

Supporting dyslexic students on practice placements

For the use of supervisors/mentors working with students on health and social care courses



Contents

What is dyslexia and how does it affect the workplace?	1
The emotional impact of dyslexia in the workplace	3
The positive aspect of dyslexia	3
Memory difficulties, organisation and time management	5
Reading	8
Writing and spelling	10
Language	13
Motor skills	14
Contact information	16
Further information	17

“Dyslexia affects students in different ways and strategies that might have worked for one student on a practice placement may not be helpful for another”

What is dyslexia and how does it affect the workplace?

Dyslexia is a combination of abilities and difficulties that can affect reading, writing and spelling as well as organisation, memory and sequencing.

Under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act dyslexia is usually considered to be a disability and dyslexic health professionals are therefore entitled to receive ‘reasonable adjustments’ both in the educational institution and in the workplace. However, they still have to demonstrate that they are fit to practise and meet all the learning competencies and skills in the same way as others.

Students devise many ‘coping strategies’ to help with any difficulties their dyslexia may cause them in the academic setting. Some of these strategies may translate well into the practice placement, but others may be inappropriate in the workplace.

Dyslexic people are often ‘quick forgetters’ rather than ‘slow learners’. When faced with a task requiring new learning, they may have more difficulty than others, despite a similar level of ability. The level and quality of work might vary from day to day. Initially dyslexic students may need instructions repeated several times in order to learn the different procedures and tasks.



The emotional impact of dyslexia in the workplace

Dyslexia can sometimes have a negative emotional impact for students in the workplace. Some dyslexic students are under emotional stress as they are struggling to conceal their difficulties because of fear of discrimination. They may find the workplace more tiring than others because of the extreme mental effort that is required.

Many dyslexic adults are struggling to come to terms with low self-esteem. They may lack confidence in their abilities, which could affect their performance in the practice placement, particularly if they have only recently been assessed as dyslexic. They may feel isolated and think that other students are learning procedures and tasks far more quickly than they are.

The positive aspect of dyslexia

Although dyslexia affects people in different ways, dyslexic people are often considered to have different ways of thinking and learning. They may often have a variety of strengths which they can draw on to develop strategies: an ability to think holistically and to see the 'big picture'; creativity and imagination; good visualisation skills and spatial ability; good problem solving skills.

Students are usually very aware of their strengths and potential challenges and are often extremely careful about checking work on practice in order to avoid making mistakes which could affect their safety or the safety of patients.

This document sets out some of the challenges that might occur on placement and suggests strategies that can be adopted by mentors/supervisors and students working together to ensure that 'reasonable adjustments' are in place. Dyslexic students can discuss with their mentors/supervisors the particular challenges they are experiencing and solutions can usually be found which are helpful to both students and staff working with them. It is unlikely that individuals will experience all the challenges outlined here. Many of the strategies in this document could well be part of general good practice within the work place already. Many strategies useful for dyslexic health professionals are useful for everyone.



Memory difficulties, organisation and time management

Students may take longer to 'fix' information into their long-term memory and may require information presented more than once. They may appear to have a short attention span and be easily distracted in meetings. Dyslexic people often find it more difficult to discard irrelevant or redundant information which could lead to 'memory overload' and confusion.

Some people with dyslexia will experience difficulty with:

- following instructions
- ordering their ideas
- remembering names and job titles
- remembering drug names and medical conditions
- recall of procedures, instructions or observations taken
- filing and looking up information alphabetically or sequentially
- reading dates and times
- remembering phone messages accurately
- remembering all the information to pass to other colleagues
- sequencing the order of tasks correctly

Students may also have difficulty with:

- managing the balance between coursework and placement commitments
- planning ahead or planning their work schedule
- estimating how much time is needed for a specific task
- allocating a realistic time-frame to different placement tasks
- completing tasks on time
- reacting quickly in busy environments
- learning routines/procedures quickly
- understanding exactly what is expected of them
- multitasking: having to do several things at once demands good memory and time management, as well as the ability to work sequentially and to be organised

Memory difficulties, organisation and time management: **Strategies for mentors/supervisors**

- With the learner, draw up a plan for the placement at the beginning, highlighting important information and dates
- Set clear, measurable learning outcomes, using Student Agreements where appropriate
- Provide additional time in structured supervisory sessions to go through administrative procedures and routines for placement. Explain tasks more than once at the beginning
- Give lots of opportunities for observation of yourself or other qualified staff with patients/clients in the first few days. Demonstrate and explain procedures simply, relating to the individual patient/client. Ask the student to repeat/outline what s/he is going to do. Encourage reflection
- Do not give too many instructions at once, particularly if the instructions are only given verbally
- Give instructions in both written and verbal form wherever possible
- If a task involves following a sequence, this could be set out clearly on a wall chart, manual or instruction sheet
- If available, provide the student with a placement pack, setting out useful information and standard procedures
- Give the student a map of the hospital/building

Memory difficulties, organisation and time management: **Strategies for the student**

