International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research And Studies

Available online at www.ijmras.com
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND STUDIES

E ISSN: 2640 -7272
Volume:09: Issue:05 (2026)

Page no.
1-19

Dyslexia, Diagnosis, and Disability Discourse: A Case Study of Academic Advisers in Higher Education

James Moir

Department of Sociological and Psychological Sciences Abertay University

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a case study of the ways in which dyslexia is discursively constructed in relation to higher education and the nature of support offered for students who have been assessed as having the condition. While there has been a shift in contemporary understanding away from considering dyslexia in terms of disability or deficit towards viewing it under the umbrella of neurodiversity, there is still some uncertainty in higher education about what this means in practical terms. Consequently, this study sought to examine some of the issues surrounding making reasonable adjustments for students with dyslexia. Interviews were conducted with academic advisers as part of a wider study on support for students with dyslexia at a UK university. The data was analyzed through utilizing a discursive psychology approach in which three key inter-related themes emerged: (i) diagnoses and dispositions in which dyslexia was externalized as a diagnosable condition versus the constructing it in internal dispositional terms related to student agency; (ii) dyslexia and deadlines in terms of adjustments made for coursework submissions and the tensions around support versus equitable treatment for all students; and (iii) reasonable adjustment and resources in which the advisers' discourse posed a contrast in terms of what is specified in students' support plans versus the 'reality' of associated resource pressures.

Keywords: dyslexia, higher education, academic adviser, discourse

INTRODUCTION

Disability-related legislation in the United Kingdom (i.e., Equality Act, 2010) has set a legal requirement for educational institutions to make 'reasonable adjustments' for students disclosing specific learning difficulties (SpLD), including dyslexia. However, dyslexia can be considered a specific condition or as having subtypes and at present there is no universally accepted definition (Alexander-Passe, 2015: 204; Snowling et al. 2020). It is also the case that constructing a definition of dyslexia can produce tensions given the terms used for it can imply a 'problem condition'. For example, terms such as 'disability', 'impairment', 'deficit' and 'Specific Learning Difficulty', all imply some form condition that is apart from the norm. This

kind of discursive construction can be seen as controversial and potentially leading to discrimination (Riddick, 2001). It has also been argued the discourse of disability sets up an oppositional line between abled and disabled thereby creating an ideology of inferiority (Bolt, 2014).

In educational terms, dyslexia can be defined in terms of capabilities and deficiencies, such as difficulties with literacy and reading. An example of this approach has been put forward by Pennington (2006) who has advocated a multiple deficit model in terms of the cognitive difficulties that accompanies the condition in terms of working memory, phonology, and speed of information processing. However, this kind of approach points to the standardization of ability and leaves individuals with dyslexia as being out of kilter with set norms. This can result in form of 'othering' in which disabilities are made apparent and academic skills are valued in terms of standard expectations for literacy. This can lead to a situation where individuals who have dyslexia perceive a degree of stigmatization where their abilities are considered as being of lesser value because they do not meet norms of literacy.

In sociological terms, Macdonald (2009) and Riddick (2012) have argued for countering the discourses of learning dysfunction and neurological disorder. A social model of dyslexia is based on the view that while disability exists, society is comprised of a diverse spectrum of human capabilities and that dyslexia is part of that neurodiversity. In adopting this view, the issue then becomes one how society places barriers and restrictions on what can be academically achieved by those with dyslexia. By acknowledging the prevalence of dyslexia, the issue then becomes one of accepting learning differences and understanding different skillsets. In this vein, students with dyslexia are treated are consulted about their education and support needs rather than being considered as passive recipients (Glassman & Patton, 2014). A strength approach therefore considers discrepancies in educational provision in order to counter the notion of dyslexia as an academic deficit but rather a different way of working (AbbottJones, 2023: 5). This approach aligns well with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model which developed out of the view that those with physical disabilities could access public areas (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016). The concept has since been applied to education with the view that a curriculum should be designed to take account of human variation in learning. It is not uncommon for students to face difficulties in their studies and support at one time or another (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2020; Keefer, 2017; Missingham, 2017; Richardson, 2021).

