Advice about the challenges people with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) face and how to tackle them

Learn what to do

Connect with others

From a variety of industries, people give their personal stories of SpLDs
This newsletter was produced by the 2018 SpLD HEAR Group Project to celebrate learning differently at TUOS.

It was produced, with thanks, with sponsorship from the Alumni Foundation.
My name is **Natalie Lamb** and I am a PhD researcher at The University of Sheffield, working in industry with Anglian Water.

I chose to get involved with this project to increase the awareness that people with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs) are out there— you are not alone! And, that it is not only students who have SpLDs, there are people out there, highly successful people at the top of their careers, who face the same challenges that you might be facing right now.

This publication is for anyone who is interested in SpLDs. I hope you connect with the personal stories within these pages, that you learn something, that you take something from this. Thank you for giving it a read.

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*I also wanted to give back to a support system that has meant so much to me.*

I am **Paul Ndegwa**, a recent graduate of IT & Organisations with DLL at the University of Sheffield. I’m also a member of staff, working for the Department of Estates as Facilities Assistant.

I wanted to take part in this project because I am passionate about helping students go past their challenges. I am a very firm believer in helping people understand their challenges, find a way of turning them around, and achieve their potential.
In September 2015, Wyn was appointed Pro Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching at the University of Sheffield. He takes the lead for ensuring excellence and innovation in teaching and learning, with an emphasis on the use of technologies to enhance student learning. In April 2017 he was presented with an international learning and teaching award for his outstanding contributions to the field.

Wyn acknowledges that teachers need to adapt to meet the needs of all but accepts that there are a number of challenges for the university in communicating with and supporting students who learn differently. Giving a personal example of his daughter’s experience with OCD, he points out that having the diagnosis was very important in that it allowed the family to then start to work on how to deal with it in a way that worked for her.

He underscores the importance of understanding exactly what the difficulty is i.e. the diagnosis:

“We need to make sure we capture that as soon as possible”

and points to the university’s specialised support services in DDSS that facilitate assessment and diagnosis. He also points to the need for a wider understanding in the academic community of what it is to be a student with specific learning difficulties.

Wyn believes that “It’s not about redesigning everything for every student; it’s about being inclusive in our practices, inclusive in ways that make the classroom experience, and indeed the online experience, approachable for all students.”

In order to address these challenges and move towards a more inclusive environment, he believes these three aspects are essential:

“…education, conversation and intervention.”

Interview: Paul Ndewa

SpLD Times
How do SpLDs affect learning?

SpLDs can have a big impact on your learning but sometimes you are not even aware of it. This impact can vary depending on the individual but also depending on what you are trying to do.

The following difficulties are recognised as characterising the learning process of students with SpLDs (the range of characteristics will differ from person to person).

- Lacking confidence becoming fluent in a new skill to the point where it becomes automatic, for example reading, writing and driving a car
- Taking longer than other students to complete tasks
- Organising work and other aspects of their lives
- A poor sense of passage of time, mixing up dates, times and appointments
- Poor short-term memory for carrying out instructions or copying from the board and remembering what has just been read and/or said
- Retrieving words when speaking and mispronunciations caused by motor problems or difficulties in discriminating sounds
- Directional confusions, getting easily lost, having problems using maps or finding their way to a new place
- Poor motor control resulting in a range of difficulties including handwriting
- Sequencing, such as instructions and mathematical procedures
- Retaining the visual image of words, signs, symbols, formulae, musical notation
- Reading text due to visual distortions such as blurring or moving letters
- Comprehension, despite appearing to read fluently
- Attention span and concentration

Image: Chris Webb

Kasra Shahtaheri:
University of Sheffield alumnus 2017

After graduating in 2017 with a Masters in translation studies, Kasra secured full-time employment teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in China, in Shenzhen near the Hong Kong border.

"It’s probably not the most conventional career for a dyslexic and dyspraxic person, but I like to think of my dyslexia as an asset, because it means I can relate to all of my pupils, regardless of their abilities. Some of my pupils have SpLDs and even some of my own lecturers."

