Neurodiversity and Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs)
Placement guidance for students and Practice assessor/supervisor/ workplace mentor

The purpose of this guide is to:

- Explain neurodiversity and the range of specific learning difficulties (SpLD).

- Provide an insight into the barriers faced by students with SpLD in a work place, such as on placement.

- Provide guidance to support discussion between the mentor and the student in identifying reasonable adjustments and strategies. These can empower students to thrive and succeed, and enable a supportive and inclusive placement experience.

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What is Neurodiversity and Specific Learning Difficulty?

Neurodiversity is a term that applies to all those with neurological difference such as those with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD). SpLD is an umbrella term for dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

These specific learning difficulties are characterised by the different way information is processed and learnt, it typically affects reading, writing and spelling as well as concentration, organisation, memory and sequencing.

SpLD's appear across all ranges of ability and with varying severity. As with any disability, no two individuals experience are the same and some students may exhibit signs of more than one SpLD.

Strengths can include:

- Intuitive
- Visual-spatial awareness
- Good strategic thinkers
- Good at problem solving
- Empathetic
- Honest
- Creative and original
- Risk takers
- Ability to hyper focus
- Leadership – good at getting things started, high energy levels
- Resilient / determined/motivated
- Holistic/global thinkers (see the whole picture)

Challenges can include:

- Short term and/or working memory, especially verbal memory. May have difficulty remembering verbal instructions and appointments.

- Processing information quickly, especially under time pressure. The student may take a few moments to think things through and respond, read and make notes accurately at speed, take longer to learn routines or procedures, or to read calibrations on equipment.

- Organisational skills, planning, multi- tasking, prioritising and time management.
- Sequencing information, such as correctly ordering letters, numbers, tasks, files (alphabetically or sequentially) making accurate efficient records/patient notes or retelling an incident.

- Motor skills, fine or gross. This may impact handwriting or a slow writing speed.

- Orientation, such as identifying left/right, following direction, analysing data/charts.

- Concentration, particularly in distracting environments.

The legal Context

Under the Equality Act 2010 the protected characteristic of disability applies to a person who has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

A SpLD is a disability and therefore health professionals with an SpLD are entitled to receive 'reasonable adjustments' both in the educational institution and in the workplace. 'Reasonable' in this context means adjustments which are practical and achievable in the context of the real working environment.

Disabled students will be expected to demonstrate that they are "fit for practice" – i.e. they must meet all the competencies and skills set by their professional body. Reasonable adjustments should be in place **before** competence is assessed.

General Guidance for Student

- Before you meet with your practice assessor/supervisor/workplace mentor or before you start your placement, take time to identify your strengths and your needs, and what challenges you may come across in this particular work environment. Then practice a solution focused approach to discussing reasonable adjustments, using this document to help you.
  - For example: *I would like to discuss the noise levels in the office. It is hard to concentrate when others are speaking loudly on the phone. I am wondering if I can change desks and work around people who aren't talking often on the phone.*

- Reflect on previous challenges faced and how you overcome them. Consider how you could transfer these new skills to this placement/situation. This could be done with your placement supervisor, specialist mentor, SpLD tutor or with a critical friend.

- Be honest with colleagues – tell them what you find difficult and what your strengths are.

- Be honest with yourself, don't minimise the challenges, be kind to yourself, and identify your strengths.

- Be as prepared as you can be for each new experience on your placement.

- Find the words or phrases that help you confidently say what you need (see page 13 for words and phrases to help).

- Discuss on placement the opportunity to meet/observe/buddy with a member of staff who has disclosed a specific learning difficulty or has identified strategies that support their neurodiverse profile in the workplace.

- Support and digital capability are significant factors in improving your learning experience, well-being, and confidence. Access your learning and mentoring support before and during your placement. This could be from:

  - your Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) funded support https://www.uwe.ac.uk/life/health-and-wellbeing/get-disability-support/get-dyslexia-and-spld-support#section-1

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- Library Study Skills https://www.uwe.ac.uk/study/study-support/study-skills/library-study-skills-support#section-3

- Your UWE module Blackboard site.