Dyslexia in UK higher education

Students with SpLDs, including dyslexia, are less likely to enter higher education than those who are not categorized as such (Chatzitheochari & Platt, 2019). It is also the case that students with Spud's who do enter higher education are less likely to complete their studies or gain a First or Upper Second award (Bolton & Lewis, 2023; Pumphrey, 2008). In a UK-wide study of data from 2007 – 2019 (Brunswick et al. 2025) found that students with SpLDs were more likely to attend newer universities, and more likely to study on degree programmes such as creative arts and design, agriculture and architecture rather than areas such as law, languages, computer science, and mathematical sciences. The number of with declared SpLDs has increased year on year and represents approximately 6% of the student body. The authors conclude that this suggests that policy aimed at increasing diversity and inclusion have been successful.

With respect to dyslexia in UK higher education students, recent work by Hamilton Clark (2024) has examined the impact upon identity and self-esteem. This qualitative research study focused on how students manage the associated stigma of the condition in terms of their

decisions on declaring their dyslexia, with some opting to reject study support. However, concealing dyslexia led these students to experience identity conflict and low self-esteem. This was exacerbated where students had an undiagnosed condition through their schooling. What is evident from this work is that despite subsuming dyslexia within the broader, and more positive, umbrella term of neurodiversity, there remains a deeply felt stigma associated with the condition. The labelling of students as 'dyslexic' itself has been called into question. Knight (2025) points to the problem associated with a categorical diagnosis of the condition in order to gain access to specialist support. The effect of such an approach this leads to tensions between the more inclusive education ideals of accepting dyslexia as a form of neurodiversity and conventional special education models. Knight concludes that a fundamental shift is required in terms of categorical labelling and the associated practices of targeted provision. In keeping with the framework of UDL, she argues in favour of learning environments that accommodate all students in order to support the range of learning preferences and styles.

However, while this may be an ideal, for now higher education students in the UK who have a diagnosis of a SpLD can usually be able to apply for a Disabled Students' Allowance. This enables the funding of non-medical support such as a laptop computer and specialist software. Students can also undertake a full Needs Assessment in which their higher education institution receives particular recommendations for putting in place 'reasonable adjustments', for example, alternative assessment formats, additional time for examinations, a support tutor, and coursework virtual or material notification stickers for markers indicating they have a SpLD. However, these measures may vary from student to student and therefore decisions on 'reasonable adjustments' may sometimes need to be tailored to an individual's needs. Most UK higher education institutions have in place a system of notifying departments and tutors of student support plans although setting these up can be challenging (Cameron et al. 2019). These plans usually apply to students who have been formally diagnosed with a condition such as dyslexia and consequently those who have not declared their condition remain undiagnosed and may not meet the threshold to have formal support plans in place.

Investigative Approach

The investigation reported on in this paper is part of a wider case study examining the various discursive construction on dyslexia by students, support staff and academic advisers. It follows on from the work of Rolak et al. (2023) in adopting a value-driven perspective to the study of dyslexia in higher education. In examining these values, of particular interest is how academic advisory staff navigate the ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) posed by potential contradictory discourses in terms of expressions of equitable treatment for all students versus the view that those with dyslexia have special needs that require being treated as a distinct group. As is the case with the work of Rolak et al. (2023), a 'capability approach' approach is also draw upon the concept of a (Sen, 1980, 1985, 1993), but in a different manner. The issue of interest in this investigation is how this may act as mediating discourse through which the values of equitable versus distinct treatment are reconciled with one another.

Capabilities can be considered in terms of what students can do but these are facilitated or inhibited by opportunities made available to them. (van der Klink et al., 2016: 74) The enabling of students who are diagnosed with dyslexia to utilize their full capabilities and reach their academic potential, depends upon a range of individual and institutional factors (Pino & Mortari, 2014). The study investigated these issues through the lens of a discursive psychology perspective that sought to address the following research question in relation to academic advisers involved in the case study: How do academic advisers construct their discourse around their role in relation to dyslexic students reaching their academic potential?

