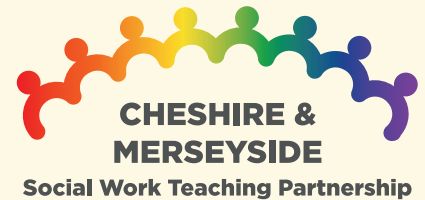


# WORKING WITH SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS WHO HAVE DYSLEXIA



A Good Practice Guide for Practice Educators, work-based supervisors and colleagues supporting a social work student on placement.

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This Good Practice Guide draws on some of the experiences of social work students who have dyslexia. It offers advice and suggestions worthy of consideration when working with students who have dyslexia.



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As a starting point, it is important to remember that people with dyslexia are all different and dyslexia affects people in different ways.



## What is dyslexia?

- Dyslexia is defined as ‘a specific learning difficulty that mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills’ (British Dyslexia Association (BDA), 2018), and according to Fuller et al (2004) it is the most common, self-reported disability amongst undergraduates in the UK, accounting for 35% of all students identifying as having some form of disability.
- As dyslexia is a lifelong condition and has a significant impact on a person's day-to-day life, it meets the criteria of a disability a covered by The Equality Act 2010.
- Acknowledged as a specific learning difficulty, dyslexia can impact on everyone, including of course, social workers, academics, and students, as well as people with lived experience and carers.
- In addition to being the most common self-reported disability amongst undergraduates, dyslexia is also the most common disability that will be encountered in the workplace. This means that for programmes such as social work leading to a professional qualification, support for students is key to enable successful completion of the programme and future longevity of career.
- A diagnosis of dyslexia is highly significant for a variety of reasons, not least the fact that social work students with such a ‘self-declared’ disability are more likely to fail or to be delayed in completing their studies (Hussein, 2018).
- Dyslexia is not linked to intelligence but can make learning difficult. Many people who have dyslexia have strong visual, creative and problem-solving skills.

## Understanding dyslexia

- As a starting point, it is important to remember that people with dyslexia are all different and dyslexia affects people in different ways. Just as preferred terminology varies, 'people with dyslexia' or 'dyslexic' are used interchangeably throughout this guide, and as language is constantly evolving, we have used the terms most commonly expressed in current literature.
- Dyslexia impacts a person 24 hours a day, 365 days of every year. To understand dyslexia and the impact it has on individuals, we need to look holistically at an individual's experiences. Every person with dyslexia will have a different pattern of strengths and challenges (Griggs, 2021).
- Social work students told us they felt that dyslexia could not and should not be simplified (and arguably trivialised) into people simply being seen as having poor reading, spelling and writing abilities.
- Challenges with concentration, memory retention and information processing are all common difficulties experienced by many with dyslexia (Isaacs, 2019).
- Dyslexia as a term is often used interchangeably with 'literacy difficulties': it is therefore important for educators to understand that these are different things and require different support (Kirby & Welch, 2016).
- It is important to understand that dyslexia has an impact on adults as well as children, and a diagnosis may be sought at any time. Students told us they felt many people thought dyslexia only affected children.



‘Identification is key to success in education and employment as well as [in relation to] self-esteem’

Griggs, 2021

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## Challenges associated with dyslexia

- Students told us that one of the main challenges associated with dyslexia is that of identification. ‘Identification is key to success in education and employment as well as [in relation to] self-esteem’ (Griggs, 2021, p 18). Clearly, if people do not understand the impact of dyslexia, then the appropriate support, understanding and empathy is unable to be given. This is more challenging for students who are “self-declared dyslexics” who have not accessed formal diagnostic services for whatever reason (NB: obtaining a formal diagnosis as an adult is expensive and often out of reach for many students).
- Research indicates that people with dyslexia are often worried about disclosure due to the stigma often associated with dyslexia. Students told us they often ‘disguised’ their dyslexia and in several cases did not seek a formal diagnosis for fear of being judged differently. Identification can be difficult, and many students with dyslexia adopt a strategy of camouflaging some of the more obvious dyslexic traits.
- Many individuals ‘walk the tightrope’ of their dyslexia being significant enough to warrant



support, whilst not being damning of their ability to fulfil their role (Kiesel, DeZelar & Lightfoot, 2018).