- Make use of software and equipment that is available to you, either through your DSA funded support or by exploring free/low cost options. https://academicskills.uwe.ac.uk/assistive-technology/workbooks/free-and-low-cost-assistive-software/10851/introduction

General guidance for practice assessor/supervisor/ workplace mentor.

- Reasonable adjustments are often a simple change in working life that have little impact on other staff, but greatly improve your student's productivity and performance. It could be as simple as changing break times or adapting the format of a meeting.

- Meet with the student before or at the beginning of the placement to discuss the expectations of the placement, reasonable adjustments and strategies. Many students will have already developed effective strategies and understand the reasonable adjustments which would enable them to succeed on placement. Conversely, the student may have been recently diagnosed not fully appreciate the impact it may have, or the strategies that are needed.

- Identifying, valuing and using one's own strengths is thought of as the key to engaging people in learning new skills and building confidence. Therefore, ask the student about their strengths and how these can help them succeed in their placement.

- Discuss any strategies– how do they normally manage? As their practice assessor/supervisor/ workplace mentor, is there anything you can do to help support them? What reasonable adjustments or strategies can be put in place?

- Discuss the opportunity to meet/observe/buddy with a member of staff who has disclosed a Specific learning difficulty or has identified strategies that support their neurodiverse profile in the workplace.

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- Use real scenarios found in the workplace. Encourage creativity in finding solutions. Discuss how plausible/ reasonable/effective these solutions are (for example recording notes/ handover discussions) Discuss alternative strategies that may be beneficial.

- Support, tuition and software are significant factors in improving learning experience, well-being, retention and confidence so encourage the student to access support during their placement if they have funding for Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) or other means of accessing support on their course. This could be a specialist tutor or a mentor. Also, encourage the student to make use of software and equipment they have funding for through DSA.

- Record/write down the discussion and outcomes.

- If you are unfamiliar with how to manage a situation, ask within your organisation - it is unlikely that the circumstance is as unique as it may first appear.

- Meet with the student regularly (as part of routine supervision) to discuss progress and evaluate how the support strategies are working for both student and staff.

- Adjustments, strategies and level of support will change over the length of a placement, confidence is key.

- Promote a culture of inclusivity, where individuals feel able to discuss their specific needs without fear of discrimination or negative attitudes.

- UWE hopes that students will feel that their practice assessor/supervisor/ workplace mentor is open and approachable and will react to their disclosure of an SpLD in a positive and supportive way.

- Most students with an SpLD will thrive and succeed on placement, but will do even better within a supportive, inclusive environment.

- Remember that SpLDs affect individuals in different ways, so a strategy that is helpful for one student might not be helpful for another.

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Specific Guidance for different work place activities:

Speaking, Listening and Remembering
Strategies for student:

- Carry a notebook/pen. Use 'to do' lists.

- Create a list of common abbreviations / words and their meaning.

- Prepare flip-over, laminated prompt cards that fit in your pocket (for terminology, processes).

- Discuss with your mentor recording on your phone/tablet to remember important things.

- Use visual methods (e.g. diagrams/mind maps) to help you remember.

- Stick things you need to remember on post it notes around your house.

- Set reminders on your mobile phone of key tasks (check policies in your placement setting for confidentiality and data protection).

Strategies for practice assessor/supervisor/ workplace mentor:

- Give verbal instructions slowly and clearly (in a quiet place if at all possible).

- Break down long, complicated instructions into smaller steps.

- Be aware of information overload; having to remember too many things at once.

- Encourage the use of a notebook to write verbal instructions – check these to make sure the student has got it right.

- Be aware that students may have different, visual and creative notetaking strategies.

- Provide written instructions if possible – prioritise tasks and highlight key points.

- Visually indicate left or right when giving verbal directions.

- Provide/signpost to a map of the workplace.

- Demonstrate practical skills to the student whilst giving verbal explanations using straightforward language.