In order to address the question above, a Discursive Psychology (DP) was adopted. DP draws upon both social constructionism and conversation analysis (CA), (Sacks, 1992), (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Social constructionism provides DP with an epistemological grounding which see discourse a both constructive and constitutive of social reality (Potter & Hepburn, 2008). In the case of dyslexia, it considers how this category is reified as something in talk, text and images. DP takes this stance and uses the CA as a methodological approach to examines the ways in which talk is constructed in the course of interaction in order to accomplish discursive actions such as justifying, criticizing, rationalizing etc. In order to do this, DP is attuned to key features of talk such as the formulation of phrases, lexical choices, conversational turn-taking, and paralinguistic features.

However, an additional feature of DP is that is also concerned with variability and contradictions in discourse. These can be considered in two ways. First, it can show how in constructing their discourse, people perform different actions and that these can lead to variability. Second, it is also the case that in putting forward versions of matters, people must contend with ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) in which they may draw upon contradictory discourses. This kind of flexibility in analyzing discourse is useful in considering how dyslexia and the support offered for the condition are constructed in variable ways (c.f. Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014; Elliott, 2020). A DP approach also permits the analysis of dyslexia as constructed as category in conversation (dyslexia), as way of being (a dyslexic), and as a label applied to persons in terms of having a diagnosed condition (SpLD). Therefore, a DP approach attends to both rhetorical and linguistic features in order to understand how versions of dyslexia and academic the support offered are constructed in different ways. For example, by talking about dyslexia, versions may be constructed that weave together issues of disability, learning difficulties, equality, and difference and support in order to engage in different actions such as affirming, justifying, criticizing etc.

Dyslexia is often considered to be “hidden” disability or neurological difference. The ways of constructing it as such can lead to different ways of talking about it in terms of interpretative repertoires (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). These discursive patterns can be thought of as common ways of referring to dyslexia in terms of their constructive function using a limited set of discursive resources. This is important in showing how these resources are discursively deployed by drawing upon sometimes variable or contradictory repertoires. This can help shed light on how dyslexia is formulated in flexible ways, the terms drawn upon, and the discursive strategies used talk about it in the context of student support. Of particular interest was the ways in which capabilities are discussed in relation to students with dyslexia and how this is constructed within the meritocratic framework of higher education.

Methodology and Data Analysis

As previously noted, the analysis reported on in this paper is part of a broader case study of dyslexia at a university in the UK. The main focus of this part of the work is on how academic advisers talk about the support offered to students with dyslexia rather than the institution or its policies on disabled students. These advisers can be considered as institutional linchpins in terms of liaising between staff and students with disabilities, as well as students and support services. This gives them a unique and critical role in ensuring that dyslexic students’ needs are met, and therefore why they became a key focus for the study. Having said this, given that a case study approach has been adopted, no claims are being made for the generalizability of the investigation. The focus is squarely upon the nature of the discourse itself, and the discursive constructions used in discussing supporting dyslexic students. More specifically, the investigation is concerned with the tensions arising from discursively constructing these students as requiring support versus that of equitable treatment for all students, and the ways in

which these views are reconciled in interview discussions. In other words, the focus of this part of the study was on the talk itself and how these discursive constructions were managed *in situ*. This approach enables a window onto the ways in which these discourses are managed, and how support for dyslexic students is interpreted, contested, and framed within the notion of 'reasonable adjustment' in accordance with the Equality Act (2010).