- A challenge for educators is that 'dyslexic brains are "wired" slightly differently, meaning that people with dyslexia have a different way of processing information' (Griggs, 2021, p 18). This requires educators to offer alternative ways of teaching/supporting learning in university and on placement, and developing appropriate understanding in order to support students. This often looks easy on paper, but putting it into practice requires time, patience, flexibility and understanding.

- A challenge for organisations is to create and develop diverse workspaces. For social work practitioners it is important to consider what might be done to raise this as an issue with colleagues and management, and to keep it on the agenda.

- Remember that all organisations have a duty to provide reasonable adjustments under the aegis of the public sector equality duty. It is important therefore to ask how educators/organizations accommodate alternative learning, working, and understanding in the workplace?

Social work is all about people, and social workers are committed to upholding social justice and promoting anti-discriminatory practice.

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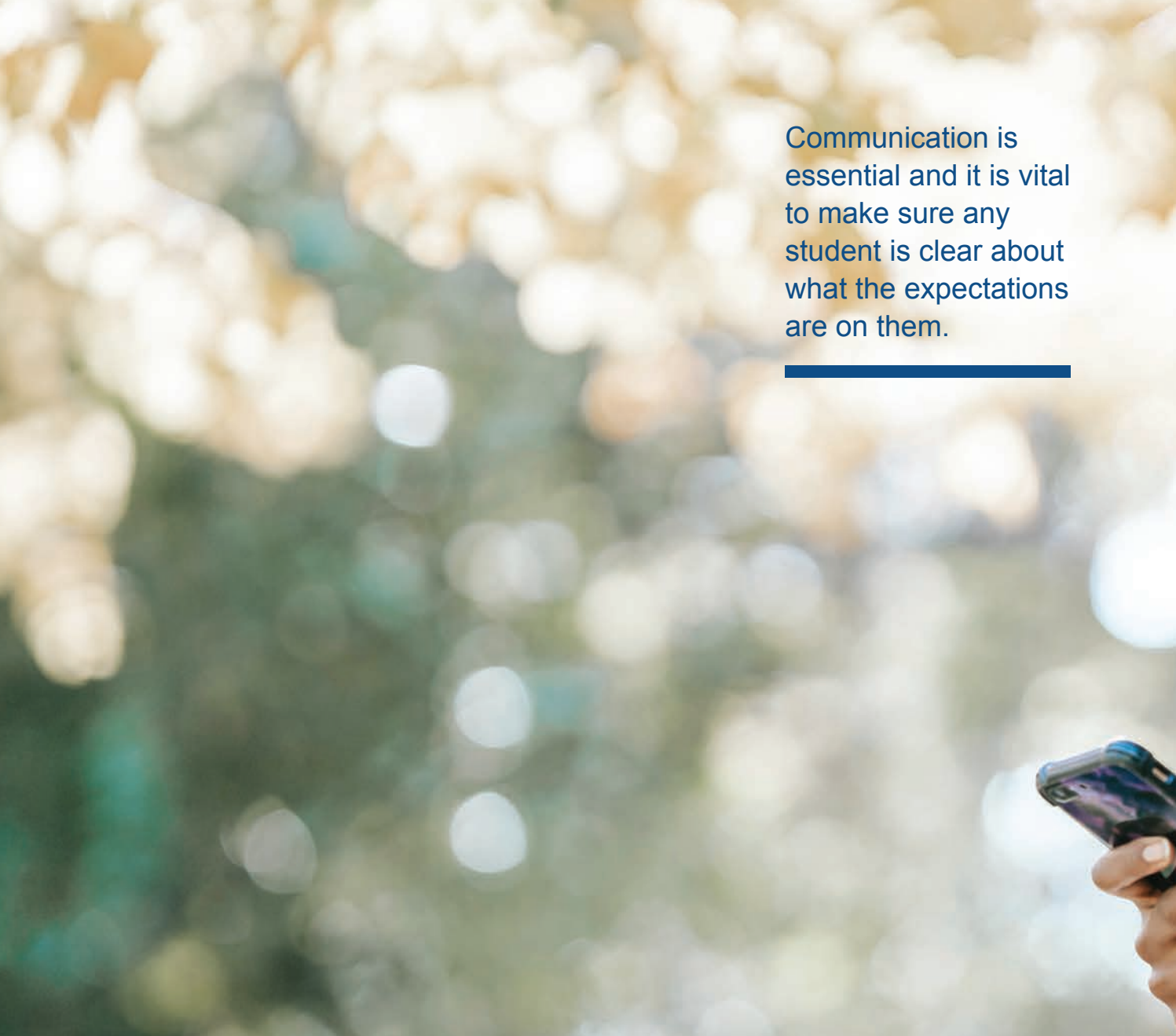
## Opportunities