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- Encourage the student to repeat back what has been learned and to reflect on why.
- Allow the student to practise tasks under observation before meeting the patient/service user.
- Encourage students to remember messages using L3R: **Listen – Repeat – Write – Read.**

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Writing and Recording Information

Strategies for student:

- Give yourself enough time (in a quiet space if available) to write up notes etc.
- Use a small alphabetical notebook to write down difficult words and remind you of their meaning.
- Carry with you a list of common abbreviations and their meaning.
- Familiarise yourself with the layout of the different forms and charts used by your placement colleagues. Ask if you can take a blank copy/template to look at in your own time.
- Use an electronic (medical) dictionary if possible.
- Use a laptop or PC to write your notes on if one is available.
- If you have to use a pen and your writing is messy, try different types of pen to see if a certain type is better for you.
- Ask whether you can use a recording device to record your ideas and then write them up later (bearing in mind local policies around confidentiality).

Strategies for practice assessor/supervisor/ workplace mentor:

- Allow the student to write in a quiet place (if possible).
- Allow extra time to write notes if it is needed.
- Try to avoid students having to write in group situations which may lead to embarrassment.
- If possible, allow the student to dictate notes onto a digital recorder (making sure that confidentiality is maintained of course).
- Check notes written by the student: make suggestions for a clear format and use of colour (e.g. multi-coloured ball-point pen).
- Be prepared to help proof-read notes initially.

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- Allow the student to practise filling in documents and forms before doing it for real.
- Assist in discerning key points at handover by going over the student's notes afterwards.

Reading

Strategies for student:

- Give yourself enough time to read things and re-read them if necessary.
- Find a quiet place or time with no distractions, or ask if you can take things home to read.
- Carry a list of common abbreviations and their meaning.
- Research words you don't know to practice pronouncing and spelling them.
- Try using a coloured overlay if white paper is not good for you (available online) or print documents off on cream or coloured paper, depending on your specific need.
- Try using different coloured backgrounds on your computer screen.
- Explore the accessibility options for the software that is used in the workplace.
- Use a highlighter to highlight key points in documents.

Strategies for practice assessor/supervisor/ workplace mentor:

- Encourage the student to check important details where there is a high risk for error.
- Discuss accessibility features for the software that the student is expected to engage with. Or signpost to further support.
- Allow the student to read aloud (or whisper) to aid comprehension.
- If possible, allow the student to read in a quiet area away from distractions.
- Allow the student more time to read information as they will likely need to re-read

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- Provide written material in advance if possible.

- Consider providing a list of acronyms to avoid confusion.

- Printed material should be in "sans serif" fonts (e.g. Arial or Calibri) as these are easier to read.

- Discuss reasonable adjustments around presentations and the requirement to read aloud publicly.

- Permit the use of coloured overlays/coloured paper or tinted lenses.

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Organisation and Time Management

Strategies for student:

- Agree realistic target dates with your practice assessor/supervisor and record on your plan.
- Use "to do" lists or mind maps.
- Use your mobile phone to set reminders of important dates/times, or a wall calendar at home if you prefer (bearing in mind rules around confidentiality).
- Use coloured pens or highlighters to help organise and prioritise your work.
- If getting up on time is difficult, consider having 2 alarm clocks.
- Practise using the 24-hour clock at home so that it becomes familiar.
- Visit the placement beforehand if possible to get familiar with the layout of the buildings.
- Build up a list of how long tasks and procedures usually take.
- Develop a priorities list to ensure everything is completed, such as a traffic light system: Red – urgent. Yellow – need to do. Green – would like to do. Use post it notes.

Strategies for practice assessor/supervisor/ workplace mentor:

- Create an "orientation pack" or similar for students outlining useful information and routines.
- Consider recording information – a voice memo or podcast with instruction rather than written.
- Provide the student with a map of the building.
- Encourage the student to use "to do" lists rather than trying to remember things.
- Help the student to draw up a plan for the placement at the start, highlighting important tasks and deadlines.
- Set clear targets.

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- If a task involves following a sequence, consider presenting this visually on a wall chart/diagram or instruction sheet.
- With the student, devise prompt sheets to help with specific tasks.
- Help students to build up a list of how long different tasks take to complete.
- Ask students to tell you what the key activities are at the beginning of a shift or working day, and remind them of things they have forgotten.