**What motivated you to seek a diagnosis?**

"I always knew there was something wrong and something that affected my academic abilities, I noticed that my reading and writing speeds were very slow from the beginning, not to mention my poor fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination at the time. I struggled with spelling complex and non-phonetic words and I would miss words out, even in English.

And, despite having a gift for certain foreign languages, I struggled with their non-phonetic spellings."
Interview

"Never see your SpLD as a hindrance; never give up on your dreams and a career you feel passionate about."

"My job as an English teacher and even my two degrees are unconventional for an SpLD person."

Did your diagnosis help you understand more about SpLDs?

"Yes, but I’d say my diagnosis helped me to learn more about my difficulties concerning dyspraxia rather than dyslexia, my dyslexic habits didn’t come as a surprise to me as much. It was my languages degrees and school subjects which helped me more to understand my dyslexia, rather than my diagnosis."

Are there any challenges you face in your job because of your SpLD?

"I sometimes have to check the spelling for certain words, but with the invention of the internet and with help of spellcheckers, proofreading and speech recognition software, I feel that we are so lucky to live as dyslexics, dyspraxics and other SpLD people in the 21st century."

What advice would you give to students who think their SpLD might prevent them from succeeding in their chosen career?

"Don’t put all your eggs in one basket: depending on your degree, perhaps try and look for work experience in your chosen career before graduating to see if you like it and always have a Plan B. For example, I always had teaching to fall back on if I didn’t continue my career in subtitling, translation, and interpreting."

How did specialist support help you at university?

"Specialist 1:1 support helped with my academic writing and essay planning, exam prep and revision. It also helped to improve my organisational skills and practice my presentation skills. SpLD tutors at university were a lot more supportive than school and college."

What do you wish everyone understood about specific learning difficulties?

"That it’s not visible and we might have strategies to cope with it and overcome some of our difficulties. We may not fit the stereotype or display all of the characteristics of SpLD. We may even have academically demanding degrees and careers; it doesn’t mean that we don’t still have specific learning difficulties."

Image: Pixabay
Descripions of SpLDs

Specific learning difficulties affect the way information is learned and processed

- They are hidden and therefore often overlooked
- They occur independently of intelligence
- They are often hereditary
- They often co-occur

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a combination of abilities and difficulties; the difficulties affect the learning process in aspects of literacy and sometimes numeracy.

Coping with required reading is generally seen as the biggest challenge at Higher Education level due in part to difficulty in skimming and scanning written material.

A student may also have an inability to express his/her ideas clearly in written form and in a style appropriate to the level of study.

Marked and persistent weaknesses may be identified in working memory, speed of processing, sequencing skills, auditory and/or visual perception, spoken language and motor skills.

Visuo-spatial skills, creative thinking and intuitive understanding are less likely to be impaired and indeed may be outstanding.

Dyspraxia

Gross motor skills (related to balance and co-ordination) and fine motor skills (relating to manipulation of objects) are hard to learn and difficult to retain and generalise.

Writing is particularly laborious and keyboard skills difficult to acquire. Individuals may have difficulty organising ideas and concepts. Pronunciation may also be affected and they may have poor awareness of body language.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia involves basic aspects of arithmetical skills. Difficulties lie in the reception, comprehension, or production of quantitative and spatial information.

Students may have difficulty in understanding simple number concepts, lack an intuitive grasp of numbers and have problems learning number facts and procedures. These can relate to basic concepts such as telling the time, calculating prices, handling change.


Illustration: Chris Webb
Descriptions of SpLDs

"It's like having a hundred browsers open at once"

AD(H)D

AD(H)D exists with or without hyperactivity. In most cases people are often ‘off task’, have particular difficulty commencing and switching tasks, together with a very short attention span and high levels of distractibility. They may fail to make effective use of the feedback they receive and have weak listening skills.

Those **with** hyperactivity may act impulsively and erratically, have difficulty foreseeing outcomes, fail to plan ahead and be noticeably restless and fidgety.

Those **without** the hyperactive trait tend to daydream excessively and lose track of what they are doing.

