

## **MARKING GUIDELINES FOR DISABLED STUDENTS**

This document concerns good practice for marking the work of student with disabilities. This includes students with physical and sensory disabilities, those with Specific Learning Difficulties (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, Autistic Spectrum Disorders), as well as students with neurological impairments and mental wellbeing issues.

### Academic Standards

As assessors in Higher Education we are naturally concerned about compromising academic standards when making allowances for students with disabilities (including dyslexia) in the marking of coursework and examination scripts. We should be reassured that ever since SENDA, the need to maintain academic standards is a fundamental premise within the law. In fact, the terms of possible justification for treating a disabled student less favourably than other students include the “necessity to maintain academic standards or the necessity to maintain standards of any other prescribed kind

or occurring under prescribed circumstances.” However, it is the way that learning outcomes are defined and assessed that is crucial.

QAA take the view that “academic assessment practices must ensure that disabled students are given the opportunity to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes and competence standards.” [Precept 12] and “whilst there is no duty to make any adjustment to a competence standard itself, the duty does apply to the assessment of that standard, that is, to the process of enabling a student to demonstrate that they meet the standard”.

Reasonable adjustments (e.g. extra time, using a word processor or a scribe) can be applied to the process, and alternative assessments can be devised to permit demonstration of attainment of the learning outcome.

Learning outcomes must be specified in ways that do not discriminate – they should focus on justifiable skills in handling knowledge – the requirement to handwrite, speak or visually observe may be essential in some circumstances, but generally alternatives are possible.

The purpose of coursework and examinations is for students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding. There must be no difference in the requirement for students with disabilities to provide evidence of learning than for their peers.

If, however, when all possible reasonable adjustments have been made, a disabled student is not able to demonstrate academic competence as prescribed by the course requirements, he or she will not be able to complete the course successfully.

Reasonable adjustments, which in the case of students with disabilities may include differential marking criteria, cannot involve failure to penalise lack of knowledge.

However, as a direct result of their disability, the standard of written work of some students may differ from that of their peers, and it is these subtle differences for which assessors may need to make adjustments.

#### Marking with due consideration for the effects of disabilities

A significant number of students registered with the Disability & Dyslexia Service have dyslexia, or another Specific Learning Difficulty. These students may typically experience difficulty producing written work as quickly as other students; they may encounter more difficulty in structuring their work and getting their thoughts down in a logical, sequential manner; 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. To ensure that students with dyslexia are not treated less favourably than other students as a result of their disability it is important that assessors are aware of the manifestations of dyslexia and other disabilities in Higher Education. They will then be able to give due

consideration to disability-related factors when marking examination scripts. It is also important to note that disabled students may experience similar difficulties as described above but they may have a diagnosis other than dyslexia.

### Functional Support vs. Diagnostic Information

Students registered with the Disability & Dyslexia Service each have an Individual Support Plan (ISP): faculty staff responsible for teaching these students have access to part of this Plan, which details the support and/or adjustments they are expected to make for the University to meet its legal obligation (under the Equality Act 2010). The ISP details only the support academic/faculty staff are expected to provide; the ISP does not contain information about a student's diagnosis. The support listed on an ISP may include dispensation for spelling, grammar and punctuation in examinations, extra time, use of a scribe, etc. Such support is recommended for students with Specific Learning Difficulties such as dyslexia; however it may also be appropriate for students with other disabilities and health conditions. Therefore, it should not be assumed that if a student has dispensation for spelling, grammar and punctuation on their ISP, this student is dyslexic. It is also not appropriate for staff to ask students about the nature of their disability diagnosis.

### Coursework and examinations differentiation

Within the University of South Wales, there is a clear differentiation between the adjustments that should be made when marking work by students with

disabilities. A student's Individual Support Plan (ISP) clearly states whether a student is entitled to dispensation for spelling and grammar for examinations. There is no dispensation given to disabled students for spelling, grammar and punctuation in their coursework.

### Examinations

One school of thought argues that the extra time (and any other adjustments such as readers, scribes etc) granted to disabled candidates in an examination should be sufficient adjustment. However, the provision of extra time in examinations is often to allow for slower processing or memory recall, or slower handwriting; extra time is unlikely to improve the spelling and grammar accuracy of a student with such difficulties and they will continue to exhibit issues with written expression. Whilst anonymous marking is employed at USW, staff marking exam scripts are provided with a list of enrolment numbers of students who are entitled to dispensation for spelling, grammar and punctuation. Without this measure, students with disabilities such as dyslexia would be unfairly discriminated against.