Consequently, three academic advisers took part in semi-structured interviews with topics that covered how students with dyslexia are advised and the support they receive (e.g., referrals to support services regarding a diagnosis); issues surrounding the preparation and submission of coursework (e.g., essays, reports, exercises), and the reasonable adjustments made in teaching (e.g., putting lecture slides up early on the virtual learning network). The role of academic adviser involves a broad range of duties covering student welfare, including liaising with lecturing staff and university disability support services. Each of the three advisers were affiliated with major schools in the university that covered the areas of science and engineering, business and social sciences, and computer science and digital technology. In other words, within this university case study, the sample comprised all three advisers available across the constituent schools. All agreed to take part in accordance with the university's ethical procedures in terms of informed consent and anonymity. Although a relatively small sample, the research was not concerned with the traditional qualitative research focus on sample size in relation to 'data saturation', or an interpretative epistemology that focuses on 'experiences' or 'themes'. Instead, the analytical focus was on discursive ways of accounting and how the advisers constructed their responses. Interviews were conducted online, lasted around 30–45 minutes, with transcripts produced for each. These were transcribed in terms of readability rather than including micro-linguistic features prevalent in conversation analysis (e.g., timed pauses, overlaps, emphases). This broader level of transcription was adopted in order to enable an examination of the nature of the interpretative repertoires present and to connect with to broader ideological matters.

The transcripts were analyzed in three phases. First, each was read and reread in order to identify broad interpretative repertoires and ideological dilemmas. Having identified these, the data was coded for instances of each repertoire in order to determine how they were deployed. Second, a line-by-line analysis of these extracts was undertaken in which lexical features of talk were attended to, including: the use of hedges, contrast structures, active voicing, repeated phrases, and the overall action-orientation of discursive segments. Third, as patterns were identified in terms of discursive features, the interpretative repertoires were examined to see how they were deployed in variable and contrasting ways by rereading the transcripts to see how each was taken up.

In addition to these phases, it was also important to adopt a reflexive stance vis-à-vis the process of analysis. This is most commonly associated with a researcher's positionality, often on an insider-outsider dimension or emic-etic researcher perspective (Beals et al., 2020). In the case of this research, it could be considered as being conducted from a partial insider perspective in terms of being an experienced lecturer who deals with dyslexic students on a regular basis as well as being in contact with staff who support these students. However, while this may be seen as offering some insight when analysing the advisers' responses, it is possible to think of positionality as involving a more dynamic process. A researcher can have shifting positionalities as both as an insider and an outsider within an investigation, and even at a given point in the analytical procedure (Bukamal, 2022: 344). An attempt has been made to capture this shifting positionality through the inclusion of reflexive comments in discussing the findings. The summary table below captures the analytical procedure.

Table 1: Analytical Procedure

Step 1	a) Identification of broad interpretative repertoires: recurrent ways of discursively constructing dyslexia and disability support. b) Identification of ideological aspects: discursive accounts that preserve dominant discourses and the status quo in terms of disability.	A dynamic reflexive positionality cut across these steps as the transcripts were analysed. This was recorded in terms of reactive notes that were written alongside the analyses and that chart the ways in which the analytic process was impacted in relation to each of the three steps.
Step 2	Examination of the micro-linguistic features within the interpretative repertoires: lexical choices; hedges, contrast structures, active voicing, repeated phrases etc. that enable their coherence.	
Step 3	Examination of the deployment of interpretative repertoires: variability in the ways in which these were used to provide rhetorical purchase.	

Findings

The findings are presented in terms of the broad interpretative repertoires that are apparent across the interview data and the ways in which these are weaved together in the advisers' discursive constructions. It can also be seen that these repertoires pointed to contradictions in seeking to reconcile support for dyslexic students with neoliberal notions of agency, meritocratic ideals of student achievement, and pitting support against the 'realities' of resource provision. These interpretative repertoires are comprised of particular lexical choices, figures of speech and other micro-linguistic features that are drawn attention to in the interpretative passages below.

Diagnoses and Dispositions

One interpretative repertoire that was apparent was that of referring to dyslexia as a condition. In this discourse dyslexia is externalized in terms of a condition that is diagnosed and that this then serves as the basis for student support. At a reflexive level this is a commonplace repertoire within higher education; we routinely deal with student support plans that indicate student who have SpLDs and support needs.

Academic Adviser 1

Some people don't want any help, but obviously some people do, especially if they've had it at school and things like that.

So, they've kind of lived with that stigma for, you know, a number of years and it's only now it's sort of like as a student that's now been diagnosed.