*Illustration:* Chris Webb

*Quote:* a first-year student at UOS

*Text source:* SpLD Working Group

2005-DfES Guidelines. P.5
Interview

Interview with Professor Brendan Stone:

Deputy Vice-President for Education at The University of Sheffield

Brendan’s work includes the areas of social and civic engagement, teaching innovation and excellence, widening participation, and equality and diversity particularly in the fields of disability and mental health. He is the founder and co-director of the University’s Storying Sheffield project. He left school at 16 with few qualifications and returned to education in his mid-thirties on a university access course. Brendan has always had a keen interest in disability in the workplace and student life.

“I am very interested in the idea of learning with a difference.”

He highlights the similarities in support for individuals with mental health issues and those with SpLDs: his approach being to “treat each person as an individual and listen to their needs and how they will best learn.”

He pays particular attention to someone with an SpLD but as he does with all students, works to their strengths:

“The idea of learning differently doesn’t only apply to those with an identified SpLD like dyslexia … if you live with a long-term mental health condition you will also learn differently.”

Brendan suggests students find a tutor on their course that they can trust and speak openly to, someone who respects them and is willing to listen and learn from them:

“As a teacher, I think our job is not only just to teach but to learn.”

Brendan places a high value on learning from his students’ experiences and the way they learn. He also advises students to face their fears and disclose their SpLD as soon as possible to those who can support them:

“Be brave; identify yourself, don’t be on your own.”

Mental health issues and SpLDs are both still stigmatised to a certain extent; therefore, he understands why some are reluctant to seek help:

“Society stigmatises even if the university does not.”

continued on next page...
“I’m very interested in the idea of learning with a difference.”

Brendan goes on to emphasise that there is “absolutely nothing to be ashamed of.”

He hopes that our university community doesn’t become complacent and that we adapt to the changing world and how we view disability and difference. He suggests that it could be empowering for students to set-up support groups:

- student-led peer support so that students can speak to someone who understands and has a shared experience.
- He notes that “you do not always need an expert to support you; in any case, you are the expert in your own difference.”

Brendan concludes by underscoring the point that we still need our specialist tutors and support services but he would like to see more work going on where the students support each other like the SpLD Society, because “that is building communities.”

This can go a long way to lessen the loneliness and sense of being isolated.

*Interview: Paul Ndegwa*  
*Illustration: Chris Glynn*
Assessment

How do I access disability support?

Get support from the university in as little as 2 steps.
Get in touch with DDSS today.
Don't miss out!

If you study at The University of Sheffield, the Disability & Dyslexia Support Service (DDSS) can provide you with specifically tailored support if you tell them about your individual needs. Make contact so that they can begin to talk about the support that works for you.

Current Students
1. Make an appointment with an adviser
   - Come to the Disability and Dyslexia Support Service reception in the Alfred Denny Building
   - Call 0114 222 1303
   - Email disability.info@sheffield.ac.uk

2. Bring in evidence of your SpLD, a diagnostic assessment report completed by an educational psychologist or by a specialist teacher
   - Send it by post
   - Bring it to your first appointment

Prospective Students
1. Tell the universities you are applying to about your SpLD on your UCAS or other university application form

2. Complete the DDSS applicant registration form, after you have received an offer to study at UoS. This will tell the university about your support needs

3. Make an appointment with an advisor, in the same way as current students [above]

4. Bring in evidence of your SpLD, in the same way as current students [above]

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/disability/setting-up-support/providing-evidence-of-your-disability

Have any problems?
Maybe you have already applied to UCAS without disclosing your SpLD? Or maybe you are unsure if your evidence is correct? No matter the problem, try contacting the Disability and Dyslexia Support Service to discuss setting up your support.

More information available: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/disability

Image source: DDSS Webpage
My name is Natalie Lamb and I am a PhD student at The University of Sheffield, working in industry with Anglian Water. I am currently completing a three year PhD investigating the chemicals used to produce drinking water and loving every minute of it, the challenges, the impact of my work and just learning so much.

If you would have told me 5 years ago that I would be completing an engineering PhD, there is no way I would have believed you. My physics teacher at college was the first person to suggest I visit dyslexia services. My workings out was all correct but the number I would write down was completely made up. I found that my AS results in Biology, English Language and Psychology were excellent but my Physics and Chemistry were not excellent at all.

