






DYSLEXIA: EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS AND STAFF

Overview


The focus of this discussion paper is dyslexia, specifically the experiences of students with dyslexia in two higher education institutions and staff who are working to support these students. In considering the impact of dyslexia, it is important not to overlook other factors (e.g. social class, age, and ethnicity) which influence a student's academic experience and possible progression into employment. This paper explores descriptions of  Dyslexia;  Students' views and experiences: emerging themes;  advisors and support workers and concludes with  recommendations and  questions for further research and debate.

DEIP: an introduction

This paper is one of a series of discussion papers produced by the Disability and Effective Inclusion Policies (DEIP) project that was funded by the European Social Fund. The DEIP project is a piece of collaborative research undertaken by Sussex and Lancaster Universities. The project aims to explore ways in which higher education institutions support disabled students through higher education and on into employment.

The research is shaped by four research questions (see **DP1**) which provided the opportunity for considering the influence of disability models with respect to: sector and institutional HE policy; practice as reported by disabled students and university staff at Sussex and Lancaster Universities; the experience of disabled graduates making the transition into employment and the views of employers.

DEIP Discussion Papers

The DEIP project contributes to an increasing body of institutional research surrounding the experiences of disabled students in higher education. For a list of current and future DEIP project Discussion Papers (**DP**) see:  <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/equalities/1-2-9.html> For details of the thematic topics emerging from an analysis of institutional policy see **DP1**, methodology **DP2**, and an annotated bibliography of other relevant research **DP13**

Dyslexia

The term 'Dyslexia' derives from Greek and means 'difficulty with words' (BDA 2006). The difficulties typically associated with dyslexia are those relating to reading and writing (e.g. problems with spelling and slow reading speed) although the characteristics of dyslexia also include problems with time management and organisation. Dyslexia is classified as a 'Specific Learning Difficulty' or SpLD together with other learning difficulties including dyspraxia and Attention Deficit Disorder. According to the British Dyslexia Association, around 4% of the population is severely dyslexic and a further 6% has mild to moderate problems. Statistical evidence suggests that for 2004-5, amongst those UK domiciled first year HE students (undergraduate and postgraduate) known to have a disability, approximately 43% disclosed dyslexia and thereby constituted the largest sub-grouping amongst disabled students.

 <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/holisdocs/pubinfo/student/disab0405.htm>

Students' views and experiences: emerging themes

Experience of dyslexia

The experiences of dyslexia reported by students in the research were diverse, reflective of the fact that dyslexia varies much from person to person (BDA 2006) and may be combined with dyspraxia. Students discussed their difficulties with spelling, time management, short-term memory, organisation, and reading aloud.

Dyslexia as disability? Labels and ambivalence

A central issue emerging from the interviews with both students and staff was the dilemma over whether dyslexia is a 'disability':

...to be asked if I have disability I'd almost immediately say "Oh no, no" (Diane)

Learning disability – I don't think I'd tick that box, because I don't see it, dyslexia obviously does affect learning, but I don't see it as disabled (Dee)

There was a sense that the requirement to disclose dyslexia as a disability in order to access the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) prompted students to reflect about their identity:

I'm not sure, because sometimes you hum and arrh about whether dyslexia is a disability, but then I have a disability loan and so I guess dyslexia is classed as a Disability (Dawn)

[The form said] 'Do you have a disability?' and I thought "Oh no, I haven't a disability" and then one of the categories I think is dyslexia and "Oh is that a disability?" (Diane)

In some instances, students appeared resistant to the use of the label 'dyslexia' as Debra said:

Part of me didn't want to be labelled, it was quite strange telling people that I was dyslexic

Riddell et al (2005: 638) observed similar resistance amongst a student with dyslexia in relation to perceiving herself as 'disabled' and noted the tension which arose for this student who was also aware that claiming a disability was central in securing legal protection.

On the other hand, sometimes a diagnosis of dyslexia had a positive impact on self-esteem in cases where students previously undiagnosed reported relief in 'discovering' that they were dyslexic rather than being 'slow' as some of their teachers had led them to believe.

Now I know about it I'm less concerned that it takes me so long to do things, because I recognise that it's the dyslexia, so I don't worry about it as much (Dan)

I had this assessment and it came out I was severely dyslexic, for me it was good, there was a reason why I struggled with things, it may sound strange... but it was good to know that and to know I wasn't thick. (Delia)

The ambiguity concerning the status of dyslexia as disability is mirrored in university policy documents and in staff attitudes at the institutions (see below and **DP 1**).

Assessing dyslexia

It may be assumed that due to an increased awareness of SpLD over recent years that assessment would occur during students' earlier education. However, many of the students interviewed had not been diagnosed until they arrived at university. The assessment procedure, which is required for DSA claims, was often lengthy and complicated. A number of students reported that they were unclear about what was involved and who was responsible for different aspects of the process. Delays in the receipt of the DSA resulted in delays in receiving equipment. As Donald said:

It's been agonizing, especially as I had to go through the summer holidays and get this constant correspondence, I had the test in the summer and it's only now (autumn term) my assessment forms have been accepted

Furthermore, there was a certain resignation it was something to get through, as Dee described, the test itself was '*not intensely horrible, but not a pleasant experience*'.

