

Marking Guidelines for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD)

The aim of this guide is to identify work from a student with Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) and not create lower standards, but the right circumstances under which the student can develop and demonstrate their potential.

1. Context

1.1 Legislation

The Equality Act 2010 (Previously known as Part IV of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995) protects disabled people in education. It is important to note that the vast majority of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has simply been transferred over into the new Act. This Act was brought in to integrate, simplify, clarify and further strengthen former discrimination legislation.

Under this legislation it is illegal for universities to discriminate against disabled students. Such discrimination is defined as:

- Failing to make a reasonable adjustment where any arrangement or physical feature places a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage;
- Unjustifiably treating someone less favourably for a reason relating to his or her disability.

The University has a duty to implement reasonable adjustments for disabled students to ensure that they are not at a disadvantage for reasons due to their disability.

Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) are registered as a disability under the Equality Act 2010.

1.2 Definition of Specific Learning Difficulties

The term "Specific Learning Difficulties" covers a wide range of cognitive and motor difficulties. It is often used synonymously with the term "dyslexia," although it is now accepted that dyslexia is one of only a group of specific learning difficulties, which include Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

SpLD Working Group 2005/DfES Guidelines states that:

“There is considerable overlap between the characteristics of these conditions. In general terms those with SpLDs have particular difficulties which may include spelling, acquiring fluent reading and writing skills and/ or manipulating numbers which may indicate their performance is well below their abilities in other areas. They may also have problems with working memory, organisational skills, receptive and expressive language or oral and auditory skills, maintaining concentration and co-ordination.”

The following are recognised as a range of characteristics for SpLD (taken from SpLD Working Group 2005/DfES Guidelines)

- Lack of confidence
- Becoming fluent in a new skill to the point where it becomes automatic, for example reading, writing and driving a car
- Taking longer than other students to complete tasks
- Organizing work and other aspects of their lives
- A poor sense of passage of time, mixing up dates, times and appointments
- Poor short-term memory for carrying out instructions or copying from the board and remembering what has just been read and/or said
- Retrieving words when speaking and mispronunciations caused by motor problems or difficulties in discriminating sounds
- Directional confusions, getting easily lost , having problems using maps or finding their way to a new place
- Poor motor control resulting in a range of difficulties including handwriting, inaccurate reading and spelling
- Retaining the visual image of words, signs, symbols, formulae, musical notation
- Reading text due to visual distortions such as blurring or moving letters
- Comprehension, despite appearing to read fluently

- Sequencing letters in spelling, or numbers and signs in maths, difficulties using dictionaries, encyclopedias and directories, remembering phone numbers and dialling them accurately
- Sequencing, such as instructions and mathematical procedures, sequencing of numbers or letters and difficulties taking messages
- Attention span and concentration
- Particular susceptibility to stress, which may be associated with deadlines or examinations
- Noticeable inconsistency between what can be achieved on “good” and “bad” days

Specific Learning Difficulties vary in severity and can often exist alongside each other. The effects of a Specific Learning Difficulty will vary in each individual, depending upon the severity of the Specific Learning Difficulty, the learning and teaching support available to the student, and specialist learning and teaching support.

1.3 Rationale for Marking

Recommendations for marking are provided by external professionals, such as Educational Psychologists and Needs Assessors, rather than Disability Support.

Marking was advocated by The Singleton Report: Dyslexia in Higher Education – Policy, Provision and Practice (1999), recommending that marking should be based on content, ideas and critical acumen.

Guidance for Good Practice: Institutional Marking Practices for Dyslexic Students (2004), produced by the Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education (ADSHE) endorses the findings of the Singleton Report, and recommends the following:

“To ensure that students with dyslexia are not treated less favorably 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 reasonable, 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."

1.4 Marking and Academic Standards

There is no duty placed upon HEIs to implement adjustments which would undermine competence standards. A competence standard is defined as "an academic, medical or other standard applied by or on behalf of an education provide for the purpose of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability" (Equality Act –Schedule 13, Section 98).

Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education (ADSHE) recognises that "the issue of differential marking may pose more difficulties for some subject areas than others." In certain subject areas, accuracy in spelling, grammar and syntax, and clarity of expression may be identified as specific competency standards. However, it is not for the individual lecturer/tutor to make a decision on this. ADSHE recommends that "each programme requires clear aims and objectives, taking into account 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."