I just could not understand why I kept making mistakes. It was so frustrating. I thought dyslexia was only about spelling and words and that I was just not trying hard enough in my maths- that’s what all of my previous teachers had told me.

I am so glad I visited the dyslexia services department and got diagnosed. They provided me with help at uni, still today, even, but most of all, they helped me understand myself and why I was having these difficulties. That I wasn’t just “not trying”.

If I was to give others one piece of advice, I’d say it’s OK- everyone has strengths and weaknesses. You might just be more aware of them than others are.

Natalie’s Advice:

“If I was to give others one piece of advice, I’d say it’s OK- everyone has strengths and weaknesses. You might just be more aware of them than others are.”

Illustration: Chris Webb
Paul's Story

I am a final year undergraduate and a member of staff at the University of Sheffield. I live in Sheffield with my wife and my two boys aged 18 and 11. I emigrated from Kenya nearly 16 years ago.

My tutor referred me to the Disability and Dyslexia Support Service in my second year, after struggling with certain aspects while studying. After an assessment, I was diagnosed with an SpLD. Ever since, I have benefitted greatly from the assistance from the service, the SpLD Tutors from the ELTC and from my department.

My SpLD means that I process information differently from other people. This means I engage with people differently, which requires much more tailored feedback from my tutors. It takes me a bit longer to get my essays done too.

I feel it is incredibly important and helpful to have continued discussions about SpLDs within the university, and not only among or from the students; it should be very easy and natural to have discussions about specific learning disabilities and the possibilities that are available to any student despite their difficulties.
Technology can really make a difference

No matter what your specific challenge is, there are tools out there that can help you. Check out this list compiled by Chris Webb, to see if any of them could be incorporated into your work.

1. **Academic Phrasebank** – a Manchester University resource of generic phrases that can be adapted and incorporated into your writing.

2. **Grammarly** – A free to download grammar and spellchecker that can work alongside email and Microsoft Word.

3. **Soundrown** – ‘Ambient sounds to help you relax, focus, and escape.’

4. **Browser Add-Ons** – such as screen dimmers or tinted overlays

5. **Natural Reader** – text-to-speech apps can sound robotic but this web application has high-quality premium voices

6. **Mendeley** – A free referencing manager and PDF organiser. Use it to read and annotate PDFs, cite instantly from them, and generate a reference list.

**Image**: Pixabay

**6 Free Tools for SpLD Students**
Interview with Dr. Elizabeth Walton

"Don't be afraid to ask for help and go and see the amazing SpLD tutors. It was life-changing for me: those things that probably seem quite little to the SpLD tutor have a big impact"

Liz is a GP family doctor and also a clinical lecturer here at The University of Sheffield Medical School, mainly undertaking research. Although highly successful and happy to now talk about her own experience of having an SpLD, she recalls a time when she didn’t feel as confident:

"I remember sitting around a table at a dinner party with friends and doctors and a colleague said it was just a load of rubbish: that people with dyslexia are just thick."

She has always valued peer support and set up peer learning sessions when she was a final year medical student at Sheffield.

"Find your allies and they'll keep you going."

For any students who are feeling that there’s no way they can succeed in their chosen career because of their SpLD, Liz has this to say:

"Keep going: you'll get there. It takes us longer and the effort we have to put in is more, but the gains are so much bigger because we've had to fight for it."

Liz thinks her dyslexia means she has more empathy for others who struggle. She encourages students to realise that they already have useful strategies because they secured their place here:

"To pass the exams to get to university, they're already winners; they're already successful."

Liz wants students to seek help early and make use of the extensive support available at UOS.

What does she wish everyone understood about SpLDs?

"To believe in them! There's still a lot of doubt and controversy. In any job, you need a team of people, a mix of people – and to play to people's strengths"
Support

What support is available at TUOS?