- Students told us that both whilst studying social work, and once qualified, working as a social worker offered them an opportunity to 'give something back' and share their understanding of how situations can be 'different.' Several students articulated their belief that people with dyslexia bring creativity to social work/programmes, designed as they are to embrace equality and diversity.
- Social work is all about people, and social workers are committed to upholding social justice and promoting anti-discriminatory practice. The profession is therefore in a good place to support students and colleagues with dyslexia.
- Dyslexic thinking skills and innovative problem solving, together with creativity are vital for the future. 'If we place equal importance on dyslexic strengths and challenges, we can and will go far'. (Griggs, 2021, p 19). It is both a challenge and an opportunity to ensure we make this part of the culture within our organisations.
- Students with dyslexia need to be given enough opportunities to demonstrate their strengths. These may be in advocating for others, managing people, communicating with others, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking.
- Dyslexia needs to be re-framed as an asset to a social work profession. Students who have dyslexia will have overcome many hurdles to get to this point in their education/career and are likely to be dedicated to their choice of career as well as being extremely hard working and tenacious.
- Students told us they worked hard to develop skills and attempted to be very organised: for example, 'I write down everything on a list and I also take time out for myself and make sure I have decluttered any space I'm working in-for me when it's all decluttered and tidy it makes me think more clearly'.

## Practical Suggestions

- Talk to your student! This sounds obvious, but make sure you both understand how you both learn. Ask yourselves: do our styles complement each other and if not, be open about what the challenges may be. People with dyslexia tend to be visual learners and may think in pictures as opposed to words. They are often imaginative and generally creative, such that students (and practitioners) who have dyslexia can bring a lot to a team.
- Remember that the way many people with dyslexia have to pay attention to their learning may mean that initial learning makes more of an impression than it might do for other learners.
- Some people's understanding is dependent on the senses they use. People may not use all their senses equally: vision, sound and kinaesthetic sense are the most common, so think about the materials you use to work you're your students: is it accessible and available in a range of formats? Consider also the use of different formats/layouts for different types of information, including audio.

- Communication is essential and it is vital to make sure any student is clear about what the expectations are on them.
- Practice educators and colleagues in practice, as well as tutors and staff in university need to emphasise to students that it is OK to ask questions, often time and again. Good communication can bring about positive outcomes and the development of effective strategies for professional and personal development.
- Ask the student what has worked (or not) for them in the past and remember that they will be the expert on their dyslexia. They will have a range of strategies they use to manage their dyslexia successfully: these may include using coloured font, making lists, using a recording device to organise their workload, or using time-blocking techniques.
- Ask the student: What were the skills you learnt most recently? How did you learn them? What task was involved? How important are the skills to you? What made them easy to learn? What was



Communication is essential and it is vital to make sure any student is clear about what the expectations are on them.

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hard about learning them? How easily have you been able to adapt the skills to other uses?

- Support and encourage good working habits and a work life balance. We know that many people with dyslexia take work home in an attempt to keep up with their workload [and try to do this without their managers knowing!] (Burns, Poikkeus & Aro, 2013, Major & Tetley, 2019). Make sure you encourage your student to talk to you if they feel they are not able to complete their allocated tasks in the working week.
- Time-blocking and other methods of organisation might mean the more challenging elements of the role are undertaken at a specific time (usually in the morning) when people are fresher and more alert. It may be that a student works better in short bursts of activity, broken up with more routine work. Several short breaks as opposed to one longer one may be preferable. Taking such an approach is evidence of a 'reasonable adjustment', as each person is unique and requires tailored support for them as an individual. Consider options such as job-sharing or job-carving to allow those with dyslexia to play to their strengths and support their placement journey (O'Dwyer & Thorpe, 2013).



- Consider use of colour- or mind-maps and colourful flow charts to get the student where they need to be. These could be used as an aide-mémoire during supervision to ensure the student is meeting the requirements of the PCF's. This obviously requires flexibility, adaptability, and some alterations to be made, but could have a positive impact on the student and their needs, as well as making supervision sessions more interactive and enjoyable.
- Be flexible, creative, and innovative with supervision. For example, might this also be done as a quick phone call at the end of the day? Can supervisions be much shorter, but twice a week

Organise 'soft' or informal supervision sessions to allow for more relaxed discussion about what students were thinking, doing, and feeling whilst completing tasks.