Motor Skills

Strategies for the student:

- Practise handling instruments and equipment and ask to borrow them to practise.
- Investigate alternative equipment which may be easier to use.
- Ask for extra time to practise any skills you are unfamiliar with.
- Write the sequence of skills down in the form of a diagram or flow chart.
- Access university skills labs to practise new or unfamiliar skills.
- Devise your own strategy to identify your left or right side; e.g. wearing a watch or bracelet always on the same wrist/ a ring on the same hand/ a name badge always on a particular side of your clothing.

Strategies for practice assessor/supervisor/ workplace mentor:

- Provide opportunities to practise handling instruments and equipment.
- Explore availability of specialist/alternative equipment which might be easier to use (providing this could constitute a reasonable adjustment).
- Demonstrate skills more than once at the beginning of a placement.
- Supervise practice until the student is confident.
- Diagrams and flow charts detailing the sequence for given skills can help.

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Words and phrases to help say what you need

Show me what you mean…

I need some time to get my head around this.

I work best when I can…

I can read this, but I need time to go through it.

Please can you send this to me electronically so I can format it if I need to?

It may not look like it, but my workspace is organised the way I work best.

It really helps when you explain what you are doing first.

My spelling is variable, is correct spelling important for this?

Are those instructions written down? I would find that really useful.

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I prefer to see a visual map of the subject.

That's useful, please will you send that to me on an e mail?

Your encouragement makes a lot of difference. Please tell me what you think is good.

Just a moment while I write that down

I need some time to get my head around this….

Can I have a photocopy of that?

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Definitions

Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) is an umbrella term incorporating Dyslexia, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia among others. Closely associated with SpLD is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Dyslexia primarily affects the skills involved in accurate reading and spelling. Typical difficulties include phonological processing, working and short-term memory, visual processing, reading speed and comprehension, concentration and personal organisation – the pattern of difficulties varies widely between individuals. Dyslexia occurs across a range of abilities and is best thought of as a continuum with no distinct cut-off points. It is persistent and lifelong but individuals will often develop a range of skills and coping strategies.

Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD), also known as **Dyspraxia** in the UK, is a common disorder affecting fine or gross motor co-ordination in children and adults. DCD is distinct from other motor disorders such as cerebral palsy and stroke and occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. Individuals may vary in how their difficulties present; these may change over time depending on environmental demands and life experience. An individual's co-ordination difficulties may affect participation and functioning of everyday life skills in education, work and employment.

There may be a range of co-occurring difficulties which can also have serious negative impacts on daily life. These include social and emotional difficulties as well as problems with time management, planning and personal organisation and these may also affect an adult's education or employment experiences.

Dyscalculia is a specific and persistent difficulty in understanding numbers which can lead to a diverse range of difficulties with mathematics. It will be unexpected in relation to age, level of education and experience and occurs across all ages and abilities. Mathematics difficulties are best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and they have many causal factors.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This presents as inattentive/impulsive or as a combined type with qualities of both. In most cases people with this disorder are often 'off task', have particular difficulty commencing and switching tasks, together with a very short attention span and high levels of distractibility. They may fail to make effective use of the feedback they receive and have difficulties taking in information by listening
Those with hyperactivity may act impulsively and erratically, have difficulty foreseeing outcomes, fail to plan ahead and be noticeably restless and fidgety.

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Further Information:

- Royal College of Nursing: Neurodiversity Guidance
  https://www.rcn.org.uk/get-help/member-support-services/peer-support-services/neurodiversity-guidance

- British Dyslexia Association
    http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/

- ADDISS ADHD Support Service http://www.addiss.co.uk/

- Dyspraxia Foundation https://dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk/about-dyspraxia/

- UWE guide to free and low-cost software and app to make things more accessible.
  https://academicskills.uwe.ac.uk/assistive-technology/workbooks/free-and-low-cost-assistive-software/10851/introduction

- UWE Disability Service:
  https://www.uwe.ac.uk/life/health-and-wellbeing/get-disability-support/get-dyslexia-and-spld-support

- Equality Act https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

- Access to Work https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work