Note the equivocation in this discursive construction in terms of "some people don't want any help but obviously some people do". This sets up help-seeking as a matter of individual agency, a choice, rather than considering neurodiversity as a matter for the institution to attend to.

In the extract that follows there is also an apparent contradiction in the adviser's response on supporting students with dyslexia. Extract (i) exemplifies the role of advising students "to be tested" by contacting the academic services unit. This supportive discourse is, however, in contrast to extract (ii) from later in the interview. In the second extract the adviser refers to the students' "mindset" and about "overcoming" issues in the workplace. This focus on student agency is elaborated on further by referring to attempting to "get them to push forward" to strengthen their self-concept and "mentality". This was unanticipated and had an effect upon the positionality adopted at this point. The move away from a discourse of diagnosis and support to one of pitting the student against a future-orientated and less compassionate workplace was unexpected. This flipping between advocating the need for support and the need for resilience prompted a corresponding move away from a partial insider positionality towards a stance of considering the ideological import of such a move.

Academic Adviser 2

(i)

I'm coming across students with dyslexia that perhaps have never been diagnosed with it.

So as academic advisor, just to answer that question, what happens then is I suggest to the student that they obviously go through academic services and to be tested and things like that.

(ii)

And sometimes I think what we may need to be doing, maybe it's a bit of a mindset, because when you go into the world as a dyslexic person, you know that it's not easy either. And, it's how you're going to overcome some of that. When you're in a workplace and somebody asks you for something that, yeah, you know, that can be problematic. And so, what I'm trying to say is maybe we should be talking, engaging with dyslexic students in a way that, how do we get them to push forward? Does that make sense?

Int: Mhmm

And try and see that sometimes using me as a crutch, if that makes sense. And I don't mean that in a very, I don't mean that in a malicious way whatsoever. But I think if you're going to come to university, there's other things as well. Like how do you strengthen your own concept about yourself? Yeah, your dyslexic and how you're going to deal with it in the world when you get employment. I just think maybe we should think about how do we help them, their mentality, does that make sense, in building up confidence for these students?

What is interesting in the exchange in extract (ii) is adviser's attempt to avoid the potential for these statements as being considered as controversial or problematic in some way. The use of "does that make sense" twice and "if that makes sense" together with "I don't mean that in a malicious way whatsoever" point to the adviser seeking to avoid the potential for miscomprehension that the statements made could be taken as making a negative point about dyslexic students' in terms of "how they deal with it in the world" related to employment. The potential implication here is that dyslexic students need to assert themselves in a way that overcomes their condition when it comes to the world beyond the university. In other words, they have to not only use adaptive measures for their dyslexia but also must adapt themselves and their disposition.

In the following extract an adviser also draws upon constructing dyslexia as having to be diagnosed. However, this is treated as an act of persuasion in terms of posing this to students who are "struggling with things".

Academic Adviser 3

OK, so that's actually quite interesting because I had a really interesting conversation with a student in class a couple of weeks ago as well who'd been struggling with things. And generally, if it's something that I've spotted and often, you know, as things that we do spot for what could be diagnosed, I will just ask the student if they would like some support and I start them generally with a learner development service. And I will mention to learner development service when I do that, that I sense that something might not be right. So, I mean, that's generally what I do is I say, you know, I wonder if you could do with some help on how you structure your rating and things like that and the hopes that I can get them to just engage with me at that point. And then if they do engage with me at that point, then I think I, I often will say to them, do you think you might be dyslexic? You know, and then if we can get them to think that way, then I can say, okay, let's get you into advisory, let's see what we can do and let's get some support put in place for you.

Dyslexia and Deadlines

Another prominent theme is the discussions with the academic advisers was the issue of coursework deadlines for dyslexic students and what adjustments, if any, should be made. This raised some interesting points that centred on the need to ensure parity and fairness with other non-dyslexic students while at the same time ensuring reasonable adjustment for those students with the condition when submitting coursework. Therefore, an interpretative repertoire of due support was modified through appeals to the notion of meritocratic notions of fairness cross the student body ss a whole. This resulted in tentative answers in relation to the question of extended coursework deadlines for dyslexic students. In all cases the responses contained hedged statements (Holmes, 1990) where lexical units make the meaning fuzzier and in particular to shield a proposition from attribution to the speaker thereby making it more tentative (Prince, Frader and Bosk, 1982).