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instead of once a fortnight? Consider using a flow chart of expected progression as a visual reminder so students can see what shape their progression and development will/should look like and feel like. Are we able to develop a strengths-based and person-centred approach for our students? This is encouraged in practice with service users for a reason, and it can be an extremely effective way of supporting students.

- Organise 'soft' or informal supervision sessions to allow for more relaxed discussion about what students were thinking, doing, and feeling whilst completing tasks. This opens alternative ways for those with dyslexia to provide an understanding for their learning that may be missed in highly pressure environments like official observations or case-note write ups.
- Remember that dyslexia has a stigma attached to it, and students may struggle to disclose this due to fear of reactions. Help the student feel safe to talk about their strengths, challenges, and experiences and ask them how you can help them.
- Consider organising opportunities for dyslexic students to meet with others and to receive feedback in order to develop a positive sense of self-efficacy, as maintaining a high level of confidence makes managing dyslexia very much easier (Stacey & Fowler, 2020).
- Think about using SMART (Specific, Measurable Achievable, Realistic, Timely) objectives to introduce students into the fast-paced environment of social work. Some students have told us that the use of SMART targets can provide opportunities to have experience of success, where their skills can be fully utilised and positively acknowledged. Give verbal rather than written instructions.
- Consider sharing examples of overcoming adversity and demonstrated examples of resilience. Dyslexic students can benefit greatly from a mentor who knows adversity and difficulty and who has managed to overcome it. This is arguably one of the greatest abilities of the dyslexic individual, as they have had to adapt and overcome difficulties all of their lives. Help the student see this and use it as motivation. Students told us it that it has helped them to have a good support network of family, friends and peers.
- Direct students to some of the material and resources below. Some dyslexic students may not fully understand how their dyslexia impacts them. Guide them towards resources and materials that will help open up dialogue and understanding of what dyslexia means to them.
- Dyslexia can have a profound impact on an individual's life experiences, and this should be acknowledged. This will go some way to truly appreciating and understanding dyslexia (Hewson & Gant, 2020).
- Reading through this good practice guide can help make a positive difference to potentially 10-20% of your students/colleagues and therefore increase their productivity, ability and well-being.
- Knowing that there are some considerations and changes to be made is already a powerful step in the right direction for actioning positive change. Those with dyslexia can often feel misunderstood, and therefore the time taken to read, process and reflect on this guide can show a commitment to them and their learning experience.

## Examples of reasonable adjustments in the work place (adapted from The Dyslexia Association UK)

### For students who experience reading difficulties:

- Use voicemail rather than email.
- Providing screen-reading software facilities.
- Adjusting PC screen setup to show coloured background instead of white.
- Provide text-to-speech or other assistive programs.
- For students who experience difficulty writing:
  - Adjust deadlines to allow more time for completion/issue documents earlier.
  - Consider other methods of communicating information.
  - Provide speech-to-text software (eg. Dragon).
  - Provide a Smartpen.
  - Provide modified spell checker program.

### For students who experience verbal difficulties:

- Give instructions one-at-a-time.
- Choose a quiet location.
- Ask for the instructions to be repeated back.
- Encourage the student to take notes and check these with them before allowing them to proceed.

### For students who experience difficulty with time planning:

- Consider moving the student to a quieter location in the workplace.
- If possible, allow them to work from home from time to time.
- Allow the student time to write notes or highlights when interrupting them in a task.
- Adopt a 'do-not-disturb' policy for set times in the day.
- Provide a wall planner or device to allow them to organise their time effectively.
- Remind the student of pending deadlines.





## Useful resources and references

Made by Dyslexia: [www.madebydyslexia.org](http://www.madebydyslexia.org). Contains lots of resources, including dyslexia tests, dyslexia dynamic report and specific sub sections for work and study.

The Dyslexia Association: [www.dyslexia.uk.net/about-the-dyslexia-association/](http://www.dyslexia.uk.net/about-the-dyslexia-association/).  
An organisation founded in 1971 offering support and advice to children and adults with dyslexia as well as suggestions for employers.

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