

Bournemouth University
Centre for Excellence in Learning (CEL)

CEL Theme:

Employability, Work based Learning and professional Practice

CASE STUDY:

Keeping secrets: a case study of students' disclosure of dyslexia and dyspraxia on application for a work placement

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Key Words:

Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, disclosure, neurodiversity, discrimination, placement, graduate employability

Case study synopsis:

Anecdotal evidence suggests that undergraduates with dyslexia or dyspraxia fail to disclose these conditions when applying for a work placement. This research finds that students fear their employment opportunities will be compromised by negative perceptions of neurodiversity held by placement providers.

Lack of disclosure means that reasonable adjustments are not made in the work place. Feedback from employers indicates that details of neurodiversity are not asked for at various stages of the application process. Often, this is because placement providers misunderstand equality legislation. They wrongly assume they will be seen as discriminatory if they raise notions of neurodiversity.

Employers know very little about dyslexia or dyspraxia and have limited understanding of reasonable adjustments. This case study illustrates how and why a continuous cycle of non-disclosure exists which affects the placement experience for both students and employers.

In turn, this impinges on subsequent decisions made when applying for graduate employment; it precludes opportunities for placement providers to utilise positive traits possessed by these applicants; it results in students failing to use their assistive technology in the work place and perpetuates negative assumptions about dyslexia and dyspraxia in wider society.

Context

Business enterprises and universities in the UK are morally and legally bound (Equality Act, 2010) to embrace diversity and equality of opportunity. However, despite the regularity of high-profile anti-discriminatory campaigns, it appears that 'deeply entrenched assumptions and concerns about the employability of disabled people' remain (Morris & Turnbull, 2007 p35). In 2012, less than half of working age disabled people in the UK (46.3%) were employed which comprises a difference of two million in comparison with their non-disabled counterparts. Of the former, only 14.9% are educated to degree level or above (Department of Work & Pensions (DWP), 2014).

These statistics, however, do not present a sufficiently comprehensive account. For example, the most commonly reported impairments are those that affect mobility or conditions where lifting and carrying abilities are degraded. Further, whilst employers are required to offer adjustments and

accommodations, they can only do so if the employee has chosen to disclose a disability. The inference is, therefore, that the numbers of those who will experience problems in the workplace is far higher than currently suggested. In particular, those with invisible or hidden differences related to neurodiversity, such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, are often excluded from consideration.

An added problem is that little research has been undertaken on the problems faced in employment by the neurodiverse. Academic discourse has tended to concentrate on the extant debate between social and medical models of disability, thus reflecting the inequalities most predominate in the DWP account (DWP, 2014). With some notable exceptions, such as those inspired by successful conscious raising campaigns by representatives of people with mental health conditions, studies have largely concentrated on overcoming barriers for the physically disabled and ignored invisible differences such as dyslexia (Griffiths 2012; Morris & Turnbull 2007). This paper begins with the premise that **without disclosure and explanation of learning differences, employers will fail to appreciate the positive attributes that neurodiverse employees can bring to business and enterprise.**

Perceptions of Dyslexia

Dyslexia can be associated with the possession of insightful problem-solving skills and the ability to think multi-dimensionally (Sanderson-Mann et al, 2012). Unfortunately, the commonly held perception within society at large and, ironically, on the part of many with dyslexia and dyspraxia, is that these [learning differences imply negative manifestations which are neither understood nor appropriately met within the workplace](#). For instance, difficulties with time and task management that could be managed with relatively simple adjustments can be viewed as obstacles to progression. As Todd (2013, page unavailable) argues, 'a neurodiverse profile can pose a radical challenge to ... concepts of measurement, competency frameworks and appraisal systems.' Little wonder then that so [many fail to disclose evidence of neurodiversity on application for employment](#).

Within UK higher education institutions, dyslexia is the most commonly self-declared disability (Evans, 2013). The benefits of disclosure at this stage are clear: following a diagnosis from an educational psychologist, a student with dyslexia can obtain Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA/SFE) to fund additional academic support throughout their degree from a specialist tutor. Within their academic schools, adjustments for learning differences can be made such as the allocation of extra time in

examinations, the application of marking guidelines to negate difficulties with spelling or grammar and the use of assistive technology. Such adjustments could be developed within employment by, for example, encouraging time management strategies through the setting of clear priorities, using a proofreader and utilising the technology that the student brings with them. Nonetheless, [whilst disclosure and ensuing accommodations are common in H.E., 'both take on a new set of complexities and considerations in the workplace'](#) (Madaus et al, 2002).