Support with exams
• Extra time • Use of a computer and assistive software • Rest or nutrition breaks • Permission to use specialist ergonomic equipment • Permission for students to sit their exams in a venue with fewer other candidates, or on their own • Exam papers in alternative formats

Support with accessing taught sessions
• Copies of lecture notes and handouts in advance and/or in alternative formats • Support workers (such as note-takers) to ensure that you have an accurate record of what is covered in lectures • The loan of digital recorders to record sessions • Support worker assistance in practical sessions (e.g. in labs) to ensure that you can work effectively and safely

Fieldwork, placements and years abroad
• Ensuring that departments take into account students’ specific support requirements when allocating placements, arranging field trips and organising years abroad

Support with managing your workload
• 1:1 support aimed at developing study skills, with specialist teachers like Chris Webb from the ELTC • 1:1 mentor support sessions aimed at helping students to develop their organisational skills, manage their workload and the demands of university generally and maintain their focus on academic progress • The provision of computing equipment/specialist assistive equipment and software to enable independent learning. Also see the library’s additional support resources: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/additionalsupport/index • Arranging alternative methods of assessment for students where the standard method of assessment used may disadvantage them

Image: Pixabay

SpLD Times
Specialist tutors from the English Language Teaching Centre

I’m Chris, one of seven tutors in the service, based at 301 Glossop Road, who provide tailored 1:1 tutorials for any student with a formal identification of SpLD. Students are referred to us by DDSS. Our sessions provide a safe environment where the student and tutor work in partnership to identify and build upon the student’s strengths and improve their academic literacy.

The sessions are very much student-driven and include a number of different areas: research skills, planning, reading, note-taking, writing: composition, accuracy, expression, structure, grammar and punctuation, memory and revision, academic confidence, communication, time-management and organisation.

We also provide staff training on all aspects of learning differently and are currently developing an online resource, ‘INK’, that any member of staff will be able to access. It will be a fantastic resource to raise awareness of neurodiversity and provide strategies for inclusive teaching so please look out for its launch in the New Year.

Each year, I lead a student project that aims to celebrate the positives of learning differently. The 2017/18 cohort produced this magazine and continued on next page...
Let's start the conversation:

Learning Differently at UOS is something that isn't currently being talked about. Students with Specific Learning Difficulties working alongside the specialist tutors from the English Language Teaching Centre want this to change.

...previous groups held a conference, a festival, and established a student society. My hope is that we can start a university-wide conversation about learning differently.

We want to inspire others by finding academics and alumni who have a diagnosed SpLD and who are willing to share their personal stories of living, studying and ultimately succeeding in their chosen field.

We've managed to do this with the interviews in the magazine but would love to set something up at the university to continue this. Therefore, any suggestions for collaboration are most welcome.

In addition to supporting students, the SpLD tutors also provide tutorials for members of staff who identify as having SpLDs. Staff can come along for up to 5 tutorials with a specialist teacher to talk about the strengths and challenges they feel are linked to their learning differences and to work on strategies for getting around some of the things they find are barriers to their participation in the workplace.

Ultimately, we want to get people talking about hidden disabilities like dyslexia so that it becomes as high profile and appreciated as mental health. There is still a taboo around studying and working with a specific learning difficulty, particularly in the professions: I hope this can change.

To find out more, email c.webb@sheffield.ac.uk.

Illustration: Chris Glynn
Interview with Aimee Gregory:
F1 - Junior Doctor and University of Sheffield alumnus 2017

"I had struggled with my exams and despite working hard, I realised that my results did not reflect my efforts."

What does a typical day look like for you?

"During my current rotation on urology, I start work at 8am. We start the ward round at 9am, review patients and then complete the ward jobs; this encompasses tasks like taking blood, completing discharge documents, arranging referrals and requesting scans. After lunch, we review patients from the morning and chase up any outstanding jobs. As a doctor there are plenty of opportunities to be involved in quality improvement projects and teaching so throughout the year I have spent time teaching medical students on the wards."

How/when did you get assessed?

"I was assessed in the summer of 2012 after my first year of university. I had struggled with exams and despite working hard, realised that my results did not reflect my efforts. My phase director advised that I arrange a dyslexia test to see if I had any form of undiagnosed specific learning difficulty (SpLD)."

How does SpLD impact you?