### Coursework

A student's ISP details whether they are eligible for dispensation for spelling, grammar and punctuation: this adjustment only applies to examinations and not to coursework. Therefore, staff marking coursework do not need to make adjustments for poor literacy skills because a student has a disability (including spelling, grammar, punctuation, structure).

Most students registered with the Disability & Dyslexia Service are in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA): typically, for students with literacy difficulties and issues with written expression, this may include assistive software and access to one-to-one support from a specialist Study Skills Support Tutor. This package of support is designed to negate the impact of a student's disability and therefore there should be no difference between the quality of the work submitted by disabled and non-disabled students.

For students not in receipt of DSA, support is still available either via the DDS or from other University resources (e.g. Student Development and Study Skills Service).

### Subject and Professional Differentiation

One of the important principles of disability legislation is that any accommodation made for a disabled candidate should not undermine academic standards. The issue of differential marking may pose more difficulties for some subject areas than others. Certain subject areas (e.g. languages) may be explicitly assessing competence with grammar, spelling and written expression. There may also be professional considerations in some areas, such as law, education, medicine and allied subjects, where accrediting bodies external to the institution have expectations as to standards and formats of written expression. Competency standards must not be compromised, but the way they are assessed should be differentiated.

However, it is not for the individual lecturer to make decisions on this. Each programme needs to have clear aims and objectives, taking into consideration

professional considerations. QAA again “Staff should be aware of their anticipatory duty ..... to provide flexible and inclusive approaches to learning and teaching to ensure that all students, including disabled students, are able to demonstrate that they meet intended learning outcomes and so minimise the need for reasonable adjustments”. Degree programmes and individual modules should be designed with the learning difficulties of disabled students in mind. Learning outcomes should give weighting to the importance of written language skills and thus consider the extent to which a 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.

#### Alternative Forms of Assessment

In the small number of cases where a student’s disability does not allow them to engage with the method of assessment without being disadvantaged, the academic adjustments commonly made may not be sufficient to provide appropriate support. It could therefore be necessary to consider alternative modes of assessment – for example, a viva voce rather than written work. When deciding whether an alternative format for assessment is appropriate, it is important to consider the learning outcomes against which students are assessed. It may be the case that, due to professional requirements or the need to demonstrate a particular skill (for example, well structured written arguments), alternative assessment cannot be offered. It is hoped that these needs can be identified and mitigated for prior to a student’s enrolment: however, should alternative forms of assessment need to be considered post-

enrolment on the grounds of disability, it is encourage that the faculty works collaboratively with the student and the Disability & Dyslexia Service to identify a mutually acceptable solution.

The important aspect here is that consideration of alternative forms of assessment should be informed both by student need and the maintenance of academic standards/professional requirements. An unambiguous academic rationale should be available for the final decision, so that the student is clear about the grounds on which the alternative assessment was/was not arranged.

#### The importance of detailed and specific general marking guidelines

It is good, and increasingly general practice for course coordinators to devise very clear marking criteria and guidelines for coursework and examinations, so that there is consistency between markers in the awarding of a grade. Such guidelines normally stipulate the information and knowledge that a student needs to convey in order for a percentage mark to be awarded.

It is rare for spelling to be included as a marking criterion and therefore students, whether disabled or not, should not be penalised for spelling errors. The same would apply to minor inaccuracies and errors in punctuation and grammar. There should be no need to differentiate between the scripts of dyslexic and non-dyslexic students on the basis of these features of their writing if they are not being assessed explicitly.

In subjects such as pharmacology, nursing or chiropractic, in which correct spelling is deemed essential, the number of marks that can be lost for poor spelling should be stipulated. Usually only a small percentage (2-5%) of marks is likely to be assigned to spelling. If key course-related words are spelled incorrectly, markers should make no differentiation between the way they mark disabled and non-disabled students' responses.

### Institutional Procedures

Individual support needs of students with dyslexia vary, the University's Disability & Dyslexia Policy aims to inform the best practice in order to help assist staff and students with specific needs arising including admissions, identification, support, funding and monitoring.

### References

Singleton, C.H. (Chair) (1999) Dyslexia in Higher Education: policy, provision and practice. (Report of the National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education.) Hull: University of Hull on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Councils of England and Scotland.

ADSHE (Association of Dyslexic Specialists in Higher Education) Guidance for Good Practice: Institutional Marking Practices for Dyslexic Students

[http://adshe.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/marketing\\_guidelines\\_for\\_good\\_practice.docx](http://adshe.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/marketing_guidelines_for_good_practice.docx)

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Code-of-practice-Section-3.aspx>

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