

## Original Paper

# “A” for Attitude—Attitudes towards Dyslexia in Higher Education

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### **Abstract**

*This paper makes the case for the importance of an empathetic approach to understanding dyslexia, in educational establishments, especially in Higher Education. An awareness of the implications that having dyslexia and how this affects both study skills (concentration, organisation, revision and so forth) and presentation skills (completion of assignments within academic language and structures and without grammar, punctuation and spelling errors) is accentuated in this article.*

*This research employs meta-ethnography, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) and a grounded theory overlay to thematic critical analysis. In so doing, UK literature of both quantitative and qualitative format was examined through specifying inclusion criteria and using a filtering approach.*

*The justification for this work is to challenge any institutional or individual indirect discriminatory practice towards students with dyslexia.*

*Conclusions indicate the need for enhanced institutional understanding of dyslexia and associated provision for individual dyslexic learners within Higher Education in its entirety. For example, access to digitalised resources, individual tutorials, assistive technology and adjusted expectations in marking criteria (as not to penalise for issues concomitant with dyslexia).*

### **Keywords**

*Dyslexia, Specific Learning Difficulties, provision, inclusion, Higher Education, meta-ethnography*

## 1. Introduction

Attitudes towards dyslexia in universities have been widely studied and introduces some surprising findings. This article examines how effective the provision for dyslexia is at university level, since experiences and qualifications gained at this stage forge a path for students' careers and ultimate success. Every year, students arrive at post 1992 universities, former polytechnic college universities, pre-1992 institutions and Russell Group universities with diagnosed or undiagnosed dyslexia. A considerable variable in the success of these students in obtaining a good degree outcome might well be related to *where* they choose to study as it is likely that there are differences for students regarding the amount and kind of support offered to students with dyslexia between institutions. Dyslexia support at university is a particularly important area of study, since most assessment within HEIs related specifically to literature searching and essay writing which can be a struggle for many students with dyslexia, even if student knowledge and understanding is evident.

Dyslexia can be understood in a variety of ways. Through a theoretical lens, one of these includes being defined as a hidden, non-evident specific learning disability (Riddick et al., 2002). Although dyslexia can affect individuals differently, it can include one's difficulty in: organisation, literacy, memory, concentration, time keeping and spelling. Dyslexia can be defined in different ways and have different effects for individual students but rates of dyslexia within the population are reported to be up to 20% (Knight, 2018).

## 2. Methods

This work applies a meta-ethnographic approach to reviewing and synthesising data which addressed the research question: what is the provision like for those with dyslexia in Higher Education/at University? A *Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP)* using grounded theory was applied to analyse the qualitative and quantitative data. Questions such as: "is the data still applicable?" and "will the results illuminate local or national issues?" were used and provided a framework for the methodology. Thus, relevant studies through an inclusion filter were sought. This filter consisted of: United Kingdom (UK) data and the key terms: dyslexia, provision, university/universities, Higher Education, staff/lecturer attitudes (towards dyslexia), inclusion and inclusive education.

As studies were combined, key indicators, words, phrases and ideas were analysed to forge the links or disparities between various studies using inductive reasoning (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Subsequently, a thematic approach for summarising the literature was taken based upon Aveyard et al.'s (2016) notion of data extraction. This "is a process which enables you to extract the relevant information that are included in your study in preparation for subsequent analysis" (Aveyard et al., 2016, p. 93). This included summarising the content of papers selected and identifying underlying issues framing the discussion by producing a construction of theories based upon the emergent issues.

Although acknowledging the small-scale nature of this work, and the limitations this brings, such as how selective confounding variables may have an impact upon general is ability, this does not detract from the issues raised within the research. As a safeguard to ensure the veracity of the study, an effective quality control measure was taken-the implementation of CASP tool. This ensured that all important outcomes were considered. It also acted as a sounding board between authors to ensure the work comprised all applicable research, and the inferences drawn were indicative of combining studies.

### 3. Discussion

Large-scale research by Knight (2018) involving 2,600 participants, found that teachers lacked understanding of dyslexia in two main areas: biological (neurological) and cognitive (processing). Moreover, 71.8% of teachers reported that dyslexia was not well covered during their initial teacher training programme. If dyslexia is disregarded or the opportunities to enhance teachers' understanding is insufficiently covered during training at school level, then the further lack of awareness in this area is likely to be present for academic HE staff. These staff might have chosen to lecture based on their high level of subject knowledge but may also have a less rigorous training programme in HE lecturing than school teachers.

However, universities are aware of the notion of equality and have systems in place for supporting struggling students, as set out in the UK's Equality Act (2010). Specifically, it also introduced an obligation for Higher Education Institutions (HEI)s to provide equality of access. Equality was sought by removing barriers and managing academic adjustments and services (Kirkland, 2009). Most universities allow HE students who are formally diagnosed with dyslexia additional time (normally up to a quarter of the scheduled time) to complete exams or allow additional time to submit assignments. This is rooted in research-Hatcher, Snowling and Griffiths (2002) found that dyslexia-specific problems at HE level were identified as "slowness" which also relates to the need for students to constantly re-read sentences in order to gain sufficient meaning. Some institutions also ask lecturers to mark the content of the written work (the salient points of the submission) rather than penalise for the likely grammatical errors, spelling mistakes and presentation of information (Singleton et al., 1999). However, the attainment gap between dyslexic students and non-dyslexic students is still of a sizable difference (Ferrer et al., 2015). Richardson (2015) notes that approximately 40 percent of undergraduate students with dyslexia achieve a 2:1 or above, compared to over 50 percent of non-dyslexic students achieving this. This raises questions as to why this 10 percent gap persists.

