FACULTY OF HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND EDUCATION

SUPPORTING NURSING AND MIDWIFERY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES ON PLACEMENT

DYSLEXIA

APRIL 2013
Introduction

Kingston University is committed to ensuring all students, including those with disabilities and specific learning difficulties, are supported in gaining equal access to their chosen course and facilities at the University.

The University recognises the social model of disability. The student's disability is not the source of any disadvantage, it is social barriers (such as the physical environment, methods of communication and prejudicial attitudes) that create this disadvantage.

According to The Equality Act (2010) a person has a disability if:

- they have a physical or mental impairment
- the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to perform normal day-to-day activities

For the purposes of the Act, these words have the following meanings:

- 'substantial' means more than minor or trivial
- 'long-term' means that the effect of the impairment has lasted or is likely to last for at least twelve months (there are special rules covering recurring or fluctuating conditions)
- 'normal day-to-day activities' include everyday things like eating, washing, walking and going shopping

Examples include

- Physical impairments (eg Cerebral Palsy and Arthritis)
- Sensory impairments (eg Visual and Hearing)
- Specific Learning Difficulties (eg Dyslexia and Dyspraxia)
- Mental Health Difficulties
- Long-term medical conditions

It is unlawful for individuals with disabilities to be treated less favourably for a disability-related reason. To avoid placing disabled students at a substantial disadvantage, reasonable adjustments should be put in place on an individual basis.
HOWEVER ….

Any adjustments provided for students or guidelines provided for staff working with students with disabilities do not in any way replace decisions made through professional judgements regarding students’ competence in practice. The needs of a student in relation to their disability must not over-ride professional requirements to meet the required level of competence.
DYSEXIA

Dyslexia is a persistent condition involving a combination of abilities and difficulties that can affect reading, writing and spelling as well as organisation, memory and sequencing.

When on placement students with dyslexia may encounter day-to-day problems including

- Short-term memory problems with poor retention of information resulting in difficulties with remembering verbal instructions, telephone messages, complicated medical terms and drug names

- 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 (NSH instead of NHS), numbers, tasks, files alphabetically or sequentially or retelling an incident

- Difficulties with spoken language resulting in mispronunciation of words (whether familiar or unfamiliar), finding the right words to say, difficulties in understanding

- 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 become easily distracted, especially on a busy ward, find it difficult to stay on task and need more effort to focus which may lead to tiredness

A student may have just a few or many of the above difficulties. Some have feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem due to years of continual reinforcement that they are 'lazy' or 'stupid'. Many feel a sense of frustration, feeling unable to do something that other students manage easily.
However, all students with dyslexia have relative strengths which they have developed and enhanced as a way of minimising potential challenges and maximising their strengths. Dyslexia is often associated with:

- Good problem solving and ‘trouble shooting’ abilities
- Ability to look at information in a holistic way
- Good interpersonal skills
- Good verbal abilities
- Being creative – lateral thinkers
- Good visual-spatial skills

(University of Surrey (2007); University of Southampton (n.d.))

Disclosure

Students may feel reluctant to disclose their dyslexia for fear of stigmatisation and/or discrimination. However, any reasonable adjustments to which the student might be entitled can only be put in place if a student has disclosed their disability. In placement, disclosure is important as it allows the mentor to become more aware of the student’s learning needs and to implement positive strategies that can help support the student in achieving their learning outcomes. However, students with dyslexia must still be able to demonstrate their fitness to practice, learning the required skills and demonstrating competence in the required learning outcomes although their achievement may be through different means.