ALS at BU:

Most undergraduate programmes at Bournemouth University include a one year placement or, in the case of nursing, on-going practice. The university has a large well-resourced Additional Learning Support (ALS) unit. Annual averages of 1600 students, most of whom are in receipt of DSA are supported by around forty staff including advisors, specialist teachers and study mentors. There is, therefore, plentiful and varied anecdotal evidence available to support the hypothesis that a majority of students do not disclose a learning difference on application for placement. The rationale given for this choice reflects that given within the literature on employment: fear of being considered stupid or developing a marginalised identity (Evans, 2013); fear of attracting unwanted stigma that hinders a

constructive relationship with their mentor (Morris & Turnbull, 2007); and a concern for job security (Madeus et al, 2002). On the other hand, a rare early study (Kakela & Witte, 2000 cited Madeus et al 2002, p366) argued that a mere 29% of students who had perceived benefits in disclosing a learning difference, did so in order to use their assistive technology or to have more detailed instructions for tasks allocated by the employer.

Enhancing employability:

With the overarching aim of enhancing employability, members of the ALS team undertook a [project to encourage disclosure of learning differences on application for a work placement](#). Although we support students with a wide range of potentially disabling conditions, it was decided to initially focus on [dyslexia and dyspraxia](#); these being the most common of hidden differences and, arguably, the most misunderstood. Accordingly, we were [awarded funding from a source of widening participation money which would finance an improved placement experience for the main stakeholders - students, employers and placement advisors - through a variety of evidence-based resources](#).

It was deemed essential to give equal priority to the needs of employers because, as Todd (2013, page unavailable) maintains, even where they are eager to offer greater understanding, 'their

experience is limited as to what to do and why the required adjustments are appropriate'. This suggests a vicious circle whereby a lack of disclosure by students leads to a continuous dearth of knowledge on the part of those providing placements. Further, Griffiths has argued that 'legislation does not define what is 'reasonable' and with regard to placements, it is unclear where the university's responsibilities end and the placement setting's begin' (2012, p3).

Research methodology and outcomes:

1) From the students' perspective

Formal consent for our research methodology was given by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Panel at Bournemouth University. As the project concentrated on dyslexia and dyspraxia, the students we intended to approach were not considered vulnerable. Further, with regard to identifying a sample of both students and employers, [all our respondents were self-selecting](#). Students who were subsequently invited to participate in the making of a promotional video signed a consent form allowing them to be identified and for the resulting film to be disseminated.

We initially intended to survey 117 students who had returned from a work placement to complete their final year of study.

However, only 27 students with dyslexia and/or dyspraxia expressed an interest in participating in the research. We quickly learned that whilst our students were eager to discuss their learning differences in order to access tutor support for academic purposes, few were inclined to reveal their progress or otherwise outside of the university environment. In fact, whilst the subject under research is 'disclosure', terminology which in itself is suspect owing to the inference of something hidden, this theme of keeping a secret ran throughout the project. Accordingly, [we changed our approach to a method which would elicit more qualitative data. In-depth interviews were conducted with the 27 students, some of which were filmed for the purposes of creating informative and promotional videos for future dissemination.](#)

Firstly, the students were asked at what stage of the application process they disclosed a learning difference. Choices offered comprised the initial application form, CV and covering letter and continued to the assessment centre and subsequent interview. All of these students were allocated extra time in university examinations. Therefore, in order to be accorded a similar adjustment in timed tests at the assessment centre, we might have expected that many candidates would have offered evidence of dyslexia and dyspraxia early in the process. However, only six of our participants had disclosed by the time

they took their tests, whilst a further 19 entered their placement without having revealed or discussed their learning difference. When asked why they had chosen not to disclose, all the students gave explanations which illustrated their expectations of employers' perception of dyslexia and dyspraxia:

- 'Because people will think I'm not very smart'
- 'I did not want it to jeopardise achieving the placement I wanted'
- 'I thought it would harm my chances if I disclosed'
- 'I had a fear of it lessening my chances as a candidate'
- 'I was embarrassed and worried they would not further my application'

These responses also typify what Blankfield (2001, p25) argues is the 'double invisibility of dyslexia': not only is the original condition hidden, so is the anxiety that emanates from consideration of disclosure.