As Brown and Levinson (2011) point out, these kinds of hedges are used to avoid disagreement; in this case committing to a view that may not align with university policy. In the case of Academic Adviser 1 below the use of phrases such as "kind of", "maybe not quite as strict", "I suppose", and "I don't know" all have the effect of making the statements uttered less definitive in favour of extended submission dates for those with dyslexia. Thus, while some may have access to proofreading "they would still need to submit exactly the same deadline as everybody else." The dilemma for these advisers is that they are members of academic staff and not support advocates. Given their academic role, they may be all too aware that fairness in assessment policy and practice is fundamental in the eyes of staff and the student body. Any potential deviation from this, in what may be perceived as a disproportionate measure that aids dyslexic students, would breach the principle of treating students equally when it comes to assessment. Again, from the point of view of positionality in the investigation, the meritocratic basis of assessment is well understood.

Academic Adviser 1

But no, they would definitely need to submit their assignment on the deadline date the same as everybody else. So, it's just kind of taken that just not being quite as maybe strict as what you would be when you were maybe mark it. But I suppose it depends on the kind of field of study as well; just how important it is. You know, maybe in Law it would be something completely, it

would need to be bang on sort of thing. I don't know. So, they would basically, I mean, it's only a handful of students that do get this kind of proofreading. That's something that is agreed separately. But they would still need to submit exactly the same deadline as everybody else.

Adviser 2 draws upon a different approach to the question of potential variation in coursework deadlines for dyslexic students by giving an equivocal answer that does not address the issue but nonetheless indirectly argues in favour of no variation in coursework deadlines.

Academic Adviser 2

And what I think is interesting about that is, is that some students really push themselves not to be dyslexic, if that makes sense. They overcommit themselves to preparing their work, redrafting their work. Whereas sometimes that we have other students that might just say "I'm dyslexic, so here it is and just accept it, right".

So, what I'm trying to say there is there's different types, there's different types of dyslexia, but there's different types of students that will say "I spent three weeks writing that essay because I was at my dictionary all the time and I was using this, and I was doing edits.

The opening statement "what I find interesting about this" is a means of prefacing what could be potentially a controversial statement "that some students really push themselves not to be dyslexic". The use of "if that make sense" as a hedge has been noted previously and, in the context of this statement, points to the problematic nature of claiming that dyslexic students can through their own agency and effort overcome the difficulties in submitting their coursework at the same time as other students. The second statement is not hedged in any way and makes the claim that other dyslexic students do not spend time redrafting their coursework. Note how this is put in the form of being spoken by a student as if quoting what has been said. This discursive construction is akin to a form of hypothetical active voicing (HAV) (Simmons & LeCouteur, 2011). In this case instead of constructing hypothetical future-orientated direct speech, it is formulated as if spoken by a hypothetical student on a previous occasion. This results in strengthening the claim that some dyslexic students do not try to extensively redraft their work to avoid grammatical and spelling errors. The adviser then proceeds with another hedge "so what I'm trying to say" before using another HAV "I spent three weeks writing that essay because I was at my dictionary all the time and I was using this and I was doing edits." By beginning the response referring to students who "push themselves not to be dyslexic" and by ending on "I was at my dictionary all the time" as an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 2021) as way of legitimating the claim, the adviser indirectly makes the case for there being no variation in coursework deadlines for dyslexic students. Consequently, a discourse is advanced of dyslexic students as having to rely on their own agency and effort to 'overcome' the condition. As previously, this kind of dispositional discourse prompted a change positionality to considering a more critical stance on the way in which the agency of dyslexic students and their own self-reliance is lauded.

In extract (i) from Adviser 3 the same equivocal discursive construction is apparent in terms of referring to dyslexic students as "some people like to be treated as special case and some people don't". However, in extract (ii) the adviser goes onto point out that a "proofread version is not the one that's marked."

