Disabled Students' Allowance and Dyslexia: towards a more wide-reaching support solution

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The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA) became law on 1st September 2002 and places the most stringent obligations ever on higher education institutions (HEI) to support disabled students (Waterfield and West, 2002). The scope of the act is enormous and the implications for HEIs represents the greatest challenge faced by them for some years, but at least the position for students who qualify for Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) under the act is clear. They receive the allowance, and their needs are met by a combination of the HEI and their LEA. A growing proportion of these students are assessed as disabled because of a specific learning difficulty (SpLD), the chief SpLD being Dyslexia.

The will and vision shown by the government's Widening Participation agenda and its intention to increase the percentage of 18 –30 year olds in HE from 43% to 50% (The Future of Higher Education, 2003, p 57) is to be applauded. However many students enrolling on these courses, especially if they are part of the new funding group "without formal qualifications or education" (replacing the post code funding mechanism) whom the government want to see benefit from "the opportunities that HE brings…..regardless of their background" (The Future of Higher Education, 2003, p 67) are likely to experience difficulties consistent with SpLD.

When formal assessment of their difficulties by an Educational Psychologist produces a "positive" assessment of SpLD, the support machine runs smoothly. However at The University of Portsmouth, at The Academic Skills Unit in particular, a rapidly increasing number of students who come for help and present with what look to the practised eye like problems consistent with SpLD, 'fail' the assessment. *They* know there is something wrong and the professionals who teach them know, from working with them, that there is something wrong, since they clearly do not learn as their peers do. Many reasons for this are possible. At one end of the spectrum are the bright, articulate, coping mature students with well-developed life skills who have developed sophisticated strategies for dealing with their literacy difficulties. In dyslexia assessments they can perform well enough to "succeed" at most of the tasks, but they perform slowly, since for them the mental processing requires time-consuming

conscious effort, whereas the normal population against whom they are being assessed performs these tasks quickly at an automatic level, as can be seen in the validation processes used for such screening tests as the Lucid Adult Screening Test (LADS), (Singleton & Thomas, 2002, p19) and even more particularly in the Dyslexia Adult Screening Test (DAST) (Fawcett & Nicolson, 1998, p18). These students end up with a damning result: not dyslexic, just slow. Where the assessment involves an ability component, as in screening tests, this slowness is sometimes consistent with low intelligence (IQ). A damning result for an aspiring, struggling undergraduate! The problem can be summed up thus, "the problem arises from students with a high IQ who have a discrepancy between their actual literacy scores and what would be expected on the basis of their IQ – but they are still performing within the normal range" (Professor Rod Nicolson, 2003, p.c.). At the other end of the spectrum are students who are inarticulate, unselfconfident and shy who go to pieces in assessment situations. Their life experiences may have been restricted. They are silent and unresponsive, performing assessment tasks badly, not appearing to understand instructions. They may not know for example, who Cleopatra is, as asked by one assessor to attempt to draw a student out, they may volunteer the information that they were accepted onto an intensely academic course with no qualifications and on the strength solely of a poem they had written. All these factors will impact on the assessor and should be borne in mind when the report is written (Bob Smith, Educational Psychologist, 2003, p.c.)

Some of these students are probably dyslexic, but the position for the assessor is extremely difficult. As Bob Smith says (2003, p.c.) where possible he gives the "benefit of the doubt", though he has occasionally found himself having to defend such assessments later. He says that for him "the real problems arise with students who are not only dyslexic, but also of low ability". He goes on to say that of the students he assesses, about 80% - 85% who think they might be dyslexic *are* assessed as dyslexic on the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale. Taking into account his "benefit of the doubt", this leaves a shortfall of 15% - 20%. There are many implications of this: as far-reaching as the need to question the admissions criteria of HEIs; as specific as having to stand by and watch a floundering student fail – in short, a late, destructive, self-selection process; as contentious as questioning whether standardised testing should be done at all, an argument currently raging the US (Phelps, 2003).

The disadvantages experienced by those 15% - 20% who are able but struggling and not in receipt of DSA are many-fold. But some of them are avoidable. The discrepancy between the students who do receive DSA and those who do not is enormous. Dyslexic students, quite rightly, receive DSA equivalent to the sum total of all their support needs. Those who do not qualify are often in need of the same or modified versions of the support assessed as needed

by the dyslexic student, but unless they can afford it themselves, they will not have access to it. Concern for such students, who are experiencing difficulties, who cannot keep up with their courses, who perceive all around them sailing through effortlessly, with or without the DSA, and who may be feeling helpless, anxious and inadequate, motivated the academic Skills Unit at The University of Portsmouth to conduct some research.