Once established on placement, some students had considered disclosing their learning difference, particularly in light of difficulties they were experiencing:

- ‘I was struggling to produce work to a high standard and I got told off’

Sadly, even where the demands of the placement were proving troublesome to both the students and their mentors, none of those who had previously chosen to conceal their dyslexia and dyspraxia felt inclined to explain why some tasks were proving difficult unless they were confronted:

- ‘I thought if I disclosed my condition that this would affect my work and the cases that I was given. I felt that the partners would view me and my ability to undertake the job in a different light’
- ‘I was worried about my credibility so I just struggled on’
- ‘I think my managers would have been more nervous to give me responsibility as it frequently involved corresponding with internal and external partners of the business’
- ‘I would not want to look like I was making excuses or being lazy’
- ‘I think my boss would have regretted employing me’

The concept of prejudice was frequently referred to by our students who have based their expectations of workplace responses to learning differences on past experiences:

‘Just because you are dyslexic doesn’t mean you’re stupid, even if you get told this for sixteen years’

Herein lays a huge problem for staff supporting those with learning differences. Whilst we might spend three years empowering our students through the acquisition of independent learning strategies that enable a level playing field for academic success, the majority appear to internalise the societal discrimination they fear. On leaving the relative comfort of university, students who have embraced their dyslexia or dyspraxia, and exploited the positive talents and traits that these conditions embody, still feel unable to share the good news with employers.

Of course, it does not necessarily follow that a majority of employers hold prejudices against learning differences. However, as other writers have mentioned (Todd 2013, Griffiths 2012), quite what a placement provider knows about dyslexia or what adjustments they might usefully make is unclear. During the interviews, it became apparent that those who had disclosed at some point were met with mixed responses when asked about the accommodations that had been made for them:

- ‘No adjustments were made but I think it was good to make my manager aware’

- ‘No adjustments were made but other employees helped to overcome it’
- ‘None were made but they were a bit more understanding’
- ‘My placement company failed to help me at all’
- ‘Conversely, three students had a positive experience:’
- ‘I was given more time to take in information and things were explained to me more one to one’
- ‘They bought me books to look at and let me do things at my own pace’
- ‘Proofreading of reports that were published for the newsletters and websites’

Finally, we asked our students whether, based on their placement experiences, they would disclose their learning differences when applying for graduate employment. Some participants were adamant that they would not reveal their dyslexia or dyspraxia and gave reasons which were similar to those given on placement application:

- ‘I feel it would affect my chances of getting the job over other interviewees’
- ‘I fear that knowing this information beforehand would hamper my chances’

- ‘In an already competitive world I believe it would go against me’

However, the reality of working life had clearly influenced the views of some of our participants. Within the university, students learn strategies to guide them through academic assessments. They take these strategies and their subject knowledge into the work placement and with reasonable adjustments can manage new demands. Those who had not disclosed were no better off than previously but those students who had revealed their learning differences and whose employers had allowed accommodations painted a much more positive picture:

- ‘I envision that the things I am good at outweigh the things I am not so good at. When my employer is aware of this, they should be able to see me in the best possible way. This will make sure the company is aware of why I might make mistakes and they will know what they need to look out for and where I will need help’
- ‘I’m honest and I don’t want them saying at a later stage ‘why didn’t you tell us?’
- ‘If they asked me, I don’t see why not. I wouldn’t want to work for a company if they discriminated against me or anyone else’

Although we found students who had a positive experience on their work placement, and a slight upward turn in the numbers of those who said they would disclose their learning difference when applying for graduate employment, 57% of respondents still maintained they would never reveal their dyslexia or dyspraxia perceiving it as a hindrance to their employability. This concurs with Pennington's suggestion (2010, p56) that a decision to reveal a learning difference was 'dependent on the perception of how the employer would respond to the disclosure'. With these answers in mind, we then moved to the second phase of the primary research to survey the employers.

