



St Mary's  
University  
**Students'  
Union**



## **Dyslexia Focus Group**

Report October 2022

## **SMSU Dyslexia Focus Group**

**Author: George Chaplin, SU education president**

**15/12/2022**

# Background

As part of dyslexia awareness week, SMSU organised a focus group for dyslexic students on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> October, 2022. The purpose of the focus group was to gain a better understanding of the academic experience of students with dyslexia at St Mary's. Nine students attended.

Undergraduate	6
Postgraduate (Level 7)	3

Sport, Allied Health and Performance Science	4
Theology and liberal arts	1
Business, law and society	1
Education	3

# Executive summary

## **Teaching and learning environment**

- Dyslexic students find advance access to lecture slides, online lecture capture, printed handouts, use of colour contrast and printed/hard copies of texts useful



- Students feel there is a lack of awareness and understanding of dyslexia among academic staff

### **Online Learning**

- Students struggle with inconsistent layouts across modules on Moodle and with cluttered and poorly organised Moodle pages.
- Students find RNIB bookshare useful
- Students may find photocopies of texts uploaded onto Moodle difficult to read

### **Support**

- Students find library staff friendly and helpful
- Students can find filling in EC forms and supplying evidence particularly challenging
- Some students report that their LSF adjustments are not implemented or are implemented too late

### **Perceptions of dyslexia at St Mary's**

- Students felt fellow students and staff lack understanding of dyslexia and may hold negative assumptions and stereotypes about dyslexia.
- Students stressed that dyslexia is more than just struggling with reading and writing

### **£100 dyslexia fee**

- Students may struggle to see the value of a diagnosis against the £100 cost and decide to “put up” with their difficulties instead
- Students struggle with filling in forms and organising appointments during the diagnostic process

# Full Responses

**Q1: What can the university do to make lectures more accessible to students with dyslexia?**

Several participants said it they would find it useful to be given access to the lecture slides in advance

“Access (to the slides) would allow me to print and annotate to be better prepared for the lecture”

A postgraduate student (SAHPS) mentioned they have lots of content in their lecture slides and that sometimes they struggle to find the most important content. This student also mentioned that they found video and podcast formats helpful in consolidating their learning. Participants also suggested the use of bold text and colour contrast to make slides easier for dyslexic students to read.

Participants agreed that they would find a printed handout helpful for any activities where the instructions are displayed on the lecture slides.

A lack of awareness and understanding of dyslexia among academic staff was also mentioned. Improved staff training was suggested by participants. A participant mentioned that their exam adjustments had not been implemented properly due to a lack of understanding by staff.

“Staff are not always aware of how to support dyslexic students”.

“We don’t learn in a linear way. Sometimes we need things explained in a different way”

Participants also thought training would help staff identify students who may be dyslexic and encourage them to seek a diagnosis.

Participants agreed they would benefit from the ability to access lecture recordings after the lecture.

One participant (PG, lotLA) suggested giving more notice for reading to be completed and providing a reading list that highlights the most important texts so they can be read first.

Participants agreed the use of online lecture capture was beneficial, although several participants stressed the use of timestamps was important to help students find specific sections of the recording.

Other comments...

- Deadlines should be spread consistently throughout each semester
- Consistency throughout resources is important
- It is important to have online reading printed if not accessible as a hard copy in the library.
- Allowing free printing in the library was suggested

**Q2: I find the online learning platforms at St Mary's (Moodle, Panopto) easy to use.**

Several participants said they struggled with inconsistency on Moodle, with different layouts used for different modules.

**"When It's unorganised it's so complicated"**

**Q3: It is easy for me to access and use the resources I need for my course**

Participants raised course-specific examples where resources needed for modules were unavailable online. They were positive about RNIB bookshare, with one student saying they only used this platform and not summon. Most students in the group agreed they found physical texts easier to read than online texts.

A student (UG, SAHPS) mentioned that sometimes texts on the resource list are provided as a photocopy, which makes them harder to read.

**Q4: The library and study spaces at St Mary's meet my needs**

All participants were positive about the library staff, describing them as friendly and helpful.

Two students (both UG, IOE) expressed their dissatisfaction about the closure of the Naylor library. They described the new education section in the main library as not user-friendly, overwhelming, “too crammed” and as having a poor layout. A student (UG, SAHPS) described their resources as “easy to find”.

Some students liked using the DV lounge space, while others said it was too loud and there were too many distractions. Students appreciated the number of plug sockets available in the space.

