost for poor spelling should be stipulated. Usually only a small percentage (2-5%) of marks is likely to be assigned to spelling. It may be therefore, that students with dyslexia will lose a small percentage of marks because of their weak spelling; but if spelling is important in their particular discipline, they may have to accept this. The emphasis for students in this situation will then shift from special accommodations to appropriate tuition so that they can develop the skills they need.

The above document was prepared from information contributed in two workshops at the First Annual ADSHE conference (September 2004) and subsequently agreed upon by the members of the Association. It amends the original Guidance Notes first developed in October 2003.