

# **Dyslexia at university: the situation in England\***

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An inevitable consequence of helping dyslexic students to be more successful at school, is that they arrive in higher education and look for similar support. We started finding this in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s, and the situation in Italy is likely to be the same.

There is a dyslexia problem in the English-speaking world: no one agrees about what it is. The medical model of dyslexia presents it simply as a defect; however, the word means ‘difficulty with words,’ and many dyslexic people prefer non-verbal, non-linear thinking<sup>3</sup>. A social model of dyslexia holds that in terms of education, the disability of dyslexia can be said to come about as a result of the practices of schools and colleges (and universities). It is important to support students in seeing themselves as part of the diversity of human experience.

Over the past 10 years, numbers of known dyslexic students in UK universities have increased ten-fold. Over 2% of university students are dyslexic. Dyslexia at university raises questions such as:

- What are the essential qualities of a graduate? Do these include essay-writing and rapid reading?
- What are the key learning outcomes of (any) course?
- Is an examination the only way to assess the students?

There has been controversy in the UK about the nature of assessment reports stating that a person is dyslexic: what qualifications should the assessor have, and what tests should they use? These have been resolved by a government-funded committee, which has now published a code of practice for this<sup>5</sup>.

Most UK universities have dyslexia tutors attached to the Disability Unit. The medical model of dyslexia places dyslexia support in a ‘remedial’ category, meaning that the student must go outside the Faculty or course department and obtain learning support – this is not seen as the role of Faculty lecturers.

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Some universities have guidelines for staff on marking the work of dyslexic students. We have an Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education <sup>1</sup>, and there is a growing body of expertise on the nature of alternative forms of academic assessment for dyslexic students: for example, a viva voce or an assessed oral presentation instead of an exam <sup>6</sup>. Most dyslexic students are offered extra time for exams, usually 25%.

In the UK, dyslexia is legally recognised as a disability. The law states that you are disabled if you have ‘a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ <sup>2</sup>. Arrangements for disabled people have to be explicit.

There are individual responsibilities as well as institutional ones – for example, a disabled person needs to disclose what their needs are. The expression “a level playing field” is often used to symbolise equality of treatment. The law states that disability arrangements must be embedded practice rather than ‘bolted on’, and institutions are obliged to anticipate the needs of disabled people.

It is also illegal for professional bodies to discriminate against disabled people in their examinations for qualifications (such as nursing); dyslexic people must be given the opportunity to demonstrate their competence.

A recognised ‘reasonable adjustment’ (the term used in the law) for an interview is to allow the applicant extra time to read any printed information which might be used in the interview, and to allow them extra time to think about their replies to questions. Dyslexic trainee teachers are allowed extra time for the skills tests for entry into the profession; dyslexic students of nursing are allowed extra time to check drugs and dosages, and electronic dictionaries of medical terms.

Screening (or initial assessment for dyslexia) always begins with a learning history, because screening is a collaborative process with the student and one can learn a lot from them. Full assessment is carried out by a psychologist, or by a specialist tutor who has completed a recognised training course in dyslexia assessment and support. A good psychologist’s report has the following characteristics:

- technical terms are explained;
- it describes strengths as well as weaknesses;
- it refers to the demands of the student’s course;
- there are detailed recommendations;
- it states clearly the category of learning difficulty which applies to the student.

The government provides a Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA), which is a grant of money for UK citizens who have a psychologist’s report stating that they are dyslexic and a Needs Assessment carried out by a recognised assessment centre. This lists the equipment and other support which the student requires. Most students’ support, both assistive technology and tutorial work, is funded by the DSA. Those who are not eligible for the DSA sometimes have a difficult time.

It is important for the student to have a recording system, both for lectures and individual support sessions. Many use a digital voice recorder. Others use concept maps as a record of the session. Sometimes the support tutor makes a concept map for the student, particularly if she needs to talk about an essay and ‘unpack’ her ideas. Any computer used needs to be connected to the internet so that tutor and student can practise (for example) using the online library catalogue.

There is a range of technological aids which students use. They are all described at [www.dyslexic.com](http://www.dyslexic.com). The best computer program is called Read and Write. This enables the user to hear a digital voice speaking what she is typing, and to paste in other text for the software to read aloud. It also alerts the user to homophones (of which there are many in English), and has a dictionary and spelling checker which can be heard. Voice recognition software enables the user to speak into a microphone and the words appear on the screen. It is very useful for those who are good at formulating their ideas by dictation. The best concept mapping (or ‘mind mapping’) computer package is called ‘Inspiration’.

As regards helping students with reading, many UK universities use cream paper (because students frequently have difficulty reading black text on white paper). Sentences in capital letters cannot easily be read by assistive software; the words also lack the silhouette offered by ascending and descending lower case letters. It is essential to mark the key elements on a reading list for those who are not going to be able to read many items.

Many dyslexic students cannot read hand-written comments on their work.

I believe that learning support tutors need counselling skills. They should listen carefully to the student and show empathy. They should help the student to build on her strengths, and to see her difficulties less as the result of her intrinsic deficiencies and more as resulting from the nature of traditional academic practices.

Dyslexia is increasingly well known in the UK, with more and more public figures disclosing that they are dyslexic. Many dyslexic people are showing that in the workplace, they can do a perfectly good job as long as they have access to assistive technology and can do things in their own way. Many company Human Resources departments are nowadays prepared to draw up action plans which set out the adjustments required for a dyslexic employee.

It is essential that dyslexic applicants for university places are fully aware of the demands of the course they are interested in. All staff should be dyslexia-aware. University websites should not be ‘busy’ (full of pictures, especially moving ones, lots of jazzy colours, lots of small text). Websites should be easily adjustable by the user, and ideally offer screen reading. Compare [www.dmu.ac.uk](http://www.dmu.ac.uk) with [ww.brainhe.com](http://ww.brainhe.com). It is important that all documents (such as University regulations) should be available in alternative formats.

The kind of teaching practices sometimes called ‘dyslexia-friendly’ are simply good practice for any lecturer. However, for university to be a truly dyslexia-friendly place, there should be easy access to spoken versions of

books, or at least digital versions so that they can use text-readers. There should be alternatives to exams, because these demand speed of information processing, speed of handwriting, and the ability to produce good grammar and spelling under pressure. (If the course is a professional one where these are essential abilities, that is a different matter.) There should also be alternatives to the dissertation or other long essays, because these demand linear thought. These alternatives might include the non-linear portfolio, or time-limited work such as answering an exam paper in three days rather than three hours. Professional approaches such as these can result in improved retention of students and higher levels of attainment <sup>4</sup>.

### References

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- <sup>5</sup> SASC. 2006. <http://www.patoss-dyslexia.org/SASC.html>.
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