2) From the employers' perspective:

Questionnaires were intended to be delivered as structured interviews by the Placement Development Advisors (PDAs) who work within the academic schools at the university. It was estimated that between 100 and 120 respondents could be reached. Following the distribution of our pilot questionnaire, a Fellow of the Institute of Directors, advised that most employers would not have sufficient knowledge of learning differences to enable them to answer adequately. This generated a complete reconstruction of the questions whereby the problematic and positive attributes associated with dyslexia and dyspraxia were clearly outlined as traits that may be recognisable. Further, rather than ask what type of reasonable adjustments the

placement providers might be able to make, we listed the accommodations that could be deemed acceptable.

Unfortunately, our desire to introduce greater clarity backfired. Informal feedback from the PDAs suggested that a majority of the employers with whom they dealt appeared overawed. We received 29 completed questionnaires which, whilst not enabling us to draw conclusions that can be argued as representative, do allow us to present a case study. Further, the lack of willingness to engage reflects that found previously with our students and with others (Madaus et al, 2002). Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that this current research has made inroads into consideration of the perspectives and understandings of employers.

Firstly, the employers were asked whether candidates for a placement were invited to disclose a learning difference at any stage of the application process. 24% agreed that this happened at a face to face interview whilst only four people offered this facility beforehand. Of greater interest were some of the optional comments received in accounting for a lack of enquiry. Some of those approached were unclear of procedure:

- 'Unsure of company practices across the business'
- 'I don't know – possibly dealt with by the HR department'

Others, however, illustrated a completely different view of equality legislation:

- ‘Seen to be discriminating so wouldn’t ask’
- ‘Wouldn’t ask – could be discriminatory’

The paradox here is that while [some employers feel unable to ask about anything that is not a manifest disability, neither can they implement adjustments for hidden differences which are covered by legislation](#). This perpetuates the cycle of non-disclosure by further condoning the keeping of secrets. Moreover, negative stereotypes of those with dyslexia and dyspraxia are maintained in the workplace and wider society. For example, when offered a list of positive attributes that these students can bring to their placement, very few were known by our respondents although 38% recognised the possession of innovative problem-solving skills. Conversely, the figures were much higher when asked about traits which ‘might impact the employability skills’ of neurodiverse students: 55% of employers claimed awareness of placement students forgetting instructions, 45% believed they had difficulties in sustaining focus and 72% ‘knew’ that badly written material was associated with dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Given that [few of our employers gave placement students a clear opportunity to disclose dyslexia or dyspraxia, and that](#)

[most of our cohort had chosen to keep their learning difference a secret](#), it must be inferred that the employers’ ‘knowledge’ of negative traits did not originate in first-hand experience. This is by no means a condemnation of placement providers. On the contrary, when offered a list of reasonable adjustments that their company could make, responses were extremely positive. For example, 69% agreed they could offer assistance with task prioritisation, 76% were able to instigate proofreading of important documents and 83% would be proactive in asking questions to check understanding. Arguably, these accommodations were seen as both reasonable and minimal but without them many of our dyslexic and dyspraxic students struggled to fulfil their assigned tasks to the satisfaction of both themselves and their employers

Critical Reflections:

The ALS team encourage students with neurodiverse conditions to perceive themselves as possessing learning differences rather than needs, difficulties or, worse, disabilities. Within the team, we are precise with our terminology. This not a question of semantics: it is a means of reminding everyone that our students are ‘disabled’ by an uninformed society. Our approach further helps to raise the self-esteem of these students, many of whom mirrored the judgements of others and regarded

themselves in a poor light prior to psychological assessment. Students with dyslexia and dyspraxia understand that elements of these conditions are seen to be problematic for others and shy away from disclosure on application for placement. Many have an unhappy experience which informs decisions when applying for graduate employment. Wilton (2006, p36) argues that we must 'recognise the capacity of the work environment to enable or disable workers'. However, such a capacity is not necessarily the result of negative decision-making: our research indicates that employers would be happy to apply reasonable adjustments requested by students who disclose dyslexia and dyspraxia resulting in mutually beneficial enhanced employability skills. In the next phase of this project, we implement the training resources that represent the tangible outcomes of this research.

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