

**Guidance for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) and their Mentors/Supervisors/Practice Educators on placement**

**This document has been put together by UWE’s Disability Advice Team.**

**It is designed to give advice about SpLDs, explain how students with Specific Learning Difficulties may be affected in the placement setting and provide examples of the kind of support and strategies that may help to minimise the impact of their SpLD.**

**What is a Specific Learning Difficulty?**

Specific Learning Difficulty is an umbrella term sometimes used as a synonym for dyslexia but now generally accepted as also including dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

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 reading, writing and spelling as well as organisation, memory and sequencing.

**The Legal Context**

Under the Equality Act 2010 the protected characteristic of disability applies to a person who has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. An SpLD is considered to be a disability and therefore health professionals with an SpLD are entitled to receive ‘reasonable adjustments’ both in the educational institution and in the workplace. ‘Reasonable’ in this context means adjustments which are practical and achievable in the context of the real working environment. It is important to note that students who have declared a disability will still be expected to demonstrate that they are “fit for practice” – i.e. they must meet all the competencies and skills set by their professional body. The difference is that reasonable adjustments should be in place before competence is assessed.

**Characteristic Difficulties**

For each of the potential difficulties listed as commonly attributed to a SpLD, the individual will be somewhere on a continuum ranging from no difficulty at all in that area through to severe difficulties.

Many students will have already developed effective coping strategies for managing any difficulties they have.

**Potential difficulties for a person with a SpLD:**

* Short-term memory problems with poor retention of information resulting in difficulties with remembering verbal instructions, telephone messages, complicated medical terms
* Difficulties with processing information quickly so that the student may take a few moments to think things through, take longer to learn routines or procedures, to understand exactly what is being demanded or to read calibrations on equipment
* Organisational skills and time management problems so the student may have problems with planning ahead and scheduling tasks, find it hard to remember appointments and have problems with prioritising work
* Difficulties with sequencing, such as correctly ordering letters, numbers, tasks, files (alphabetically or sequentially) or retelling an incident
* Problems with motor skills causing untidy handwriting or a slow writing speed
* Difficulties with orientation may result in a student having problems with identifying left and right, losing their way easily, and finding it hard to follow lines across charts correctly
* Problems with concentration and distractibility so they may find it difficult to stay on task and need more effort to focus which may lead to tiredness

**Typical positive attributes:**

SpLD should not be seen as a weakness as it can also offer many positive and valuable attributes as well. Some of these can include:

* Intuitive
* Good strategic thinkers
* Good at problem solving
* Creative and original
* Resilient / determined
* Holistic thinkers (see the whole picture)

**General guidance for mentors/supervisors/practice educators when supporting students with SpLDs on placement**

* Meet with the student before or at the beginning of the placement to discuss their

support and strategies

* Consider the specific needs that the student may have and discuss the following:
* Ask whether or not the student has concerns about any particular areas of

practice. Please be aware though that the student may have been recently diagnosed and may not fully appreciate the impact it may have, or the strategies that are needed. Fully understanding the disability can take some time.

* Discuss any strategies that they may already have in place to compensate for

these difficulties – how do they normally manage? As their mentor/ supervisor/practice educator, is there anything you can do to help support them?

* Talk about possible solutions and strategies for supporting them. Discuss actual scenarios found in the workplace.
* Discuss the effectiveness of these strategies, and how plausible or implausible those strategies may be (for example, recording handover). If you are unfamiliar with how to manage a situation, ask within your organisation - it is unlikely that the circumstance is as unique as it may first appear.
* Discuss alternative strategies that may be beneficial.
* Write these down for further reference.
* Meet with the student regularly (as part of routine supervision) to discuss progress and evaluate how the support strategies are working for both student and staff
* Promote a culture of inclusivity, where individuals feel able to discuss their specific needs without fear of discrimination or negative attitudes
* UWE hopes that students will feel that their mentor/supervisor/practice educator is open and approachable and will react to their disclosure of an SpLD in a positive and supportive way
* Bear in mind that most students with an SpLD will do well on placement, but will do even better with the appropriate support
* Remember that SpLDs affect individuals in different ways, so a strategy that is helpful for one student might not be helpful for another

The following pages contain **tips for mentors/supervisors/practice educators** to help support students with SpLDs and make reasonable adjustments for them, plus **strategies for students** to help them to overcome some of the difficulties they may experience. Many of the strategies in this document could well be part of general good practice within the work place already.

**Area of Difficulty:** Speaking, Listening and Remembering

**Strategies for student:**

* Be honest with colleagues – tell them what you find difficult
* Carry a list of common abbreviations / words and their meaning
* Discuss with your mentor whether you would be allowed to use a handheld recording device to help you remember important things
* Make “to do” lists, and always carry something to write on and a pen
* Use visual methods (e.g. diagrams/mind maps) to help you remember
* Stick things you need to remember on post it notes around your house
* Record things on to a voice recorder or mobile phone then listen to them when you can (e.g. when driving, walking etc.)
* Set reminders on your mobile phone to remind you of key tasks (bearing in mind confidentiality and local policies around using such devices)

**Mentor/supervisor/practice educator support:**

* Give verbal instructions slowly and clearly (in a quiet place if at all possible)
* Break down long, complicated instructions into smaller, manageable steps
* Be aware of information overload; the student may find it difficult to remember too many things at once
* Encourage the student to use a notebook to write down verbal instructions – check these to make sure the student has got it right!
* Provide written instructions if necessary – prioritise tasks and highlight the main points
* Visually indicate left or right when giving verbal directions, and make sure that the student has a map of the hospital or placement area
* Demonstrate practical skills to the student whilst giving verbal explanations using straightforward language. Encourage the student to repeat back what has been learned and to reflect on why
* Allow the student to practise a task under your observation before meeting the patient/service user
* Encourage students to take telephone messages using L3R:

