

# Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs)

## Information about SpLDs

SpLDs (Specific Learning Difficulties – or learning differences) are thought to affect at least 10% of the population. The most common we see amongst students at Oxford are dyslexia and dyspraxia, but a small number of students might have a diagnosis of dysgraphia or dyscalculia. However, in practice very many of the characteristics co-occur and overlap.

SpLDs affect the way information is processed and learned, which can have a very significant impact on formal education and study, and subsequently often on self-confidence as well. However, SpLDs are neurological and are unrelated to intellectual ability, socio-economic or language background. Students with SpLD can have significant compensatory strengths in other areas of study and can be creative and innovative thinkers.

**Dyslexia** mainly affects literacy and language-related skills. It is characterised by weaknesses in the fluency and accuracy of reading and writing and in the speed and quantity of information which can be processed at any one time. There might also be difficulties with aspects of fluency, organisation of ideas and sequencing in reading, writing, and, in some cases, speaking.

**Dyspraxia/Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD)** is characterised at its core by weaknesses in fine and/or gross motor co-ordination, but also by difficulties with organisation skills and sometimes visual perception. This can result in problems with writing by hand, concentration, personal and work organisation and time management.

**Dysgraphia** affects the both the ability to handwrite and also the skills needed to compose written prose fluently. **Dyscalculia** is characterised by impairments in learning arithmetic facts, processing numerical magnitude and performing accurate or fluent calculations.

## Implications for study

Many Oxford students with an SpLD will have managed very well at school, but find that the increased pace, volume of work and level of study at Oxford may compound their difficulties, which can undermine self-esteem.

The most common implications include:

- difficulties working under time constraints - especially in exams and lectures - when trying simultaneously to write, read or listen, and extract full meaning;
- issues with reading and writing - individuals with SpLDs might have very strong verbal abilities, but tend to struggle with extracting information from written material and the ability to express ideas in writing alongside a slower speed of working than their peers. Consequently, there may be a significant discrepancy between their ability to discuss topics in tutorials, and the quality of their written work;

- difficulties with planning, structuring and sequencing ideas, and communicating them fluently and concisely in writing – detracting from underlying knowledge and creative reasoning;
- issues with spelling - students with SpLDs often find it harder to recognise errors in their own work when editing and proofreading, thus needing more time to finalise written work;
- issues with time planning and personal organisation - SpLD students might also find it hard to remember appointments, deadlines, important paperwork, or to find new locations, and they sometimes have difficulties with general time management, organisation and planning.

## Guidance for working with students with SpLDs

The following notes highlight factors to take into consideration when working with students with SpLDs. The challenge is to be aware of the specific effects of these learning differences and to explore a variety of methods and techniques to facilitate optimal learning.

### Communication

- Talk to the student about their SpLD. Ask them discreetly about the impact and discuss with them what might be helpful.
- Use clear frameworks for written work with precise instructions; be prepared to give extra clarification or more structured feedback than you normally might; provide instructions and feedback both verbally and in writing (typed/electronic format), and send a written summary after meetings/discussions with clear action points.
- Be prepared to repeat/rephrase more than might be usual if the student has lost concentration or missed what you have said. Be patient: students with SpLDs might need extra time to absorb/integrate information and prepare their answers.
- Be prepared to break tasks/information/instructions down into smaller more manageable chunks or stages.

### Environment

- Teaching rooms: check room for adequate lighting and heating, and limit background noise (open windows, noisy extractor fans and heating/cooling units) where possible, as they can affect concentration.

### Study

- Standard features of good teaching practice will provide useful support for many students with SpLD. In particular: provide an overview of the aims of a teaching session at the start; summarise salient points regularly throughout and again at the end; pause regularly when delivering information verbally so students can catch up and ensure they have enough time to take any necessary notes / copy written information.
- Reading: where appropriate, provide a more targeted reading list that points to specific chapters or paragraphs, to help the student prioritise their reading; allow more time for

reading in lectures/tutorials; check whether the student is comfortable reading aloud in front of others (as they may not be).

- Written text: use clear typed font rather than handwritten notes – minimum size 12 sans serif font. Avoid italics and underlining - bold or colour is often easier. Avoid dense blocks of text, instead use short paragraphs, bullet points, numbered lists etc. Try coloured backgrounds - cream or yellow can be helpful to some SpLD students.
- Handouts: use well structured notes with clear sections so that students can annotate easily, and number slides clearly so students can identify them during the lecture.
- Vary teaching methods: include visuals - pictures, flow charts, diagrams, graphs etc. Try other approaches, such as demonstrations, videos etc.

### Planning / Organisation

- Give key course information, deadlines and timetables in advance, alongside advance notice of any changes to venues/times, so the student can plan their workload to compensate for difficulties with organisation and speed of working.

### Examples of reasonable adjustments

The Student Support Plan (SSP) sets out the formal reasonable adjustments recommended by the Disability Advisory Service, and will provide additional specific individual information where needed. However, the following list gives some examples of possible reasonable adjustments.

**Please note these adjustments will not be applicable to every student nor is this list exhaustive.**

- Specialist SpLD tutor: to work one-to-one with the student to develop their independent study skills, building on their individual strengths and compensating for areas of weakness.
- Examination adjustments: such as extra time, use of a computer, or rest breaks.
- Provision of reading lists and lecture/teaching materials (includes handouts, notes, PowerPoint slides, and articles for discussion) in advance to allow the student adequate time to prepare in light of their disability.
- Permission to record lectures or take notes on a computer, and access to lecture capture.
- Privileged reader status at college / University libraries including extended loans.

### Additional resources:

- For further advice and information staff may contact the Disability Advisory Service by email on [disability@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:disability@admin.ox.ac.uk) or telephone **01865 (2)80459**, or see our [student](#) and [staff](#) web pages.
- British Dyslexia Association (BDA) [information on SpLDs](#).