Question of disclosure

For some students who disclosed their disability during university there was some confusion and a lack of transparency about how information was shared. For example, some students assumed that information about their support needs would be communicated to departments. They were uncertain whether they needed to mention or discuss their requirements again.

Amongst the students who had disclosed their dyslexia upon entrance to university, there were mixed views concerning whether or not they would disclose to future potential employers. While some reported that they would disclose, others expressed reluctance which appeared to stem from either a fear of discrimination or the belief that the impact of their dyslexia on performance at work would be minimal and thus it would not be worthwhile disclosing.

Perceptions of support

For some students, the support offered to them was clearly of value to their learning. For instance, Debra described positively the experience of having extra time to complete examinations: *I'm happy that I have this special consideration, its traumatising not finishing exams (Debra)*. However, amongst some students there appeared to be anxiety that others would perceive that the support would bring 'unfair' advantages:

I think I felt a bit guilty, maybe that I conned the system in some way. (Donald)

Declare disability [to an employer] – probably not unless they asked it on the application form, I wouldn't like to be positively discriminated against. (Dylan)

It may be speculated that this anxiety derives from a cultural context in which negative political discourses around 'positive discrimination' and 'political correctness' have been prevalent. It is an obvious challenge for institutions to ensure that systems are seen as fair and transparent.

Learning strategies

Students, particularly those who had been diagnosed with dyslexia during their earlier education, reported that the impact of dyslexia on their learning had been minimised due to the strategies they had developed over time. For example, Debra reported:

I have a lot of coping mechanisms now that I've developed, I write everything down, it's quite comical I have everything written in different colours in my diary.

However, previous reliance on individual strategies may mean that students are reluctant to use the support offered at university. As Delia explained:

I've always been very independent in dealing with my disability, I only discovered two years ago, and up until that point I've not had help, I've developed my own way of doing things, so I don't really take up the help is on offer.

Impact of specialist equipment

Some students were enthusiastic about the use of specialist ICT to support their learning:

I've got a laptop and some software, inspiration software which is mind mapping, which is brilliant, which I find useful (Delia)

However, others were more ambivalent towards the effectiveness of technology, particularly where there was a lack of instruction regarding its use. Dylan had found the technology 'overwhelming', while Derek felt it was *wonderful* but commented: *there are better ways of educating people, in getting people to think.*

In considering employment, students with dyslexia are faced with the problem that graduate jobs tend to require quite high levels of literacy. There was some awareness of this amongst the students who were interviewed but it is equally likely that the problem has not been considered. Desmond initially felt that he would be able to keep up in the workplace without any extra strategies, but on reflection he realised that hiding the issue might go against him eventually. Interestingly, this was the same student who claimed he had always readily disclosed in an educational setting.

Advisors' and support workers' experiences

Changing attitudes and practices

There was a general feeling amongst staff that attitudes were changing for the better, though awareness and understanding of the social model varied greatly, and a number of employees noted the constraints they worked within (e.g. financial and time).

However, some staff voiced concerns regarding attitudes of some tutors and lecturers towards students with dyslexia (e.g. the opinion that a student who cannot structure their essays should not be at university). But, as one advisor commented, she felt that examples of bad practice could be traced to a few 'villains' in the university.

Staff and students reported improvements in learning and teaching relating to the wider availability of lecture notes and greater awareness amongst tutors regarding dyslexia. It seemed that more recently appointed staff showed greater knowledge and sensitivity compared to those academics who had not recently attended any staff development sessions. Also, there was some evidence of academics beginning to consider the value of implementing mixed modes of assessment. This can be seen as a concrete manifestation of the social model in practice and means that the student is not disabled by the modes of assessment used on their course.

Reflecting the diverse experiences of dyslexia reported by students, support workers noted that the level of support requested by students varied. The support required also related to the timing of diagnosis in that students who had been assessed during their earlier education seemed more likely to have developed learning strategies and to have knowledge concerning the support available in Higher Education. There was a mixture of views concerning what constituted effective support, for some the emphasis was on providing the support or help, whereas for others it was more important to explore how to provide help that empowered them for the future.

Recommendations

- To recognise the diversity between students assessed as dyslexic, with regard to the impact on learning and attitude towards dyslexia e.g. awareness of effects of dyslexia upon self-esteem
- To recognise the effectiveness of the students' own strategies that they have developed over time and their usefulness in future employment
- To be aware that dyslexia may have indirect impacts such as financial difficulties or lack of work experience due to students' lack of time to spend in paid work
- To provide support for, and critical evaluation of, the use of ICT equipment
- To encourage discussion concerning issue of disclosure and the potential impact of dyslexia in future employment

Questions for further research and debate

- What are the criteria used to measure the effectiveness of different methods of assessment?
- How can the process and product of the dyslexia testing and assessment process be improved?
- How does the ethos and professional background of staff supporting dyslexic students influence the way they work and what impact does this have on students?

For further information about DEIP Project

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