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### Original Citation

Hatton, Jean and Mullen, Jane (2009) Levelling the playing field. In: Training Agencies Group, June 2009, Sheffield. (Unpublished)

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Jean Hatton and Jane Mullen: University of Huddersfield June 2009

*This paper, using research with dyslexic in-service mature youth and community work students, examines the correlation between students' perceptions of themselves as students and their achievements in different types of assessment. It also looks at students' perceptions of how dyslexia affects their studies and support offered by the University.*

## **Introduction**

This research was undertaken by an academic skills tutor and a youth and community work lecturer and is based on interviews undertaken with a group of part time dyslexic mature FdA/BA students on the in-service route in youth and community work.

We do not intend to discuss the different views around the existence or nature of dyslexia. We are starting from the assumption that dyslexia is very real for these students and does impact on their studies in many ways.

Writers such as Chapman and Turner (2003), Reid and Kirk (2001) along with McNulty, have suggested that "for individuals with dyslexia, self narratives tend to be characterized by low self esteem" (McNulty, 2003:364). There is also an issue with dyslexia not being a 'well defined construct' (Weedon & Riddell, 2007:26).

It is recognised that the number of dyslexic students is rapidly growing and is the largest group of disabled students in higher education (Osbourne, Huston and Toman, 2007). In 2007-08 the percentage of known dyslexic undergraduate students studying at the University of Huddersfield was approximately 4%. This compares with an astonishing 23% on the part time FdA/BA in Youth and Community Work. The academic staff team, and the National Youth Agency (NYA), recognise the high number of dyslexics working in the field, however, this has implications for the youth work profession and for academics. This research coincides with youth work moving to a graduate profession. This change, intended to increase the ability and standing of the profession could exclude some good practitioners who might not be able to attain the higher academic level that is now being required.

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) established the principle that it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of a disability. One of main precepts in 2001 of the Special Educational Needs Disability Act (SENDA) was that institutions had to make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate the needs of disabled students. The development of new forms of assessment may be considered as a 'reasonable adjustment'. Alongside this is the fact that the 'radical overhaul of assessment practices in higher education are particularly contentious because of persistent fundamental disagreements with regard to the cause and effects of dyslexia' (Rice and Brookes cited in Riddell & Weedon, 2006:58). The team of staff who work on the FdA/BA have, over recent years, been innovative in developing new types of assessment, but the affect on attainment by the dyslexic students had not been examined. Assumptions tend to be made by academic staff and students themselves that dyslexic students perform better in oral presentations and group

work and not so well in written assignments.

## **Methodology**

This research has started with the part time in-service undergraduate youth and community work students; however, there are also high levels of dyslexia in other youth and community work cohorts. These part time students are mostly full time employees within the field and many have been working with young people for many years. The ten students who participated in the research were in different years of either the 5 or 3 year course (BA or FdA).

In-depth semi structured interviews were undertaken to explore a range of issues connected to their dyslexia and their experiences as learners and youth workers. Students' marks were compared with the average (mean) marks for the cohort in which students studied. Throughout this paper we refer to the interviewed participants as 'students'.

Listening to the students talk in their own way about significant events and experiences allowed them the space to start making meaningful their life history and many found the experience quite cathartic. Listening to the stories of their lives gave us a very rich appreciation of not only their history but how they positioned themselves and their dyslexia. As Widdershoven (1993:5) states 'stories are somehow important for our identity: They tell us who we are'. It became apparent as the interviews progressed that the students began to make connections between the stories of their life experiences and their developing self.

## **Perceptions of self within the academic environment**

Students perceive themselves differently in the two settings or communities in which they are learners. According to Lave and Wenger (1991) they must learn how to participate within both the professional community in which they are a trainee and new member as well as the, may be more threatening, academic community.

Self esteem in the professional community for these students is, in all but one case, higher than self esteem in the academic community (*figure 1*). This might be due to the fact that they are experienced practitioners. Alternatively it may be due, at least in part, to their dyslexia.

Until I see the photograph of me with a mortar board I will not see myself as a proper professional (R)

I struggle with assignments ...I have the knowledge ... it is putting it down on paper (Z)

Low self esteem within the academic environment may be linked to students' perceptions that they have to try a lot harder than other students 'Four Times Harder' according to Preston, (1996) or that they have to read things over and over again before they are able to make sense of what

they are reading. This seems to be reflected by the fact that students are comparing their self esteem as learners with other students: 'I have to work at 150% (J) or 'I have to run twice as fast to keep up' (R) and having to recover self confidence in their ability to study.

Self esteem ratings (*figure 1*) in the academic environment are not reflected by lower than average marks for students. Despite the fact that 7 of the 10 students rated their academic self esteem as 2 or less (out of 4) most students got better than average marks over all despite their general lack of confidence in their academic ability.

Research conducted by Fuller et al (2004) concluded that dyslexic students found written assignments most problematic. This is supported by our findings that many of our students claimed not to like written assignments, as this type of assessment seems to take them a lot longer than it does for other students. Examining the marks that were obtained for this more commonly used assessment method was therefore surprising as many of them actually performed slightly better than the cohort average (*figure 2*). Despite their achievements relative to their peers it is impossible to know if they had the potential to achieve higher grades.

The majority of students noted that they found timed tests the most challenging form of assessment.

D: 'freaked out by tests' but found out that she was quite good at them.

R: in a second year test found 'my mind went blank - I couldn't even remember my name'

This anxiety is concurred by lower achievement in this method of assessment. Compared with their own cohorts only 1 of the 7 students for whom we have marks achieved above average in tests (*figure 3*). It is important to note that the dyslexic students may be no different from other students regarding stress over this method of assessment, but the dyslexic students do seem to be 'penalised' despite being allowed 25 % extra time in tests and the opportunity to use assistive software, or have an amanuensis.

Most of students claimed to like the assessed presentations best although many talked about having to 'keep it all in your head' (J). It is interesting to note that this confidence in verbal presentations is not reflected in the marks as most of the students achieved about average marks for presentations (*figure 4*).

These students do not expect extra consideration from their tutors and are keen not to ask for extensions on deadlines, as they feel that they can 'take our own time to prepare for assignments' (D). Nevertheless, they feel that it takes them a lot longer to do the reading and writing than other students (R,J). The effort exerted on academic study drew the heart felt comment from one student, 'With my assignments I am totally exhausted when I have finished' (J).

## **Conclusion**

Emerging themes from this small scale research project have highlighted a wide range of issues surrounding the identities that students with dyslexia bring to the academic environment. For those of us working with mature part time students we need to remember the importance of working with and acknowledging a student's individual identity rather than labelling them.

It used to be my dyslexia and me and certainly over the last few years and hopefully it will continue, we have amalgamated into one and this is who I am and it just lets me get on with my life, so it's less debilitating I guess. (R)

Academic staff should carefully consider whether innovative forms of assessment can accommodate the needs of dyslexic learners. Our findings suggest that the more 'traditional' HE written assignments provide an assessment setting in which students can work at their own pace and use formal and informal support, as well as ICT to maximise their success. Maximising achievement within the academic environment is more likely to impact positively on their self perception. Support for these students in their studies must be appropriate and negotiated with the student.

Further research is planned with students from other cohorts to examine if the trends found with the part time undergraduates are consistent with the experiences of other groups of students.

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