**Listen – Repeat – Write – Read**

**Area of Difficulty:** Writing and Recording Information

**Strategies for student:**

* Give yourself enough time (in a quiet space if available) to write up notes etc.
* Use a small alphabetical notebook to write down difficult words and remind you of their meaning
* Carry with you a list of common abbreviations and their meaning
* Familiarise yourself with the layout of the different forms and charts used by your placement colleagues. Ask if you can take a blank copy home to have a good look at in your own time
* Use an electronic (medical) dictionary if possible
* Use a laptop or PC to write your notes on if one is available
* If you have to use a pen and your writing is messy, try different types of pen to see if a certain type is better for you
* Ask whether you can use a recording device to record your ideas and then write them up later (bearing in mind local policies around confidentiality)

**Mentor/supervisor/practice educator support:**

* Allow the student to write in a quiet place (if possible)
* Allow extra time to write notes if it is needed
* Try to avoid students having to write in group situations which may lead to

embarrassment

* If possible, allow the student to dictate notes onto a digital recorder (making sure that confidentiality is maintained of course)
* Check notes written by the student: make suggestions for a clear format and use of colour (e.g. multi-coloured ball-point pen)
* Be prepared to help proof-read notes
* Allow the student to practise filling in documents and forms before doing it

for real

* Assist in discerning key points at handover by going over the student’s notes after handover

**Area of Difficulty:** Reading

**Strategies for student:**

* Give yourself enough time to read things and re-read them if necessary
* Find a quiet place or time with no distractions, or ask if you can take things home to read
* Carry a list of common abbreviations and their meaning
* Use an electronic dictionary to look up words you don’t know
* Try using a coloured overlay if white paper is not good for you (available cheaply online) or print documents off on cream or coloured paper, depending on your specific need
* Try using different coloured backgrounds on your computer screen
* Use a highlighter to highlight key points in documents

**Mentor/supervisor/practice educator support:**

* Encourage the student to cross check important details where there is a high risk for error and/or the consequence would be significant
* Allow the student to read aloud (or whisper) to aid comprehension
* If possible, allow the student to read in a quiet area away from distractions
* Allow the student more time to read information as s/he will very likely need to

re-read it a few times

* Provide written material in advance if possible
* Consider providing a list of acronyms to avoid confusion
* Printed material should be in “sans serif” fonts (e.g. Arial or Calibri) as these are easier to read
* Avoid asking the student to read aloud in front of others
* Permit the use of coloured overlays or tinted lenses

**Area of Difficulty:** Organisation and Time Management

**Strategies for student:**

* Agree realistic target dates with your mentor/supervisor/practice educator and record these on your plan
* Use “to do” lists
* Use your mobile phone to set reminders of important dates/times, or a wall calendar at home if you prefer (bearing in mind rules around confidentiality)
* Use coloured pens or highlighters to help organise and prioritise your work
* If getting up on time is difficult, consider having 2 alarm clocks!
* Practise using the 24 hour clock at home so that it becomes familiar
* Visit the placement beforehand if possible so that you become familiar with the layout of the buildings
* Build up a list of how long tasks and procedures usually take
* Record tasks in list form. You may then develop a priorities list to ensure everything is completed

**Mentor/supervisor/practice educator support:**

* Create an “orientation pack” or similar for students/new staff outlining useful information and routines
* Provide the student with a map of the building
* Encourage the student to use “to do” lists rather than trying to remember things
* Help the student to draw up a plan for the placement at the start, highlighting important tasks and deadlines
* Set clear targets
* If a task involves following a sequence, consider setting this out clearly on a wall chart or instruction sheet
* With the student, devise prompt sheets to help with specific tasks
* Help students to build up a list of how long different tasks take to complete
* Set achievable time-related tasks
* Ask students to tell you what the key activities are at the beginning of a shift or working day, and remind them of things they have forgotten

**Area of Difficulty:** Motor Skills

**Strategies for the student:**

* Practise handling instruments and equipment and ask to borrow any kit which you are struggling with so you can practise it in your own time at home
* Investigate alternative equipment which may be easier to use
* Ask for extra time to practise any skills you are unfamiliar with
* Write the sequence of skills down in the form of a diagram or flow chart
* Access university skills labs to practise new or unfamiliar skills
* Devise your own strategy to identify your left or right side; e.g. wearing a

watch or bracelet always on the same wrist/a ring on the same hand/a name

badge always on a particular side of your clothing

**Mentor/supervisor/practice educator support:**

* Provide opportunities to practise handling instruments and equipment
* Explore availability of specialist/alternative equipment which might be easier to use (providing this could constitute a reasonable adjustment)
* Demonstrate skills more than once at the beginning of a placement
* Supervise practice until the student is confident
* Diagrams and flow charts detailing the sequence for given skills can help

**Area of Difficulty:** Drug Administration (for Nursing students only)

Please see Page 30-33 of ‘Royal College of Nursing:

Dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia: a toolkit for nursing staff’ for detailed guidance and strategies around this area.

<https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-003835>

**Further Information:**

For advice about meeting disabled students' needs, through specialist equipment or support including alternative formats, assistive technology, reasonable adjustments and Disabled Students’ Allowances funding.

* Royal College of Nursing: Dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia: a toolkit for nursing staff

<https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-003835>

* British Dyslexia Association

<http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/>

* UWE Disability Service: <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/students/studysupport/disabilityservices.aspx>

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