

The Recommended Format for a Diagnostic Assessment Report for Specific Learning Difficulties

The specific learning difficulties under consideration are dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, dyspraxia/DCD and dyscalculia. Diagnostic assessment reports should present evidence for SpLD in such a way as to facilitate their perusal by student support officers in Local Education Authorities. The information contained in them and their format should therefore be consistent. While acknowledging that individual assessors must be able to exercise their professional judgement in selecting appropriate tests, assessment reports should conform to certain basic standards.

Wherever possible, tests should be **properly standardised on the adult population, with clear evidence of validity and reliability**. Tests not suitable for use with adults should be avoided.

Certain information needs to be given in a report so that a diagnosis can be seen to be based on evidence. The evidence required will relate to the agreed definitions of the relevant SpLD and to the related diagnostic criteria. The student support officer can then determine whether the Disabled Student Allowances are appropriate.

The recipient of the report will be the student who has been assessed and not third parties, unless the student has requested that a copy be sent to a tutor or to the Disability Coordinator of the institution.

The core components of an assessment report in which SpLD are identified are listed below and a report proforma is provided. Assessors of students referred primarily because dyslexia is suspected may also need to investigate problems related to numeracy, attentional function and motor control but these further “probes” will not always be necessary.

■ Report layout (see proforma for detail)

Cover sheet

Summary

Background Information

Test Conditions

Attainments in Literacy

Reading

Spelling

Writing

Underlying Ability

Cognitive Processing

Other Relevant Information

Conclusion

Recommended Support

Statement of assessor (signed)

Appendix – List of tests used and summary of scores

Details of content

■ Cover sheet

The candidate's name; date of assessment; date of birth; age at assessment; correspondence address; college/university attended; course of study (subject and degree); year and length of course (e.g. second year of four year course); assessor's details and contact information. Assessors should state whether they are psychologists or specialist teachers holding an approved qualification. Assessors should specify their qualifications, and (from 2007/08) all assessors should quote their current assessment Practising Certificate number and issuing body.

■ Summary

The main assessment findings should be summarised and placed immediately after the cover sheet for ease of reference. There should be a clear statement as to whether or not, according to performance at assessment, taking account of and incorporating any background information, the student has a specific learning difficulty, and if the student has been found to be dyslexic this should be specified. A diagnosis will have been based on converging evidence from all parts of the assessment and this evidence should be summarised in support of the diagnosis. Significant differentials between underlying ability and attainment should be highlighted if these have been identified. The effects of the specific learning difficulty on the student's literacy and study skills should be outlined, taking account of compensatory strengths. Other relevant conclusions should be drawn; for example, if previous experience or affective factors appear to have had a significant effect on the student's development of literacy skills this should be noted. If the student shows characteristics of dyspraxia/DCD or any other SpLD this should be stated so that any assessment of need for DSA can take this into account.

■ Background Information

The diagnostic assessment report should start with referral information (e.g. assessment suggested by tutor). The main part of this section will cover the student's developmental, educational and family history, any previous exam access arrangements, statement of Special Educational Needs, learning support and relevant medical information. Any previous reports which may include psychological, speech and language or occupational therapy assessments should be summarised, with details of previous scores quoted. Where English is spoken as a second or additional language, details of the student's language history and current levels of competence in spoken and written English should be included. The student's own perceptions of his/her difficulties and motivation for assessment should also be stated.

■ Test Conditions

Conditions in a test setting may influence the student's performance. These can include environment, comfort, interruptions as well as health of student, attention, motivation, anxiety. A student's behaviour during the assessment session may influence his or her performance. A student may be very nervous or anxious; appear to have difficulty sustaining concentration; or behave in a defensive manner, apparently wishing to deny his/her difficulties. It is therefore recommended that reports include a brief statement about the test conditions and the student's response to them so that results can be interpreted accordingly.

■ **Assessment**

Reports of performance in individual tests should be prefaced by a brief statement about the attainment or cognitive function which the test is designed to examine, and a description of the requirements of the task for the student.