Schools are asked to note that whilst there is no duty in place to make adjustments which would undermine competence standards, there may be a duty to make adjustments to the way in which that competence standard is tested. (i.e.: alternative formats of assessments)

2. Guidance

- 2.1 In the first instance, a student requiring marking must register with the Wellbeing Team.
- 2.2 All students requiring marking must provide the Wellbeing Team with appropriate evidence of their Specific Learning Difficulty. Appropriate evidence is a post 16 report by an Educational Psychologist, or Specialist teacher, confirming a diagnosis of SpLD. The Wellbeing Team can assist students in arranging for a diagnostic assessment if necessary. Marking will not be applied without appropriate evidence in place
- 2.3 All students requiring marking must attach a paper cover letter to their assignments. The cover letter is issued by the Wellbeing Team in conjunction with an Individual Support Plan (ISP). The ISP recommends that:

“Student should not lose marks because of his/her disability. Student to attach disability cover letter to assignments. For tutors to refer to the marking guidelines for students with Specific learning difficulties (SpLD)

Please note: Cover letters may not be taken into account where it compromises any genuine competency standards/ learning outcomes. Please refer to the module guide for information on the genuine competency standards / learning outcomes of your course”.

Where there are electronic submissions of assignments; students should be inserting the electronic cover letter into their assignment before submitting. (The electronic cover letter is situated in my registry for those students who have SpLD and are registered with the Wellbeing Team)

- 2.4 Where a cover letter is attached or inserted, assessors are required to mark in accordance with these guidelines.
- 2.5 Where marking is not applied, due to undermining of competence standards, e.g. LLB, Social Work, Journalism courses etc., the School must provide a transparent and readily available rationale and marking criteria.
- 2.6 Where a student believes that their work has not been marked in accordance with the UWL Marking Guidelines, they are entitled to submit an Appeal to the Student Union.

3. Practical Guidance for Assessors for when marking assignments and exams.

The following guidance on marking has been provided for assessors:

3.1 Reading the work

It is recommended that assessors read through the work quickly, ignoring spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors on the first read through. This usually makes it easier to assess the quality of the ideas, understanding and knowledge.

If you decide to mark for ideas, understanding and knowledge and ignoring spelling, punctuation and grammar, tell the student you are doing so.

3.2 Avoid penalising poor handwriting:

This is often an indication of the student's grapho-motor difficulties rather than merely rushing to complete the paper and these difficulties are likely to be exacerbated under pressure.

3.3 Avoid penalising technical errors characteristic of SpLD:

Examples include:

- Reversal of letters and/or numbers
- Omission of letters and/or whole words (particularly prepositions)
- Incorrect use of punctuation such as omission of capital letters, full stops or very long sentences.
- Long paragraphs that look like a single sentence, but are composed of an undifferentiated string of simple sentences linked by conjunctions.
- Short sentences that lack links with those that precede and follow.
- The use of a repeated sentence structure.
- Apparent preference for simple words rather than the more complex academic terms. This may reflect the student's difficulties with rapid word retrieval or with spelling and often creates a false impression of an immature understanding of the topic.
- Repetition of ideas, often using slightly different phrasing. This may be because the student is not certain the point has been clearly made and has had a second (or third) attempt.

3.4 Comments and feedback

Constructive criticism with a full explanation of what is needed to improve is essential for all students. Whilst the recommendation is to avoid penalising students for certain errors, a student is unlikely to know how to correct or improve an error without some guidance, model or explanation; students with SpLD in particular are often not familiar with grammatical terms or rules.

Comment on where the student had done well and explain why the particular aspect of their work is good rather than just being critical. Identifying all spelling/grammatical errors are likely to be time-consuming for the assessor, and disheartening for the student. Assessors are advised to identify such errors in only one or two paragraphs. Students should be made aware which paragraphs have been corrected for spelling and grammar.

It can be helpful to use different coloured pens when marking, and even highlighters to indicate which areas of the text belong together, if you want to show where the changes in the structure is. Anything which aids differentiation of text is helpful; colour is instantly recognisable, and will allow students to better interpret their feedback and comments. Avoid using red pens.

Comments pertaining to a lack of knowledge about the course should always be provided where necessary; however, comments referring to literacy deficits should be minimised.

Students with SpLD often find a metaphor and innuendo difficult to interpret. Feedback should be explicit and concise.

Brief Summary of the Guidelines

- Read fast, looking for ideas, understanding and knowledge
- Avoid penalising for handwriting
- Avoid penalising of technical errors (i.e.: reversal of letters, omission of letters and or whole words, incorrect use of punctuation, long paragraphs, repeated sentence structure, repetition of ideas.)
- Make constructive comments;
- Explain your comments in a straight-forward way;
- Write legibly and use good English;
- Let the student know if you are marking just for ideas and understanding;
- Use different coloured pens when marking the work. For example use two pens, one for ideas, and the other for English (if you do not correct the English, only one pen is necessary. Do not use red coloured pen).
- Use highlighter to indicate which areas of text belong together to show changes in structure. If you correct the English, explain what is wrong with it and why the correction is better, do not correct everything – check with the student what is helpful.