Although each institution is unique, it is suggested (see below) that staff across HE institutions may not have an adequate awareness of dyslexia. Consequently, some lecturers saw dyslexia as a "disability" to help gain an unfair advantage (Mortimore, 2013). Furthermore, Byrne (2018) suggested that some HE academic staff fail to give adequate supervision or offer academic guidance to their students. Those with dyslexia, who (on account of having a Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD)), may find study skills and assignment submission most challenging and would therefore be at greater risk of failure. In the

same way, Tinklin et al. (2004) noted that some practitioners can be cautious about making “reasonable adjustments” for their students, due to perceptions that standards may be lowered. Indeed, Pino and Mortari (2014) suggested that across different HE institutions there is a considerable lack of awareness by lecturers and tutors regarding dyslexia. Students claimed that lecturers were unresponsive and unhelpful, and they struggled to obtain teacher attention which led to students strongly insisting on appropriate modifications to be made available for their needs. Moreover, Mortimore and Crozier (2007) indicate that some students reported feeling inadequately helped with study skills indicative of dyslexia, including note taking, organisation of assignments, expressing ideas coherently and structured logically in academic essays. Cameron (2016) reports on students who expressed sentiments in the themes of stress, feeling a misfit and not belonging within an academic world. In addition, the varied approaches, within neoliberalism of perspectives of fairness, meant that some students felt discriminated against on account of their dyslexia, chiefly dependent upon the strong voice of the power-relationship between the student and lecturer (Cameron & Billington, 2015). To illustrate this, research by Richardson (2015), found the treatment of students with dyslexia is likely to vary between individual lecturers and institutions, which does not allow for equal parity in outcomes between dyslexic students. Furthermore, in a singular study of one HE institution, Cowen’s conclusion of student experience was for a greater need of departmental appreciation of the need to support students by tutorials (Cowen, 2018). Interestingly, the amount of contact time that universities offer may also affect attainment for HE students with dyslexia. Richardson (2015) highlighted that long-distance learning offered by the open university recruited large numbers of students in 2012 (4,961) who had dyslexia or other learning difficulties but students with dyslexia were less likely to pass modules and also obtained poorer grades than non-disabled students. This, he reported, would have deleterious consequences for academic progression and may be due to a lack of appropriate remote support resources.

As has been noted, one problem relates to lack of understanding for academic staff in HE institutions. Waterfield (2002) recommends teaching strategies to allow opportunities for dyslexic students to process information more effectively. She notes that dyslexic students benefit from access to teaching slides and handouts in advance of the teaching sessions, to allow them time to digest the subject content. Equally, recording lectures helped some students re-visit points they may have missed. This facilitated in some participants being able to form mind-maps and other visual representations to summarise session notes. Furthermore, a variety in assessment methods for dyslexic learners were endorsed; assistive technologies were found to benefit dyslexic students, in again, helping organise their thoughts, especially in assessed coursework (Waterfield, 2002). Likewise, Pino and Mortari (2014) found that computing packages were used by dyslexic students as a successful support mechanism (for example, a Pebble Pad) which supported their need for time to connect with the materials.

However, there is an additional issue in regard to students' decisions regarding testing for dyslexia when they are struggling. Due to the negative perceptions regarding dyslexia, students are-for the most part-reluctant to seek assessment and support in HE and only do so when they have reached a tipping point in their academic journey (Cowen, 2018). Another salient issue within study at HE level, is that many learners will no longer live at home with their parents. It is therefore likely that the experiences of dyslexic students, without parental support, are likely to be different than dyslexic learners of school age who may have parents willing to engage and speak on their behalf to gain support for dyslexia (Gwernan-Jones, 2010). Work by Henderson (2017) also found that support relating to dyslexia was more likely to be sought during the second/third year of study, partly due to students wishing to maintain a non-disabled student identity, which may also relate to the evidence relating to negative perceptions of and inadequate support given by academic staff (Byrne, 2018). Additionally, failure to attain study support early on may be likely to affect overall degree outcomes negatively.

Against this background, the recommendations/points of note are:

- The need for enhanced awareness for staff of the complex and varying, concomitant nature of dyslexia (challenging stigmatisation, negative attitudes or misconceptions). This may help students and applicants feel at ease in disclosing dyslexia when applying for courses or employment.
- Clearly defined differentiated approaches across all institutions (preventing the university equivalent of a postcode lottery of provision). These approaches might include:
  - a) Accessibility of teaching materials prior to the lecture
  - b) A variety of assessment methods and teaching strategies
  - c) A transparent, unambiguous shared marking criteria using non-complex language
  - d) Access to recordings of teaching sessions
  - e) Access to online support materials (e.g., Pebble Pad or a VLE (virtual learning environment)) alongside face to face support sessions
- To provide opportunities for students to discuss and recognise the features of dyslexia so that those who are not yet diagnosed can access assessment and tailored support if required.
- To offer access to regular tutorial sessions with academic staff so that emotional support can be offered where students may not have parental guidance/support from home

In conclusion, this article has highlighted the differences in student experience between institutions, including the effect of long-distance study versus regular face-to-face contact. Problems associated with perceptions of academic staff and needs of dyslexic students at this level appear as iterative issues. Challenging pockets of current disability provision for dyslexia, understanding present practice and ascertaining some prevailing staff attitudes, has been the framework for the positionality of this paper. Against this backdrop, suggestions for enhancing student experience and success in a "non-dyslexic" world are offered as ways of ensuring the inclusion of students with dyslexia. By greater awareness of indirect exclusion, those with SpLDs are more likely to feel supported by staff with an appreciation of

some of the difficulties dyslexia can bring. Moreover, by being offered differentiated forms of assessment, or given allowances for the concomitant issues associated with dyslexia, these forms of support can make all the difference to the academic success and associated holistic wellbeing of students.

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