(Thames Valley University (n.d.)
How to support dyslexic students on placement

There are a number of generic things that can be helpful

- Meet with the student before or at the very beginning of placement to discuss support
- Consider the specific need that the student has and discuss the following
  1. ask if there are any particular areas that might pose challenges for them
  2. discuss any strategies the student may already have in place to compensate for these challenges
  3. talk about possible solutions and strategies for supporting them
  4. discuss the effectiveness of these strategies and how plausible (or not) they may be
  5. discuss alternative strategies that may be beneficial
- Meet with the student regularly to discuss progress
- Document a summary of the discussion in the student's Practice Assessment Document (PAD) to maintain a record of support offered and given (remember that the PAD will be shared with future mentors so the maintenance of confidentiality is important)

Possible approaches to supporting students with dyslexia (RCN 2010)

*Scaffolded Learning (Vygotsky 1978)*

This approach strongly advocates the presence of social interaction as a means to promote learning. In practice, students per se, and students with dyslexia in particular, experience a gap between their current understanding and potential future achievements. By providing a 'scaffold', or support, that can be gradually withdrawn the student is encouraged in their development, becoming secure in their knowledge and practice. Your supportive interactions with students in placement provide this scaffold that can enable students to achieve their full potential
The ‘Three M’ approach (McLoughlin 2001)

- Make practice learning **manageable** – break down complex tasks into smaller more manageable steps thus reducing the load on the student’s working memory

- Make learning **multisensory** – learning in practice has three principle elements i.e. input of information, cognition and output (Reid 2003). Using all the senses to input information encourages students to learn more effectively. This may sound like a lot of work, but there are ways of achieving this using auditory channels (eg verbal explanations of complex case histories, skills etc), visual materials (eg flow charts, dyslexia friendly printed materials etc) and kinaesthetic channels (eg the day to day nature of nursing work requiring nurses to use a variety of body positions in a variety of settings as they learn to ‘nurse’).

- Make use of **memory** skills to aid recall

**Tips for supporting students with dyslexia in placement**

*Supporting the student with speaking, listening and remembering*

- be patient
- give verbal instructions in a quiet place where possible
- speak slowly, pause between phrases and maintain eye contact
- give concise instructions in the order they are to be carried out
- repeat or rephrase when necessary
- ask student to repeat information back to you

(Based on ALS, University of Surrey (2007))
**Facilitating documentation skills**

- allow the student to write in a quiet place
- allow extra time to write notes
- check notes written by student and be prepared to proof-read
- provide student with a glossary of terms
- allow the student to practice filling in forms before they have to do it for real
- help students to determine what needs to be recorded in patients’ notes

**Promoting effective reading in clinical settings**

- emphasise to student the importance of accuracy when reading
- if student makes an error when reading do not make any judgemental comments, just give the right word
- encourage students to crosscheck drug names
- highlight important words
- avoid using too much jargon or too many acronyms
- printed material should be in Arial font
And finally ……

There are challenges, but also great rewards in supporting students with dyslexia on placement. People with dyslexia are considered to have a different way of thinking and learning. The challenge is to identify how individuals can be assisted in recognising areas in which there is a need for improvement and in seeing what they are already doing well (RCN 2010). They often have many strengths as well as individual challenges related to their diagnosis

- an ability to think holistically and see the ‘big picture’
- creativity and imagination
- good visualisation skills and spatial ability
- good problem solving skills

Students are often well aware of their strengths and potential challenges and able to outline their needs to staff working with them. Through discussion, solutions can usually be found which are helpful to both students and staff since many strategies which are useful for health professionals with dyslexia are useful for everyone.

Contact details

If you wish to speak to someone with regard to the needs of students with dyslexia or need further clarification please contact

Jean Shapcott (Senior Lecturer)  j.shapcot@sgul.kingston.ac.uk
020 8417 5748 / 07876 137195

The Disability and Dyslexia Service, Kingston University
dyslexia@kingston.ac.uk
020 8417 4252
References


University of Southampton (n.d.) ‘Supporting dyslexic students on practice placements’

University of Surrey (2007) ‘Advice for Mentors when Working with Dyslexic Students on Placement’

Thames Valley University (n.d.) ‘Guidance for Mentors: Supporting Healthcare Students with Disabilities’

Further Information

British Dyslexia Association [www.bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk)

Dyslexia Action [www.dyslexia action.org.uk](http://www.dyslexia action.org.uk)