A trawl of the literature was done to see if any information on this group of students could be gleaned from previous research. No comparable research was discovered. Responses along the lines of, "we don't have any information as yet" from Jane Greene (p.c.) and Cindy Beale (p.c.) for the International Dyslexia Organisation (p.c.) and "we are not aware of any information in this field" from info@dyslexiahelp at The British Dyslexia Association were typical. The British Psychological Society has not yet published any research (helpline, bps, 2003) although they are interested in the topic. Singleton (2003, p.c.) says that The University of Hull is currently carrying out studies and is interested in any research done at Portsmouth.

It was decided to embark on a small qualitative study of selected students who were interviewed to see if, from their point of view, the investment in assessment for DSA invariably gives a good return and if this is the best way to assess need and provide support. In order to make a useful comparison between different student experience in relation to DSA, three groups of students were identified, those who had:

1) been assessed as having SpLD
2) decided not to go for assessment
3) been assessed as not having SpLD.

All of these students had either sought help themselves or been referred for help by their departments. All had undergone some kind of initial screening that suggested a distinct possibility of dyslexia - Lucid Adult Dyslexia Screening Test, (Singleton, 2002); Portsmouth University English Assessment (Appendix 1); or they had been assessed as dyslexic while at school.

Only one individual from group one was looked at, representing for the purposes of this study, the control group of students for whom the DSA works as it is intended. (DSA does not always work as intended, however, that is not the focus of this study). In group two, three students who decided not to go for assessment were looked at and in group three, there were three students who have been assessed as not having SpLD. Each student was interviewed and a report was compiled from individual responses. This study was not conducted by questionnaire since qualitative, not quantitative results were being sought. All students agreed

to participate in the study and for the data collected to be used anonymously. All names have been changed.

A mature student, Lucy was obliged to enrol on a degree course in order to gain the qualification, now mandatory, in order for her continue her career in nursing. Assessed as dyslexic as a child, she struggled through school leaving with few qualifications. As a health worker, she passed vocational qualifications fairly easily. Practical on-the-job training suits her and her preferred learning style very well. She was able to redraft as often as she needed, had access to practical support, was assessed not through essays or exams but through individual portfolio and observation of practice. Because she was dyslexic, she was not marked down for spelling, syntax and style unless the potential health or safety of her patients might have been compromised. Lucy developed coping strategies, taking extreme care writing names of drugs, procedures etc., asking others to proof-read, maintaining positive relationships with her tutors, superiors for advice. Formally assessed on the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) as dyslexic, she received a computer with mind-mapping, voice recognition, a scanner and reader, a personal organiser and tape recorder. Lucy's initial outlay for the SpLD assessment was £269, a worthwhile investment. She received £16,500 to cover tuition and equipment. Conscientious, assertive, determined, Lucy has used both the tuition and the technology to the full, despite starting out as "a bit phobic about computers". She uses the computer for everything from mind-mapping for time-management and planning, to writing and read-back for proof-reading. Although the designated study skills tuition is inadequate for teaching her grammar, syntax and structuring, the DSA works well for Lucy.

Diagnosed dyslexic as a child and a 'struggling' student, Tom none-the-less achieved a BA in Geography, and later an MSc. When the statutory requirements for English qualifications for teaching were relaxed, Tom was at last allowed to apply for a PGCE to teach Geography. On mentioning his dyslexia he was encouraged to go for SpLD assessment with a view to applying for the DSA. Tom reasoned that it would not be worth his while, nor cost effective. A full-time employee, he was liable for the full cost of assessment. He already owned a personal computer with a high specification and was resistant to computer packages that might "make me even lazier, even less confident and become completely deskilled in English – especially spelling!" He would not be taking exams, so extra time would not benefit him. Tom felt that he had "overcome" many of the difficulties associated with his childhood diagnosis, except spelling, the only thing holding him back. Tom's inability to spell controlled his choice of vocabulary - frustrating for an intelligent, knowledgeable and articulate man. Correcting pupils' spelling errors was extremely difficult. But most worryingly, Tom had to pass the spelling component of the Teachers' English Test. Tom had

failed the test twice. A £297 assessment would at best procure teaching tutorials, but there was a three-month waiting list, with further delay for results and final assessment…..and his course was only one school year long. It was unlikely, he reasoned, that he would be taught to spell independently through this procedure in time or cost effectively. It would have been money better spent on private tuition. For Tom the investment of £297 in order to apply for DSA would not have been a good one. Tom came to a free intensive spelling course at the Academic Skills Unit and passed the English test.