- Agree realistic target dates with your mentor for fulfilling placement competencies and daily tasks and record these on the plan
- Use coloured pens or highlighters to help organise and prioritise work
- Use a small personal notebook or electronic diary
- Create a simple flow chart on a small card as a memory aid
- Have appropriate telephone pads to hand for taking messages, with as much information as possible filled out beforehand (eg date/ref/from)
- Devise some prompt sheets to help with tasks or sequencing of tasks. Mentors/supervisors could help with this



Reading

Some students may:

- feel embarrassed about reading aloud
- misread unfamiliar words
- read very slowly and find scanning or skimming difficult
- find text is distorted, particularly black print on white
- find it difficult to read with noise distractions
- have difficulty understanding medical and pharmacological language and abbreviations and/or differentiating between technical language such as drug names, particularly those which look or sound similar
- have difficulty reading information from whiteboards
- have difficulty reading information on charts if different layers of information are presented on one chart or if information is presented on different levels – reading both across and down
- find it hard to work out readings and might give an inaccurate reading without being aware of it

Reading:

Strategies for mentors/supervisors

- Allow extra time for reading. Present the student with essential reading well in advance of meetings, highlighting important parts if appropriate
- Provide opportunities to discuss reading
- Any written information specifically produced for the students would benefit from being ‘dyslexia friendly’: write in a logical sequence; avoid small print; use bullet points in preference to sentences; use simple words, and space the information so it is not cramped; avoid overuse of jargon or uncommon words
- Use colour and space on whiteboards to differentiate sections



Reading:

Strategies for the student

- Use a small alphabetical notebook to record useful words and meanings of abbreviations
- Devise a card system for particularly difficult medical terms and abbreviations, with spelling on one side and meanings on the other
- Use an electronic dictionary
- Use mind maps and/or flow charts where appropriate
- Use a coloured overlay, if appropriate

Writing and spelling

Some students may have difficulty with:

- legibility
- writing in an appropriate language
- writing concisely
- writing accurately – work might contain inconsistent spelling and frequent grammatical errors
- writing under time pressure – some students may write very slowly and need to re-draft their work
- spelling technical terms such as drugs and medical terms, especially those which look or sound similar: for example, gastrectomy and gastrotomy; hypertension and hypotension
- identifying numbers and letters and/or getting them in the correct order
- filling in forms, especially when required to do so at speed

Writing and spelling:

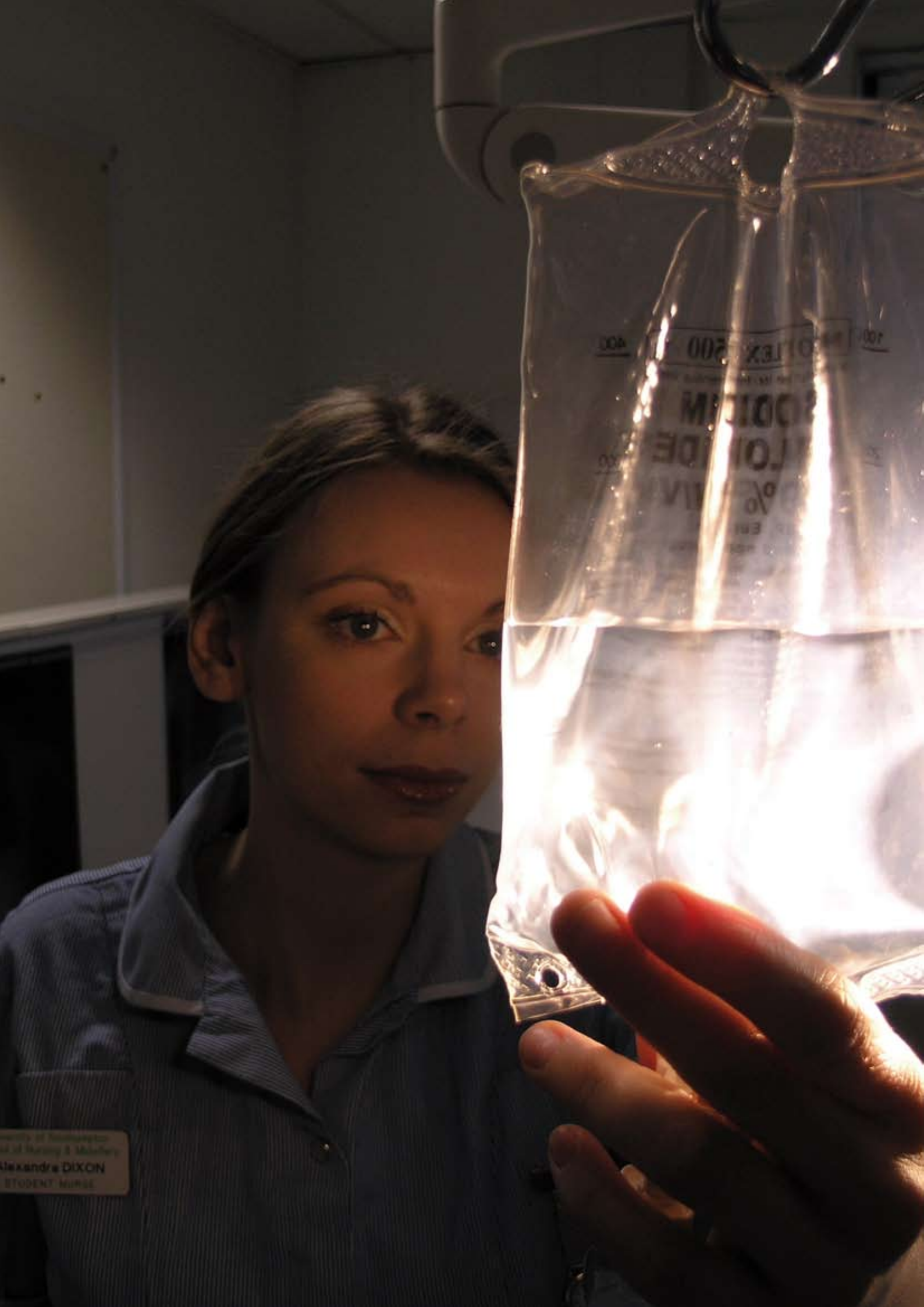
Strategies for mentors/supervisors

- Allow extra time to write reports and other paperwork. Allow students to write notes on rough paper to be checked before they are written up
- Proofread paperwork at the beginning of the placement
- Help the student to summarise the main points that should be covered using a mind map, spider diagram or flow chart
- Give sample or ‘model’ reports so the student has a clear idea about the level and content required and the expected format
- Provide templates for letters, reports and forms etc
- Where possible, allow the student to submit reports on cream paper with a font he/she finds easy to use



Writing and spelling: **Strategies for the student**

- It is important to be familiar with the layout of forms.
Take one home initially to familiarise yourself with the layout
- Use a recording device to record ideas if possible,
whilst maintaining patient confidentiality
- Use a small personal dictionary or electronic speller.
Keep a record of common words and words specific to the ward
- Devise templates for letters, memos and assessment reports
- Develop effective checking procedures and proofreading skills
- Use a laptop or PC for writing case notes (if available)



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Language

A few students may feel embarrassed about language difficulties. Some students may:

- struggle to find the right word to say
- mispronounce unfamiliar words
- find it difficult to express themselves orally and talk in a disjointed way
- find it difficult to give clear instructions and/or information and have a tendency to 'go off on a tangent'
- sometimes experience a 'mental block' and be unable to express ideas clearly, particularly under stress
- take everything 'literally' or at face value (beware of words with double meanings)

Language: **Strategies for mentors/supervisors**

- If the student has difficulty with pronunciation of medical or other technical terms, an audio tape of specific language would be useful. Encourage them to use their digital voice recorder to record correct pronunciation
- Provide a checklist of vocabulary typical in the placement, eg drug names, common medical conditions and treatments
- Give clear oral instructions. Positive statements are important as some dyslexic people are not able to 'read between the lines' or pick up on implied meaning
- Be willing to repeat instructions or allow the student to have the confidence to ask questions
- Encourage the student to repeat instructions back to you to ensure understanding

Language: **Strategies for the student**

- Build up a list of words and phrases frequently used in case notes, reports etc
- Ask for clarification if you are not sure about any terminology
- Use specialised reference books such as Mosby's 'Medical Drug Reference' which gives the pronunciation of words

Motor skills

- Some dyslexic students have right and left co-ordination difficulties
- Some students take much longer to learn to follow a sequence, eg wound dressing

Motor skills:

Strategies for mentors/supervisors

- Demonstrate skills more than once at the beginning of a placement
- Supervise practice until the student is secure
- Diagrams and flow charts can help

Motor skills:

Strategies for the student

- Ask for extra time to practise any skills you are unfamiliar with
- Write the sequence down in the form of a diagram or flow chart





Contact information

The Learning Differences Centre

University of Southampton

45 University Road

Highfield Campus

Telephone: **023 8059 2759 (internal 22759)**

Email: **dyslexia@soton.ac.uk**

Web: **www.soton.ac.uk/studentsupport/ldc**

Further information

Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education:
Supporting learners on placement

www.adshe.org.uk

Adult Dyslexia Organisation

www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/adomenu/adomenu.htm

British Dyslexia Association

www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

Dyslexia Action (formerly Dyslexia Institute)

www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk

Florence Nightingale School of Nursing & Midwifery:

Study skills information related to nursing including exercises: academic writing;
note-taking; numeracy skills; reading; time management; using ICT

www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/nursing/vc/studyskills

Healthcare Professionals with Disabilities: Information about supporting dyslexic
(and disabled) students on clinical practice

www.hcp-disability.org.uk/dyslexia/dyslexia.html

www.southampton.ac.uk/studentsupport/ldc
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