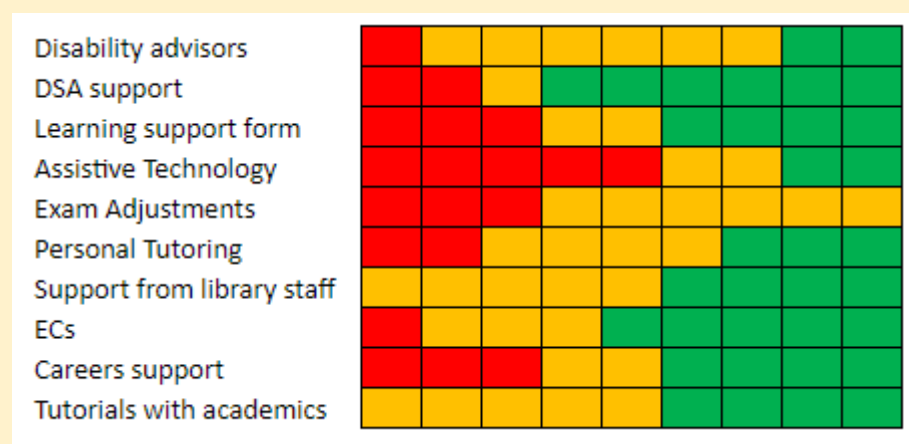
#### **Q5: It is easy for me to access support when I need it**

Participants were asked to give a response of red, amber or green for sources of support at St Mary’s.

**Red** - I’ve not heard of this support

**Amber** - I’ve heard of this support, but I’m not sure how to access it.

**Green** - I’ve heard of this support, and I know how to access it.



A few participants thought that dyslexia-specific support might need more publicity. A student also mentioned that they had struggled with the student VISA process and would benefit from additional support with this process.

#### **Q6: If you have applied for ECs, how did you find this process?**

A few participants had experience applying for ECs. Participants said that filling in the EC form and supplying evidence were sometimes challenging. One participant suggested removing the need for dyslexic students to provide evidence when applying for short extensions. An “FAQs” or flowchart guide to ECs was also suggested.

**Q7: For those with a LSF - do you feel the adjustments in the LSF have been implemented properly?**

The Reaction to this question was mixed. Some participants felt that their LSF adjustments were implemented, while others felt certain adjustments were either not implemented or were implemented too late (an example given was lecture slides being uploaded the morning of the lecture). Some participants felt their LSF had not been shared with all their academic staff, meaning staff weren’t informed of their needs.

**Q8: Assistive technology and AT training provided by the university has supported my learning**

Limited feedback was collected on this question. Some participants hadn’t heard of the university’s AT provision, while others had been offered AT support but weren’t sure how to access it. A few participants used AT regularly and felt it was useful, with positive feedback given on “ClaroRead”.

**Q9: The support I’ve received from student services has been helpful**

Feedback on the support provided by the disability and dyslexia service and the wider student services team was positive, although a couple of students mentioned they had some difficulty booking appointments with the disability advisors.

One student gave negative feedback about staff from Randstad, an external company that provides DSA support.

**Q10: I Feel I can speak openly about my dyslexia at St Mary’s**

The response to this question was mixed. Participants shared their concerns about negative assumptions and stereotypes that may be held by other students and staff. Some participants felt that academic staff didn't understand what dyslexia was and didn't feel they could be open with them. Participants stressed that dyslexia is more than just difficulty reading and writing.

A suggestion was made to invite guest speakers to attend lectures and discuss dyslexia. Guest speakers would "show the strength of dyslexic students" and foster a culture of understanding at St Mary's. It was noted that many students with dyslexia struggle with poor self-esteem.

A peer support group/network was suggested by the chair. Participants felt that the focus group format worked well and could be used to collect feedback on issues in the future. Participants were positive about the support group idea but cautioned that effort would need to be made to keep students engaged.

**Q11: The £100 fee was a barrier to me coming forward to get a diagnosis.**

Participants said they would have struggled to see the value of a diagnosis against the £100 cost, particularly as they had had negative experiences in trying to access support before and were thus sceptical about the value of the support a diagnosis would bring.

"I'd just put up with it"

"I'd just deal with it instead"

Participants also gave more general feedback on the diagnostic process. The process was described as "challenging" by one participant. Participants mentioned that they struggled particularly with filling in forms and with organising appointments.

"If I see there are lots of forms to fill in then I'll procrastinate"



Finally, participants also suggested the university should do more to raise awareness of dyslexia among students and staff, to encourage more students to come forward for a diagnosis.

“My dyslexia diagnosis was a turning point”

The formatting of this report is based on the BDA Dyslexia style guide 2022



<https://cdn.bdadyslexia.org.uk/uploads/documents/BDA-Style-Guide-2022.pdf?v=1666017053>