Criminal Justice Studies requires reading "incomprehensible and tedious" texts according to Daisy. "I can read for a bit and then I'll get stuck on a word, not even a difficult word. But it trips me up and then it's like a block that wipes out everything I've just read". Daisy could neither read the necessary material, take notes in the lectures, nor meet the requirements of the written assignments. Her learning experience and a family history of dyslexia meant she was offered initial screening for SpLD. A childhood resentment of her dyslexic sister who got "not only help, but also attention", Daisy was happy to be diagnosed dyslexic - to prove what a hard time she'd had, without support, labelled 'jealous' whenever she complained that schoolwork was too difficult - not ideal motivation. However if Daisy were dyslexic, not applying for DSA would compromise her success on a course assessed mainly by examination. The implications of a positive assessment were impressed on Daisy as was the support she could expect and the possibility that she may not be dyslexic. She chose free initial screening, DAST (Fawcett & Nicolson, 1998), before investing £296 on an Educational Psychologist's assessment. The result of the DAST indicated a high At Risk Quotient. Daisy was shocked. She was reminded of the possibility of a false positive but decided to go for full assessment, despite not qualifying for hardship fund. Daisy then executed a radical change - from ICJS to Photography. "I've always done Photography, so I thought I'd try something different. What I really want to be is a photo-journalist specialising in crime. This way, I don't have to fork out for the assessment, and I'll be able to manage the course because there are no exams, it's practical, and lots of the research is photographic…..not so much reading." Despite it being fairly likely that she is dyslexic, Daisy decided the assessment would not be a worthwhile investment for her. She decided this at the expense of the course she originally enrolled on. Was surrendering the course too high a price to pay?

Henry displayed spelling and reading difficulties not unusual in dyslexia: inversion of letters; misreading, particularly ends of words; missing out words; misusing vocabulary and an inability to proof-read. An extremely able student, he refused to be assessed, not wanting the "stigma of being dyslexic" and has gone into debt buying the available software himself. He

described very powerfully avoiding the humiliation of poor literacy skills, concurring with Maughan's depiction of the relationship between reading difficulties and social and emotional adjustment (Hulme and Snowling, 1994). He achieved 92% for coursework on his Computer Programming degree.

The three students who were assessed and found not be dyslexic, have several things in common. They are all mothers on full time courses of study, working part-time and with sophisticated strategies for coping with literacy and organisational difficulties. All support the literacy of their own schoolchildren. Each has some history of dyslexia in the family. All three have received widely varying marks for essays and assignments, from bare passes to 2:2. There are distinct differences between the three. Alex has intermittent middle-range hearing loss, and feels that her inability to spell and structure her work may be due partly to missing things that others hear. She supposed this lack of auditory skills was consistent with dyslexia. But when tested, her hearing was, at that particular moment, within the normal range and auditory skills deficiency did not show a marked discrepancy indicating a dyslexic profile. Nicki's speech is slow and deliberate, she sometimes inverts and misses out words and has word-retrieval problems, difficulties she shares with her mother - they understand each other perfectly! Nicki is a Widening Participation undergraduate whose regional accent and lack of educational background impact on her experience of university. Petra speaks extremely quickly and articulately, her thinking is fast and sometimes seems non-sequitur. She whizzes ahead without filling in gaps. The same is true of her writing. For Alex, the investment of £296 for an assessment for dyslexia was money down the drain. Not only did she lose the money, but she has no 'good' reason for not performing as well as her peers and no financial support. For Nicki and Petra whose assessments were part paid for, the experience not only cost them financially, but was actually destructive. Petra said, "that's it then, I'm just thick! I may as well give up now." Nicki just cried. All three students would benefit from the same tuition support and software available to students assessed as dyslexic.

The widely varying experience of these students indicates that the DSA system, while being effective and laudable in many ways, does have problems. Even for a student such as Lucy above, for whom it is acknowledged that the DSA works well in terms of minimising her difficulty and maximising her ability to access the course, it does little to improve her independent literacy skills. There is a tendency towards the view that, "dyslexic people are dyslexic all the time" (Hammond and Hercules, 2003), and the way DSA works seems to give credence to this. Lucy relies on technology, working within a margin of error which she has come to accept, in spelling, syntax , expression and comprehensibility. Her reading will not develop this way, it is likely to remain dependent more on 'context' (Perfetti, 1999, p45).

Thus she will never be a 2:1 student (although she expects to be an A* practitioner). Lucy is skilled at practical application of her learning and the DSA circumvents the difficulties caused by her dyslexia. However, more in-depth assessment of Lucy's strengths and weaknesses might help to improve her literacy and study skills. We may know, from the WAIS, that her visual skills are reasonable, but further tests would establish how good her visual sequential memory is and whether, say, she can perceive shape in relation to ground, (Gardener,1997, p19). Weakness in visual sequencing and strength in perceiving visual form constancy, might suggest a teaching methodology which included say, 'chunking' sequences into prefix, root and suffix. Not understanding the fundamental elements of a student's visual and auditory perception might mean wasting time and causing frustration using an inappropriate teaching method.

