

What is a Specific Learning Difficulty?

Introduction

Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD) are neurobiological conditions that affect how a person learns and processes information. SLD are unrelated to intelligence, occurring in people across the full range of the intellectual spectrum. SLD often have a severe impact upon the development of literacy skills and educational achievement, unless the person with the condition can find or be supported to find, a way to learn successfully. The most common SLD is Dyslexia, a difficulty with the processing of written information and spelling. Other common SLD include Dyspraxia, a difficulty with gross and fine motor skills, Dyscalculia, a difficulty understanding numerical concepts, even at a basic level. Dysgraphia, a difficulty with written expression which impacts a student's ability to physically write, spell correctly and get their ideas on paper. Finally, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a condition which is often characterised by an inability to maintain attention on a task, poor concentration, being easily distracted, restlessness and impulsivity.

It is thought that approximately 10% of the population have an SLD and, whilst students with an SLD choose to study a range of different subjects when they leave school, it is common to find them in trades and in art-based courses as there is perceived to be less demand for advanced literacy skills in these subjects.

Learning strengths

Many people with a SLD think of themselves as being neurodiverse. That is, they do not think and process information the same way as neurotypical people do, but that does not mean their way is wrong or that it lacks strengths. People with an SLD are often:

- highly creative
- able to think outside the box
- have excellent presentation skills
- have excellent visual spatial skills
- have an excellent Imagination.

Common difficulties experienced by students with an SLD

Some of the most common difficulties experienced by people with a SLD include:

- difficulties with short term memory so they are prone to forgetting information
- difficulties with performing two or more tasks at once, for example, listening and writing notes
- difficulties with time management and organisation, for example, predicting how long a task will take
- difficulties with spelling and grammar
- difficulties with structuring and ordering written information

- difficulties processing auditory and/or visual information
- difficulties taking in what they have read, especially after the first read through
- poor concentration
- sensory overload.

Not everyone's SLD affects them in the same way, in fact typically a SLD will be a cluster of symptoms and not everyone's cluster is the same.

What do I do if I think a student in my class has an SLD?

Firstly, please encourage your student to visit Disability Services in the library as we can support students if they have a diagnosis of Dyslexia or another Specific Learning Difficulty. We can also guide students through the process of getting an SLD diagnosis if they need an updated diagnosis or have never had one before. It's not uncommon to receive a diagnosis of a SLD as an adult. Please ask your students to visit the Service Desk in the library to make an appointment with a Disability Advisor. Alternatively, they can phone the service desk to book an appointment on 03 940 8089.

However, there are some strategies you could use to help students with SLD in your class:

- put copies of your PowerPoint slides on Moodle at least 24 hours before the class so that students can read them in advance and have an idea of what the lecture will be about. This helps them follow the lecture more easily
- allow students to record classes and to take photos of material placed on the whiteboard or on PowerPoint slides
- provide instructions both verbally and in writing; many students find remembering a set of instructions difficult
- where possible use both words and diagrams to get across your meaning
- prioritise reading lists so that students who find reading difficult know the most important texts to focus on
- use interesting stories and examples to illustrate your points as these are more memorable for students
- create Mnemonics to help students recall important information
- provide students with a glossary of technical terms to be used on your course so they can get used to their meaning and learn to spell them
- provide advice to students about how to tackle an assignment or exam; for example, how much do you expect them to write in each section? How many articles should they have read? How many marks is each question worth
- encourage students to talk to you about their ideas or present them visually, rather than always having to have these written down
- try to include audio and/or video clips in your classes to help students take in information in a variety of ways.