Attainments in Literacy

This section of the report can be subdivided under headings for reading, spelling and writing:

1. Reading

Assessment of reading can include single words (a graded, single word reading test), non-word reading, text reading (both oral and silent) and reading comprehension. Performance in each test should be reported separately and should cover qualitative analysis of errors, evidence of strategies being used (for example whole word recognition, decoding), fluency, reading speed (oral and silent) and ability to extract information from text. There should follow a summary of the student's reading profile relating this to expected performance in Higher Education, to demands of his/her course of study and to the recognised profile of students with SpLD.

2. Spelling

Information about spelling should come from a standardised spelling test (single words), a piece of free writing and, at the assessor's discretion, dictation of sentences. The report should give a qualitative analysis of errors and should take account of the student's knowledge as well as lack thereof. Where there are non-phonetic errors these should be reported. The free writing may reveal lack of consistency in spelling or a tendency to omit suffixes; a student may also limit vocabulary to simple words so that spelling is not a problem. All these aspects of performance should be reported and should be related to expected attainment levels in Higher Education and to SpLD.

3. Writing

The student's free writing should be analysed to provide information about ability to write grammatically, the complexity of sentence structure, the coherence of writing, use of vocabulary, writing speed and legibility of handwriting. It is also important to report handwriting speed in a copying task so that difficulties relating to the process of composition and to motor skills can be teased apart.

■ **Underlying Ability**

The student's performance in other areas of testing can then be considered within the context of his/her underlying ability. Qualitative observations should be made about the student's test performance and profiles of scores should be discussed, with particular reference to any significant discrepancies between verbal and non-verbal ability, and to weaknesses in working memory or processing speed if these cognitive functions have been assessed. Information about both verbal and non-verbal ability should be reported.

Gathering information about underlying ability is a vital component of assessment. The assessment of verbal and non-verbal ability throws light on the extent to which students are likely to be able to develop compensatory strategies, and informs specialist teaching

intervention. The effect of SpLD on a student's learning can be evaluated more effectively when underlying ability is taken into account.

■ **Cognitive Processing**

As it is widely accepted that the underlying causes of SpLD are weaknesses in particular cognitive processes, a section of the report should be dedicated to reporting the student's performance in tasks designed to tap these skills. In some cases a full IQ test (WAIS III UK) will have been administered and reported in the previous section, so tests of working memory and some tests of processing speed may have been covered. If not, performance in a test of auditory working memory should be reported here. For the identification of dyslexia, phonological processing should also be reported and this will need to include phonological awareness and phonological processing speed (for example rapid naming).

■ **Other Relevant Information**

At the assessor's discretion, performance in a range of other tests may be reported here. These may include tests of competence in certain aspects of numeracy or tests of motor control. Assessors may additionally consider it appropriate to screen for disorders such as Meares Irlen Syndrome, or to use recognised checklists to identify whether a student might show signs of dyspraxia/DCD or ADD. The results of any such screening procedures should be reported in this section.

■ **Conclusion**

■ **Recommended Support**

A brief statement about the type of support which might help the student should be made here, particularly in relation to study skills tuition. Diagnosticians should also bear in mind that students will have a full assessment of their needs for the purposes of DSA, and the final recommendations for support will be made through that assessment. We would expect recommendations from the diagnostician to be used to inform the academic staff and those who undertake a later assessment of the student's course related needs which will identify the appropriate DSA support for the Higher Education course. If recommendations are made about examination arrangements it should be borne in mind that universities may have their own systems for supporting students with SpLD. Information about the procedure for applying for the DSA can also be given here.

■ **Assessor Statement (signed) (see proforma)**

Assessors should sign the statement that the assessment and report comply with the SpLD Working Group 2005/DfES Guidelines for the Assessment of SpLD in Higher Education. The report should be dated.

■ **Appendix**

- A list of tests used in the assessment (with references)
- A summary of scores achieved in the tests, with notes to aid interpretation of scaled scores, standardised scores and percentile ranks.