

**Art and design lecturers' perspectives of dyslexia and  
dyslexic higher education students**

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**Keywords:** dyslexia, lecturers, attitudes, higher education, students.

**Abstract**

Lecturer perspectives of dyslexic students in higher education are important due to the impact that teaching staff have on their university experiences. In this study, two art and design lecturers took part in an interpretivist case study using semi-structured interviews. It was found that both lecturers had, in practice, positive attitudes to dyslexic students in their classrooms. However, these perceptions and the ability to include anticipatory adjustments for students shifted once the realities of teaching workloads were taken into account.

## Introduction

*This article was written as part of an MA Education (SEND and Inclusion) dissertation at the University of Hertfordshire and all data has been anonymised for reasons of confidentiality.*

Since enrolment data was first made available in 1994/95 by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), dyslexia (later assigned under the umbrella term of Specific Learning Difficulty - SpLD) has been the most declared disability of students entering higher education (HE) in England (HESA, 1996; HESA, 2020). It is therefore useful to ascertain perceptions of this largest group of disabled students, as this has consequences for other groups of disabled students.

The rationale for focusing on art and design lecturers is due to the prevalence of dyslexia within that field in HE. According to HESA's bespoke analysis from 2015/16, creative arts and design had the highest percentage of SpLD students of any discipline, at 15% (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2017). Therefore, the lecturers that agree to participate in my interviews will have an increased probability of teaching dyslexic students in their class, even if they are new to the profession, compared to other subjects.

## Literature Review

Although the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) may provide some dyslexic students contact with one-to-one specialist teaching each academic year (Doyle, 2019), the attitudes of course lecturers that dyslexic students encounter is an important area to research due to the majority of university teaching being delivered by them. The literature review also includes studies where dyslexic students were included under the umbrella term of disabled students.

Data from research suggests that, in general, lecturers tend to have a negative view of students with disabilities and therefore dyslexia. According to Holloway (2001), staff who lacked knowledge about disabilities and how to cater for these students contributed to the stress and poor university experience for disabled students. Both Garrison-Wade (2012) and Moriña and Orozco (2021) highlighted that staff who lack an awareness of disabilities also displayed negative attitudes. Specifically, Moriña and Orozco (2021) found that disabled students were viewed unfavourably, as they increased the lecturers' workloads. Furthermore, Fuller *et al.* (2004) found that attitudes to disabilities affected their flexibility to meet the needs of disabled students and to ensure parity between the quality of provision that disabled and non-disabled students received.

In contrast, Lister *et al.* (2021), in their study at one distance learning UK HEI, found no link between knowledge of disabilities and positive attitudes towards

inclusivity. Nevertheless, the weight of evidence would suggest that there is a link between negative attitudes and an insufficient understanding of dyslexia. Therefore, the negative attitudes of staff that a dyslexic student encounters during their time at university can have a detrimental effect on their access to a level playing field, compared to non-dyslexic students, and their overall HE experience.

Both Langørgen and Magnus (2018) and Berggren *et al.* (2016) observed that the success of disabled students in HE can be based on the positive or negative interactions with staff. They discovered that positive staff attitudes and interactions improved student attainment and reduced drop-out levels. Díez *et al.* (2015) made a similar point in their study of disabled students, stating that in the rare cases where students received positive attitudes and support from lecturers, this contributed to their academic achievement on the course. In conclusion, negative attitudes displayed by teaching staff can affect the attainment and progression of dyslexic students.

Studies by Griffin and Pollak (2009) and Riddell and Weedon (2006) highlighted the scepticism that dyslexic students faced when communicating their diagnoses to lecturers. Riddell & Weedon (2006) confirmed this view in the interviews with lecturers, which included labelling dyslexic students as lazy and being worried about standards of academic work lessening when dyslexic students constituted more of the student body. Additionally, they found that students with visible disabilities received more support than students with

invisible disabilities, such as dyslexia. These findings are in agreement with Díez *et al.* (2015), who observed that students with visible disabilities received more support from staff. In summary, it would seem that dyslexic students face further barriers, including disbelief about their diagnoses, being branded as lazy, unjustified opinions about the standard of their academic work and having less support than peers with visible disabilities.

In opposition to the idea that lecturers display negative attitudes to dyslexic students, several studies (Cameron & Nunkoosing, 2012; Ryder & Norwich, 2019) demonstrated that they mostly have positive attitudes. Kendall (2019) found that lecturers were dedicated to applying inclusive practices in their teaching but, nevertheless, they worried about the constraints that existed to put this into practice, including workload. This follows the findings in Ryder and Norwich (2019), where the majority of lecturers had positive attitudes towards dyslexic students and 60% of participants wanted to provide inclusive teaching to dyslexics. However, the same percentage felt that it was time-consuming and therefore unrealistic within the confines of their current teaching. The authors also postulated that the positive attitudes found were a result of participants aligning with the medical model of disability, where the problem lies with the individual (Riddick, 2011).

