

Occupational Therapy Education

Supporting the Student with Additional Learning Needs on Practice Placement

Students who have been diagnosed with Dyslexia and/or, Developmental Coordination disorder, often referred to as Dyspraxia, are offered support and help via Student Services whilst at university. Under the Equality Act (2010) *reasonable adjustments* need to be made to allow these students the same opportunities for learning as their peers, both in university and also on practice placement. The large majority of the students that have an additional learning need will have developed a wide range of strategies to compensate for any residual difficulties that they might have. However, it is worth remembering that students will, throughout placement, encounter new situations that challenge them and they may need opportunities and support from Practice Educators to problem solve and find potential solutions.

At this stage of study many of the difficulties that an individual has had with for example reading and spelling and /or motor coordination are less obvious than they may have been in school. This is often because students have adopted strategies to manage them. However, written communication may still remain a difficulty particularly when working at speed or to a desired format that is unfamiliar, for example when writing up case notes. Other co-occurring difficulties associated with poor working memory and information processing may also impact on organisational skills.

There is little written about practical solutions to problems encountered on practice placement. The following hints and tips have been devised with the help of students with additional learning needs. Not all students will have the same difficulties so a student led approach is recommended.

Offer specific help and support with:

Paperwork:

- Ensure that very early on students are familiar with the forms and formats that are used to produce notes and reports.
- Allow them time to read through the forms and ask questions about them.

- Provide a completed version of the forms for them to gauge what is expected of them.
- Where possible offer opportunities for them to save the format to the computer so that they can complete them utilising spelling and grammar checks.
- Offer students the opportunity for their draft copy to be checked by yourself. Offer constructive criticism that will help them improve their **own** style of report/note writing.
- As a *reasonable adjustment* students may be offered a proof reading services particularly for writing up notes that cannot be typed – that is the checking of spelling and/or grammar, not content.
- Encourage students to keep a glossary of terminology and vocabulary that is specific to your practice, offering opportunity for them to clarify the meanings and spellings.
- Encourage students to build a bank of commonly used phrases when report writing so that they can be re-used.
- For students with significant written difficulties the use of Dictaphone or voice recognition software will be a '*reasonable adjustment*' that will need to be made.
- Some students may find reading from coloured paper or screen helpful. The colour will vary depending on the student. Encourage students to utilise photocopying facilities if they need information, report formats etc. on different coloured paper.
- Try to ensure that your learning outcome for report writing/note taking respects and acknowledges that reasonable adjustments can be made.

Time management:

Students who do have working memory difficulties will often have difficulties with planning and organisation. A number will have developed strategies to cope with this but may need time to put them into place. They may appreciate you offering your top tips for managing busy working schedules.

- Encourage students to timetable a slot each day to review what they have done and what they need to plan to do. Setting goals will help.
- Encourage prioritisation by considering activities that need to be done immediately, within the near future or those can be left. Add time scales to these priorities. Use coloured post it notes to denote priority systems for those students that are visual learners.
- Encourage the use of detailed timetables, diaries and 'to do' lists.
- Be aware that last minute changes to the programme can be made but students may need to reflect upon how this change will impact on the sequence of events to follow.

Information processing:

If students are have difficulties with auditory processing (often associated with dyslexia) they are likely to have adopted a more visual, practical style of learning.

- Offer opportunities for students to see demonstrations of tasks/ skills that they need to master.
- Where possible, visual instructions may help e.g. when learning to fit equipment.
- Written forms that are structured into headings can act as a visual guide and a prompt sheet.
- Provide opportunity for the student to repeat back verbal instructions to clarify what they have understood.

Utilise the student's strengths:

- Student with additional learning needs often have excellent oral ability. They tend to out shine their ability to record their thoughts on paper. So utilise discussion, verbal reflection and practical demonstration to measure learning outcomes.
- Students are often excellent problem solvers. They will have had to problem solve their own difficulties and are often very creative in how they manage them. As occupational therapists we need to encourage this problem solving ability and its transference to working with service users.
- Often students IT skills are very good so offer opportunities for them to utilise them in the work place.
- To have reached this stage in their educational career they will have adopted a range of coping strategies. Encourage the student to discuss these with you as they may provide useful tips for the future.

Students with additional learning needs will not always need any additional support or adjustments whilst on practice placement, and many of the hints and tips above will already be familiar to you and may be part of the procedures that you use with all students.

However, it is worth remembering that a large majority of the students, even if they appear to be coping very well, will be putting in more effort, and often more time than their peers, to complete tasks. They will need to have adequate study time set aside and be encouraged to take time out at the

beginning or end of the day to complete unfinished work and to organise their schedule.

Anxiety may be a secondary consequence of having an additional learning need and this can further negatively impact on performance. Being able to put *reasonable adjustments* in place and to see progress across a placement will help to ease any anxiety associated with their difficulties.

As a department, we are not able to disclose a diagnoses without a student's consent. However, we strongly recommend that students discuss their specific needs with the practice placement educator in advance of the placement. Student's reluctance to do so is associated with experiences of prejudice. Unfortunately there is still a stigma attached to these diagnoses.

As a team we try to reassure them that as a profession we need a diverse workforce to truly meet the needs of the population that we serve and that, where ever it is possible, *reasonable adjustment* will be made to ensure that they can perform to the best of their ability.

Useful reference:

Bartlett D & Moody S., 2010. *Dyslexia in the workplace: An Introductory Guide*, 2nd Edition. London: Wiley - Blackwell

Dyspraxia Foundation, 2016. *Dyspraxia/DCD in the workplace: Help and guidance for job seekers and employers*.

<http://dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Dyspraxia-in-the-Workplace-Guidance-for-Employees-Oct-2016.pdf>