For students on short courses, like Tom, or who already have appropriate software, going for assessment may not be cost-effective, but not going will deprive them of the individual education plan that an in-depth diagnosis of their strengths and weaknesses would give, as Fawcett and Nicolson suggest (1997, p.12). Borderline students with dyslexia-type difficulties, may be wary of investing in an assessment which could lead to DSA, if there is some doubt as to the likelihood of a positive diagnosis, but these students, too, would benefit from diagnostic assessment that would indicate strengths and weaknesses. Students like Daisy and Henry are of particular concern here, which is why at Portsmouth, students are going to be offered this level of assessment through the Academic Skills Unit. But it is students like Nicki, Alex and Petra who will really benefit from this facility.

The cost of investing in an assessment for DSA is an issue, not only for each individual student, but also for the HEI. Assessment done by an Educational Psychologist or a qualified assessor who holds membership of a recognised organisation can cost anything from £150 to £300. Students may apply for the cost to be paid for out of means-tested hardship funds, allocated according to student numbers by The Higher Education Funding Council Access Fund. According to Paul Meades, Student Finance Advisor, University of Portsmouth, (p.c.) about 30% of students who apply qualify for some portion of their fund to be paid, although as from next year students will be assumed to be in receipt of part-time income of £1,500 p.a., which will further disadvantage them. A university may employ and pay for its own dedicated staff to assess for SpLD instead of buying in from outside, an expense which might be met through students' DSA. There are many hidden cost implications for an institution when admitting students who may have SpLD. A requirement under SENDA (Waterfield & West, 2002), 'reasonable' support must be put in place for all students in receipt of DSA. From major investment, adapting buildings, to minor adjustments like supplying coloured

photocopy paper, HEIs are now responsible, if not for all the expense of this investment, at least for its administration. Support for students with SpLD may entail time and expense of staff in their academic departments, which would not be covered by DSA. Many administration costs are not covered, and the kindness, time, support and staff development of library staff, halls of residence tutors, peers and many others, are also a consideration, which may have cost implications - an increased workload for staff spending a lot of time with students with SpLD necessitates the employment of more staff. For the 15% -20% of students who have the needs of, but not the DSA of dyslexic students these costs are always borne by the HEI, as the student, Alex, with hearing loss, found out to her delight. Her department have bought voice-recognition software for her to use.

For the duration of an HE student's course - assuming the requirements have been met and commitment to the course is undisputed - it is in everyone's interests they be retained, which means supporting them appropriately. While disabled students should of course continue to receive DSA in its present format, the system should also be extended. Should there not be the means to fund appropriate support for all students? There are many cost-effective ways to do this. This would not mean supplying all students with personal computers, but merely giving them access to HEI-owned software and offering individuals tutorial time to plug skills gaps, for example those commonly experienced by widening participation students. Many of the software packages offered to individual students in receipt of DSA can be bought by site licence for a whole institution. A site licence for 'Read and Write', for example, an all-round software tool, useful to all students, can be bought for £2995, the single user cost is £140. For the cost of 20 single users, a whole institution could have access (A Buyer's Guide, n.d., p5). This would benefit all those students who choose not to go for assessment, all those students who go for assessment but do not qualify for DSA, all borderline cases of SpLD and any other students – in full-time work, single parents or carers - who for some reason cannot devote themselves to full time study, all of the time. It would also cater for dyslexic students who have, after remedial help, retested as no longer dyslexic, but still need support.

It is therefore not possible to say that the DSA as it stands is always a good investment, as some of the students who chose not to be assessed rightly decided. For first year students who are severely dyslexic, who will be assessed by examination and who are studying courses with large quantities of reading and long assignments to write, paying for an assessment that will qualify them for DSA is clearly an essential investment. For students who go for assessment and are assessed as not having SpLD there are serious issues to be faced. If they have paid for their own assessments, they will not only be out of pocket, and their self-esteem will be extremely low, but they will be left wondering exactly what is wrong with them and

why they are experiencing so much difficulty. The urge to open HE up to a wider population, "regardless of background" (The Future of Higher Education, 2003) must address the problems of non-mainstream students. As Lucas and Schecter (1992, p85-104) so succinctly put it, they may not perform well because they have not been "equitably served by the educational system" which may be due to "student characteristics, socio-cultural factors, language issues and instructional issues" hardly surprising, then, that they sometimes present with difficulties consistent with dyslexia.

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