In contrast to the medical model, the social model of disability suggests that is it society that disables an individual (Riddick, 2011). Over half of the lecturers in the study did not align their perceptions with the social model and disagreed

that issues were caused by the literacy barriers created by the university. Cameron and Nunkoosing (2012) found that 62% of the participants in their study had a positive attitude because they experienced more contact with dyslexic students and therefore had a better understanding of the learning difference as a result. Specifically, lecturers who had meaningful interactions with dyslexics, including students, colleagues, friends and family, were positively impacted in their attitude. This then led to further positive experiences with other dyslexics and assisted in their understanding.

Overall, the weight of evidence suggests that dyslexic students usually face negative attitudes from lecturers, which could be as a result of poor awareness and understanding of the learning difficulty. It then follows that those students who are not adequately supported at university do not receive the same learning as students without dyslexia, which affects attainment and drop-out levels. Therefore, it can be concluded that dyslexic students are still not given equal access to the curriculum, although it is a legal requirement, as the findings suggest that policy is not being adhered to in practice and inclusive teaching practices are not widely available for dyslexic students.

## Methodology

As I was interested in learning more about individual perspectives of dyslexic students, my research approach seemed to align with the interpretivist paradigm, where the focus is on multiple realities occurring alongside each other (Denscombe, 2017). It is also known as the constructivist or social constructivist paradigm, due to these experiences being socially constructed (Mertens, 1998) and subjectively interpreted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Research is given a humanistic view where the focus is on individuals and their construction of reality (Robson, 2011; Thomas, 2013). Therefore, using this approach should provide me with rich data on lecturers' individual attitudes to dyslexic students.

The methodology that most suitably investigates individual lecturers' attitudes towards dyslexia is the case study. Stake (2005:17) stated that a '*... case study is defined by interest in an individual case, not by the methods of inquiry used*'. Additionally, according to Simons (2009:21):

*'... [a] case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context.'*

This definition highlighted the importance of studying real life situations. However, it is also essential to emphasise where practices are transferable, as

unique case studies are not helpful (Newby, 2014). The other advantages of using case studies are that it allowed for an extensive inquiry (Saldaña, 2011) and is helpful to determine what is occurring currently in HE (Thomas, 2016).

My research focuses on an interpretivist case study investigation into individual attitudes and pedagogy. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), qualitative interviews are useful in gaining a better understanding of the way that participants see and interpret their individual worlds. It would therefore seem that using interviews is a good match with my research.



## Themes

### 1. Dyslexia Awareness and Attitudes

#### *Participant 1*

Participant 1 had a good understanding of the key dyslexic traits, even though she had no formal training, due to her sibling being diagnosed with dyslexia:

‘So obviously, regarding reading and processing information, sequencing and managing time. But primarily what I've noticed is that there there's a blind panic that settles when you give a new brief or when you give them, you know, lots of lots of written information, for example, that is just a rabbit in headlights, I can't understand this. I can't process it. You know, it's just noise. I can't kind of find a route into it. And then the other one is around time management and planning workflow and tasks and keeping to task and navigating diaries and things like that.’

Participant 1's understanding that dyslexics have issues with reading and processing information aligns to the definition given by Rose (2009), where difficulties in phonological awareness are characteristic of dyslexia. She also mentions the co-occurring difficulty of time management, also mentioned in the Rose (2009) definition of dyslexia.

Another issue that she identifies correctly is the difficulty with sequencing, which can lead to problems with organising sentences and essays (Reid & Kirk, 2001; Department for Education and Skills, 2004). Her example also links to guidance by the University of Bath (2018) that, when dyslexic students are presented with long assignment briefs, there can be an information overload as they endeavour to process the information. Fernie and Henning (2006) also suggested that the clarification of assessment briefs was helpful not just to dyslexic students but all learners.

Ryder and Norwich (2019) observed that a better awareness of dyslexia was gained not through formal training but through a family member with the learning difference, as in Participant 1's case. This view is supported by Cameron and Nunkoosing (2012), who found that positive interactions with either dyslexic family, friends, colleagues or students led them to developing positive attitudes, further engaging experiences with dyslexics, all of which improved their understanding of the condition.

