

Equalities and Human Rights Committee: Widening Access to Scottish Universities for Disabled People – Dyslexia Scotland response

Dyslexia Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to this call for evidence. In addition to this response from us as a national charity representing the views of people with dyslexia, we also encouraged individuals with dyslexia and those who support them to submit their views directly to the Committee.

We fully support the target of ensuring that universities widen access to undergraduate places for people who may otherwise find it difficult to attend a university. This is a significant issue for many students with dyslexia.

The 2014 Education Scotland review, '[Making Sense: Education for Children and Young people with Dyslexia in Scotland](#)' highlighted that 'young people with dyslexia attain significantly less well than their peers who do not have additional support needs in those qualifications which would enable them to apply for places on university courses such as Highers. As a result in 2011-12, only 17% of young people with dyslexia have the opportunity to apply for these places, compared to 44.2% of their peers with no additional support needs'

Furthermore, 28% of Extended Learning Support (ELS) students in colleges (FE and HE) in 2013-14 were dyslexic. The number of students with dyslexia receiving ELS support has increased from 642 in 2002-03 to 2,630 in 2013-14 (over 4 times as many).

Question 1: Tell us about your experience of applying to a Scottish university, whether you gained a place or not? What could be changed about the applications process to ensure equality of opportunity?

If a young person has not been identified as dyslexic at school, they can only find out whether they are dyslexic through an assessment, either by a Psychologist or specialist dyslexia assessor. There is currently no free source of assessment of dyslexia for adults, and the cost varies from £300 - £500. This is clearly unaffordable for many school leavers and adults who may need evidence of their dyslexia to help them in higher education.

Adults may seek assessment for dyslexia for a number of reasons, including what support they might need in further and higher education.

Although many colleges and universities will provide an assessment for students, there is often a delay between organising the assessment and accessing support for their learning. This is especially the case if someone has not been identified as being dyslexic at school or if the student does not have evidence of that assessment. This delay can mean that a student does not receive Disabled Students' Allowance until the second or third terms, which clearly means that they are more likely to fall behind in the crucial early stages of their university career.

Some universities reimburse the cost of assessment retrospectively, but this is not widely known and students who do not realise this may not apply for university if they are not confident about being awarded the DSA.

Having clear, consistent and accessible information available to all students applying to Scottish Universities in the early application stages about DSA and the application process would help to ensure equality of opportunity. Examples of good practice include information briefings at Open Days on the support available for students with additional support needs. Dyslexia Scotland has a [range of free leaflets](#) which can help students and which can be used by universities for this purpose.

Questions 2: If you have studied at a Scottish university as an undergraduate, were there any barriers which stopped you taking full advantage of your time at university, please tell us about them? (for example, access extracurricular activities, using all university facilities, joining student life etc.)

Many students with dyslexia tell us that, especially if they do not get the right support at the right time early on in their university career, they have to spend far longer revising and studying than their peers. This in turn affects their ability to take part in extra-curricular activities. The earlier they can access support and learn how to make use of the support, the more likely they are to access both learning and extra-curricular activities. Some students report on excellent support from Disability advisers and through the DSA, as well as seminars on practical help such as Study Skills. Others report that not all lecturers provide reasonable adjustments for students with dyslexia or who do not provide dyslexia-friendly lectures or tutorials. We have a number of useful, free leaflets on our website [for students and lecturers](#).

Question 3: If you studied at a Scottish university did you achieve the qualification you wanted? If not, tell us why you think that was (for example, did any barriers hold you back from achieving your full potential etc.)

We recently heard of a post-graduate student who had been advised not to declare her dyslexia on her dissertation. This resulted in her achieving a far

lower mark than her lecturers had expected. The advice given to students can vary and in some cases appears to prevent the student from reaching their full potential. Clear and consistent advice from supervisors is crucial in order to enable students with dyslexia to achieve on a level playing field with their peers.

Question 4: Did studying at a Scottish university help to improve your chances of successfully gaining employment, please tell us about your experience?

Dyslexia Scotland aims to encourage and enable people with dyslexia to reach their potential in education, employment and life. With early intervention and the right support, people with dyslexia can reach their full potential. Making school, college and work dyslexia friendly can benefit all, but if unsupported, dyslexia can affect behaviour, self-esteem, mental health and their ability to cope day to day.

If students with dyslexia have been able to get the right support and learn independently, they are far more likely to gain employment and also to be successful in their work. Good quality information and support during periods of transition, e.g. from school to college; from year to year at college and from college to work, can make a significant difference to people with dyslexia in enabling them to reach the four pillars of Curriculum for Excellence. However, without the right support, students can be left feeling demoralised and an already deep-seated feeling of failure can be enhanced, which can carry over into their working life.

Please tell us about any other comments you feel are relevant to the inquiry.

Many dyslexic students applying for college courses leading to degree entry will have attended Scottish secondary schools in which they have been provided with suitably supportive assessment arrangements in SQA exams, such as extra time or use of a computer. Staff in the schools are likely to have told SQA that this need is because of dyslexia, but, nevertheless, the pupil will have left school without any "letter from a previous educational establishment that you attended, such as a school or college, confirming that you have been diagnosed with dyslexia or a specific learning difficulty by an educational psychologist or appropriately qualified professional".

There are very few professionals in Scotland's schools who consider themselves qualified to sign off a dyslexia assessment. Neither is there "joined-up thinking" between school support staff, local authority educational psychologists and the requirements of SAAS or employers to see a correctly signed letter stating that the individual has dyslexia.

The access to equal opportunity to apply for Disabled Student Allowance on grounds of dyslexia is therefore not consistent and can make or break a student's chances of success before, during and following college.

Work is currently being carried out by Education Scotland as part of the recommendations of the above mentioned Making Sense report, to improve access for teachers to high quality career-long education and training on dyslexia. Further information is available [here](#). It would be useful for the Committee to be aware of these recommendations and the work being carried out to address them.

Dyslexia Scotland
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