Academic Adviser 3

(i)

I mean, some people like to be treated as special case and some people don't. So, it's very, very difficult to do that. I mean, and again, I say not all students are comfortable telling you that they're dyslexic, you know.

(ii)

I mean, things like well, when students have to get things proofread and it might take a bit of time for that for, for students to be able to get things proofread.

Int: Should that be built into the submission time for them? Should they get any extra submission time?

I mean, we have the extra week, you know, but the proofread version is not the one that's marked. I mean, it's only there just to, to make sure, you know, if there's something you're unsure of and you, you refer to it.

Again, the discursive construction involves discourse markers such as "I mean" and "you know" that function as hedges with the effect of softening the claims being made. This is particularly apparent when addressing the question of extra time for students to submit where the use of the collective "we" avoids directly addressing the question before pointing out that the later submitted proofread copy is "just there…. if there's something you're unsure of".

Taking the three academic advisers' comments together on the issue of extras time for coursework submission for students with dyslexia, it is evident that there is tension in the responses between constructing their discourse around supporting these particular students versus that of equitable treatment for all students. It is also the case that they did not offer personal opinion responses that would not be in alignment with the university's policy on coursework submission.

Reasonable Adjustment and Resources

The UK Equality Act (2010) makes clear that there must be reasonable adjustments made for those with disabilities in educational institutions. While this is a legal requirement there are issues at stake in terms of ensuring that such adjustments are also reasonable in terms of institutional resources. This tension between the requirement of the Act and the availability of institutional resources can be seen in the discursive constructions of the advisers. This is posed in terms of a contrast structure between what is specified in students' support plans versus the 'reality' of associated resource pressures. This is evident in the discursive construction of Academic Adviser 1 who, in addressing the question of making slides available early for dyslexic students first points to the support plan and then the 'reality' of lecturers who are constructing lecture slides as they go in delivering a new module.

Academic Adviser 1

Int: Do you, do you liaise with, with lecturing staff about say, putting slides up early or changes in background colour?

Adv: Yeah, again, that's part of the support plan, right.

So, to be honest, I, would, I would only raise it with a, with a member of staff if this if they said look, you know, we're not getting these early. Then you know, then I would ask, I mean, I'm not, you know, I'm not a boss of any of the, any of the members of staff, you know, but I can, I can nudge them gently and say look, this, you know, this student, and there's always a number of students, who've got the support plans that require slides early. The problem is, of course, a lot

of the time if it's a new module and things like that, they're only writing them, you know, writing that week's lecture, you know, so it's hard. It's hard to get things in advance, or it can be.

The academic adviser begins by drawing upon a commonplace interpretative repertoire of pointing to 'official' support plans for dyslexic students and is affirmed by the use of "right" after stating this. However, the next segment of talk displays signs of hesitancy at following this through with lecturing staff and this is signaled in the opening phrase "To be honest" followed with the disclaimer "I'm not their boss". Note the repetitions of "I" and "I can" that signal a hesitancy to the claim to "nudge them gently" to follow the support plans. This claim is followed by a defence in terms of point to the "problem" of staff teaching a "new module" and "writing that week's lecture". This is strengthened by adding "it's so hard" and "It's hard to get things in advance, or it can be". The net effect is to point to official policy but then offer in mitigation in terms of hard-pressed staff who are teaching new modules and preparing material shortly before delivery.

In the case of Academic Adviser 2, pointing to official policy in terms of support plans is also drawn upon in a similar manner and also in turning to offering a defence for slippages in following these due to workload.

Academic Adviser 2

Int: So, I mean, what about putting up slides early for them? Do you help anybody or advise on that?

Adv: Yeah, well, what I do is I usually chase up the lecturer. As you see, my role as academic advisor is to support the students [mentions a specific individual case].

And so, what I normally do is I become the go between yeah, and I might just contact the tutor right away. And just to remind them, maybe they've not looked at the support plan because, you know, we're up to our necks, right? And it never ends, right. So, my role was to be, I kind of go between just to give it a gentle nudge to the tutor to say right.