My assessor said that whilst my spelling and writing skills were above average, my mental maths and ‘processing’ of information was very mismatched in comparison. I often struggle to process new information and grasping new concepts can often come as a difficulty. This meant that I would need to revisit new topics continued on next page...
Interview

"Having a SpLD doesn’t mean you are lacking in skills or qualities, on the contrary, there are a lot of talented individuals with SpLDs who go on to achieve great things creatively and academically."

several times in order to grasp a good understanding of the principles – and this was often what had been holding me back when it came to exams."

What advice do you have for others with an SpLD?

"My best piece of advice would be to ‘know yourself’ especially when studying. Everybody learns differently and everyone has different preferences and routines.

'Dyslexia', as an example, can present itself in many different ways and people learn to adapt their learning techniques to suit themselves.

I found that handwritten notes and the use of a dictaphone really helped me in recapping certain topics, and I relished the use of sticky notes and coloured pens.

With a visual preference, I found it helpful to create diagrams and pictures, especially as I like to draw."

What do you wish everyone knew about SpLDs?

"There are lots of high-achieving individuals with specific learning difficulties."

Image: Pixabay
Asperger Syndrome:  

Asperger Syndrome (AS) is a complex developmental condition which falls within the autism spectrum. It is not a SpLD but can often co-occur

It is associated with differences in
• Communication • Social performance • Flexibility of thought • Sensory perception

Each individual with the label of Asperger Syndrome will experience the condition differently.

Non-academic learning may cause greater issues than the academic side of university life; for example, not understanding the social rules and difficulties in managing the practicalities of being at university.

Environment

Students with AS may rely more heavily on routines than other students and anxiety may be caused by an unpredictable or confusing environment.

• Give advance notice of any changes to the location, arrangement or timings of meetings and ensuring that this information is clarified e.g. use a post-it note on the original room door directing students to the new room

• Respect any need for routine e.g. the student may need to sit in the same seat at every lecture.

• Students with AS may have heightened sensory sensitivities and experience sensory overload. This may make some areas unbearable. Students with AS may be less likely to filter out background noise or may hear it at a greater intensity than others.

continued on next page...
AS can often co-occur with SpLDs

Students with AS are likely to have information processing differences. There may be delayed processing of verbal information and so providing handouts in advance of taught sessions may be beneficial to allow time for preparation and therefore more engagement with the information given. Be aware of the possibility for literal interpretations. Do not rely on non-verbal information (such as body language) to communicate intentions as this may lead to misinformation, a lack of clarity and to confusion.

**Group Work**
Some students with AS may need additional support for group work. Prior to organising groups have a discussion with the student about who they would feel most comfortable to work with.

Working with a small group of students is likely to be more successful in helping a student to engage with the work.

Assigning clear roles within the group will make expectations more concrete. If group work becomes a barrier to learning it may be necessary to consider an alternative method of working to group work.

*Image: Pixabay*
Links, contacts and other support resources:

The SpLD Tutorial Service. Director: Victoria Mann  
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/eltc/languagesupport/dyslexiasupport

SpLD student HEAR group project. Lead tutor: Chris Webb  
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/301/services/dyslexia/project

English Language Teaching Centre Writing Advisory Service  
To help improve the writing skills of both home and international students: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/eltc/languagesupport/writingadvisory/index

Disability and Dyslexia Support Services. Head of disability: Bryan Coleman  
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/disability

The University Library additional support. Diversity Manager - Ange Greenwood  
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/additionalsupport/index

Learning Differently at The University of Sheffield  
http://learningdifferentlyatuos.blogspot.com/

301: Academic Skills Centre  
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/301

A note from Chris:  
The first year that this student group project ran, the SpLD Society was founded. Unfortunately, the committee all graduated this summer and couldn't find replacements. If you are interested in trying to get the society up and running again, please get in touch with me at c.webb@sheffield.ac.uk or contact the students union - there are unused funds and an existing Facebook and Twitter account to be utilised: https://su.sheffield.ac.uk/groups/specific-learning-difficulties-society

The University of Sheffield Alumni  
An alumni grant made the publication of this magazine possible: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/alumni

FC Images: Main illustration by Chris Webb. 'challenge' image from Pixabay

SpLD Times