### ***Participant 2***

Participant 2 was unable to show any understanding of the learning difference, although he used the interview to learn more about dyslexia and wanted further information and training in the future. Vickerman and Blundell (2010) and Moriña and Orozco (2021) highlighted that the low awareness of disabilities in staff continues to be a barrier to disabled students. What became apparent through his interview was that, although Participant 2 had been

teaching in the school of art and design since 2010, during this time he had been unaware of the high numbers of dyslexic students in his classrooms. For example, on the art and design courses from 2017 to 2021, an average of 13.5% of all the undergraduate students at this particular university declared an SpLD (Management Information, 2021).

Both participants had, in principle, a positive attitude towards having dyslexics in their classes.

**Participant 1:**

‘And it's not an issue, I find autistic students more challenging.’

**Participant 2:**

‘You know, if I am aware of that condition, on the contrary, I would, you know, support them or find a way to support them as best as I could.’

Participant 1's positive attitude could be linked to the study by Cameron and Nunkoosing (2012), who found that positive attitudes were fostered by lecturers who had engaging experiences with dyslexics, which in her case would be family and students.

Participant 2's positive attitude is contrary to the findings by Garrison-Wade (2012) and Moriña and Orozco (2021), who suggested that negative attitudes were displayed by staff who lacked an awareness of disabilities. It is, however, in line with Lister et al. (2021), who found no association between knowledge of disabilities and a positive attitude towards inclusion.

## **2. Participant Workloads**

Initially the two participants had positive attitudes towards dyslexic students, however, when the issue of an increased workload was addressed, they became more negative:

### **Participant 1:**

'I think probably from a time point of view, there are certain demands around the academic input but in [her level of teaching] there's a there's a bit more space maybe, and we have fairly small class sizes. So, I can offer additional, you know, tutorials. I think what at one point the Health and Wellbeing team was suggesting that I gave an additional half an hour to every student who has a learning difficulty fortnightly. And I just simply wouldn't be able to do that. If what you know, to give say, eight students in 15 to give each of them an additional half hour tutorial fortnightly it's not possible.'

**Participant 2:**

‘Now, I guess the question for me would be in terms of workload. You know how it is we're really kind of, you know, constantly submerged by work and catching up, catching up. So, I don't know how practically I could you know, I would find a way, I guess. But I don't know how much more work that would require.’

For Participant 1, the small class sizes on her course allow her to offer additional support to those students that need it. However, she was unable to offer those with learning difficulties supplementary tutorials, which for eight students would have amounted to four hours each fortnight. Therefore, what she is able to offer to the group would amount to less than this. Participant 2 states that he would try and find a way to have the time for inclusion but, in practice, he was not aware of how much extra workload it would involve.

In their study of 164 lecturers, Ryder and Norwich (2019) highlighted that, although 60% thought that a fully inclusive teaching system was an improvement on individual reasonable adjustments, the same percentage thought that inclusive teaching was time and resource intensive. Lecturers in a different study suggested having reduced teaching hours where they encountered a high number of disabled students (Márquez & Melero Aguilar, 2020).

**Participant 2** added:

‘And I don't know if it would be better if I provided that support or if someone with better knowledge of the condition would provide that support. But I guess, you know, because I don't know anything about dyslexia, apart from, you know, the very basic thing. So that's one thing. Right now, I would feel someone, you know, with knowledge would be more effective in supporting those students. But if I would get training. And be more knowledgeable about how I can support students more effectively. That would, I guess, be a different situation.’

Participant 2 is in effect suggesting that, as the lecturer, he is not best placed to support dyslexic students in the classroom. This is supported by Ryder and Norwich (2019), who found that, although the majority of lecturers said they had positive attitudes towards dyslexia, just over half reported that an all-inclusive system of teaching and learning was idealistic and unrealistic.

## Conclusion

### 1. Summary of Findings and Recommendations

There was a large disparity in the knowledge between the two participants, although both were keen to improve their understanding of dyslexia and inclusive teaching practices.

Importantly, both displayed a positive attitude towards dyslexic students. However, workload seemed to have a significant impact for both participants in the practicalities of creating an inclusive teaching environment and they both mentioned how it might create a barrier to inclusive teaching. This is an issue that can only be addressed by university policy, for example, by reducing teaching hours for lecturers with many disabled students on their course, as suggested in the study by Márquez and Melero Aguilar (2020). Kendall (2019) recommends that universities need to have a better understanding of the time taken to support students, especially those who need reasonable adjustments, which need to be considered during workload planning. Until these measures are in place, disabled students may not receive the reasonable adjustments for which they are legally entitled.

### 2. Limitations

The main limitation to the research was the number of individuals that agreed to take part in the interviews and so any generalisations from the results are limited. On the other hand, the two interviewees were well known to me

professionally which increased the trustworthiness of the answers they provided.

In hindsight, I should have built into the research design another method of data collection, such as art-based research. This would have provided a method of triangulation and may have appealed to the art and design lecturers, leading to further participants offering to take part in the research.

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