**Guidance for marking examination scripts from students with Specific Learning Difficulties**

**Definition of a Specific Learning Difficulty**

The term Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) can refer to a range of conditions, the most prevalent being Dyslexia. Other conditions that may occur either in isolation or in co-existence with Dyslexia are Dyspraxia, Scotopic Sensitivity and Dyscalculia.

Dyslexia can be defined as an unexpected and variable difficulty in acquiring proficiency in reading, spelling and composing written information. It may be associated with other specific difficulties such as weaknesses in certain aspects of cognitive functioning such as working memory and processing speed.

Dyspraxia is a delay or disorder of the planning and/or execution of complex movements and associated with this may be problems of language, perception and thought.

Dyscalculia is a difficulty in understanding the concept of maths, i.e., applying mathematical rules. There can also be associated difficulties in time management and with dealing with sequential information.

**Legal Requirements**

Under the terms of the Equality Act 2010, Higher Education Institutions are required to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ in order to ensure that students with a SpLD are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with students who do not have a SpLD.

Under the terms of the Act, students with a formal and current diagnosis of a SpLD are eligible for support from the university’s support department - DASS. This support, as outlined in their Inclusive Learning and Support Plan (ILSP), may include extra time on library loans, revised reading lists, extensions to coursework and the use of assistive technology such as *TextHelp Read & Write Gold* to support spelling and reading and *Inspiration* to help structure written work.

Typical examination concessions for students with a SpLD can include additional time in exams, the use of a reader, amanuensis or a computer. Students sitting their exams with these accommodations are placed in a separate designated venue.

**Sympathetic Marking - guidelines**

It is the view of the university that students with a SpLD submitting coursework and assignments are able to achieve the learning outcomes of their course specifications with the support outlined above; therefore the university does not advocate sympathetic marking in this instance.

However, Sympathetic Marking or Professional Differentiation should be used when marking the examinations scripts of students with a SpLD, as compensatory support is not available to the student under examination conditions.

There should be no difference in the requirements for students with a SpLD to provide evidence of learning within an exam, however as a consequence of their condition their work may differ from that of their peers, and it is for these differences that assessors may need to make adjustments[[1]](#footnote-1).

Students with a SpLD are typically provided with 25% extra time as they are more likely to experience a difficulty in producing written work as quickly as other students. They may also be slower to read and interpret examination questions and may need to reread a question several times.

Spelling, punctuation, grammar and sentence structure are also likely to be weak. Examination scripts may also be poorly presented and lack overall structure with a weak expression or presentation of knowledge.

**Specific Guidelines for marking the work of students with a Specific Learning Difficulty within an exam**

Students with a SpLD should not be penalised for spelling, grammar and punctuation errors or poor expression of ideas. A student’s examination script should be marked primarily for content, ideas and critical thinking. However, the maintenance of academic standards should always be considered, therefore significant errors in written expression, spelling and grammar should not be disregarded when they impact on coherence and intelligibility.

In subjects where a direct evaluation of grammar, spelling and written expression is be assessed, such as in English and Language courses, the assessor should take account of errors in fluency and accuracy and in written expression as in this instance, where performance in these areas are part of the competence standards of the course, reasonable adjustments do not have to be made. It may also be essential to the understanding of the course that particular words or phrases are used correctly; in this instance, the assessor should take account of the error since the understanding is core to the subject. These guidelines should also be implemented as and when appropriate in courses that are externally accredited or have ‘fitness to practise’ considerations.

Where feedback on an examination script is given, assessors should provide constructive feedback that allows a student to progress, including comments on academic content, spelling, grammar and structure. Good quality constructive feedback is also likely to address the intangible aspects of a SpLD; increased anxiety, lower self-esteem and expectations regarding academic achievement.

**Considerations in the presentation of examination question papers**

Assessors should aim to keep dense text to a minimum; Tahoma or Arial fonts are easier for students with a SpLD to read together with a larger 12+ font size and 1.5 line spacing. Avoid using italic and underlying, the wording of questions should also be checked for ambiguities. For students who have symptoms associated with Scotopic Sensitivity, the use of coloured paper, blue or ivory, will reduce visual stress.

**General Information about Specific Learning Difficulties:**

There are five cognitive processes involved in creating the various difficulties in which students with dyslexia, dyspraxia, scotopic sensitivity or dyscalculia may experience.

(i) The memory processes – the particular memory processes involved are ‘working memory and / or sequential memory’. In the traditional British view of ‘dyslexia’ these memory difficulties are regarded as being the cause of dyslexia, because they greatly affect reading, spelling and mathematics. They also affect the ability to give logical explanations because of the way they influence the order with which points are made.

(ii) The language processes – especially those involved with understanding the meaning of words (semantics). Semantic problems may cause students to ‘lose’ words while they are talking, struggle to ‘find’ the most relevant word to express what they are trying to say or write, have difficulty understanding what they read (even though they know they’ve read it correctly), and misinterpret what people say.

(iii) The auditory processes - which cause auditory perception problems i.e., difficulty processing sounds even though they have been heard. The auditory difficulties are mainly experienced as phonological awareness problems and /or over-sensitivity to certain sounds. Phonological awareness difficulties greatly influence the development of reading and spelling.

(iv) The physical co-ordination processes – which cause difficulties sorting out left from right, poor balance, and clumsiness. When severe, these difficulties can be diagnosed as ‘dyspraxia’.

(v) The visual processes – which create the problems of over-sensitivity to bright light and changes in light intensity. The over-sensitivity causes problems in reading / looking at tables of numbers etc. both in terms of physical discomfort (such as headaches) and/or distortions of text (such as words moving or blurring). These problems appear to be eased by using coloured overlays or tinted spectacles.

Alongside the primary effect of these conditions secondary characteristics of a SpLD can also occur. These include:

(i) Lack of confidence **-** lack of confidence manifests itself both in relation to specific tasks that a student with a SpLD finds difficult, and in a more general way.

(ii) Low self-esteem - the daily questioning of one’s abilities and capacities will slowly and surely erode self-esteem. Among all the problems, the difficulties, the inefficiencies, the traumas, where is the person who is of worth?

(iii) Anger and frustration **-** a sense being imprisoned and trapped is often reported by students with SpLD’s; frustration soon turns to anger.

(iv) Anxiety, fear and panic - whatever difficulties one may have in life, anxiety usually makes them worse, and this is certainly true of the difficulties associated with a SpLD. Anxiety and stress can also precipitate physical symptoms: panic attacks, nausea, migraine and susceptibility to illness.

(v) Embarrassment, shame and guilt - feelings of embarrassment about having SpLD can deepen into shame, and, whereas embarrassment is often specific to a particular situation, shame seems to seep through the whole personality.

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1. The examination scripts of students with a specific learning difficulty are identified by means of a sticker. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)