Note that the academic adviser begins by adopting an advocacy position for dyslexic students on the issue of lecture slides being made available in advance ("what I do is I usually chase up the lecturer"; "As you see my role as academic advisor is to support the students"). The inclusion of the phrase "As you see" acts as a marker to confirm the Adviser's advocacy role. The next part of the response, as in the case of Adviser 1, acts as a defence, by drawing on the collective "we" in terms of "we're up to our necks; a colloquial expression implying an excessive workload. The Adviser then uses the same expression as previously encountered in terms of giving "a gentle nudge to the tutor". The implication here is that this is a collegiate informal conversation about following support plans rather than any form of directive.

Finally, Academic Adviser 3 commented on the issue of recording lectures and early release for dyslexic students. ***Academic Adviser 3***

And if you're going to record lectures, I mean, you know, if they're serious about that, then there has to be proper things set up that, you know, staff again, are really busy, go in and then re-edit that lecture. I'm not making excuses just for lecturers, but you know, sometimes, you know, we've got to edit half the recordings and there's a million other things going on.

What is notable about this response, like the previous ones, is the defence offered on behalf of lecturing staff in terms of the time taken to edit recorded lectures. Note the use of the disclaimer "I'm not making excuses just for lecturers" there after follows the usual claim following this of

what could be considered a controversial statement with an extreme case formulation for emphasis ("there's a million other things going on"). In adopting a reflexive insider positionality on this issue it understandable that defensive statements are made about the 'operational realities' of making reasonable adjustments and the time and effort this takes.

Summary

Before discussing the findings, it is useful at this point to present an overview of the main analytical features. Table 2 summarises the interpretive repertoires, main micro-linguistic features, and the ideological import in relation to each.

Table 2: Analytical Summary

Interpretative Repertoi·es	*Lexical/Micro-linguistic Features*	*Ideological Effects*
Diagnoses and Dispositions	Equivocation between use of the term "diagnosis" as the basis support and references to "mindset" and student agency. Qualified statements with question tags such as "Does that make sense?"	A dichotomy is set up between the condition as something that is neurological, and the agency of the student in overcoming it.
Dyslexia and Deadlines	Tension between support with assessments for dyslexic students and the need for fairness to all students. This was signalled through the use of hedges such as "kind of", "I suppose", and "maybe" that softened any claims that dyslexic students should be given extensions for assessments. Tags such as "I don't know" also were used to distance the adviser from support for any such extensions.	A dichotomy is set up between support for assessments for dyslexic students but adhering to the meritocratic notion of fairness for all students.

Reasonable Adjustment and Resources	Presentation of the need for required reasonable adjustments set in opposition to the 'reality' of less than 'ideal' resources to action these. Defensive statements were made through referring to the "problem" for staff in making these adjustments; it being "hard" for them; the use of disclaimers such as "I'm not making excuses; and the use of extreme case formulations such as staff having a "million other things to do".	A dichotomy is set up between reasonable adjustment as a requirement for dyslexic students and the 'reality' of lack of resources, including staff time to enact these.

Discussion

The three broad themes identified in the analysis can be considered in terms of ideological dilemmas (Billig, 1988, see also Billig, 1991) in terms of the contrasts and contradictions that are made relevant by the academic advisers' talk. The first theme of 'diagnoses and dispositions' laid bare the notion that dyslexia is a SpLD rooted in a neurological condition that needs to be diagnosed versus its unseen 'in-the-head' nature and the various ways in which students' dispositions come into play in terms of (non-)disclosure, or in their efforts to 'overcome' its effects through persistence. The 'dyslexia and deadlines' theme made was apparent in terms of the construction of making a special case for such students versus the meritocratic notion that coursework deadlines need to be fair, and seen to be fair, for all students. Finally, the 'reasonable adjustment and resources' theme was apparent in terms of the dilemma between the enactment of student support plans by lecturers in terms of advance lectures slides and recordings being made available versus the 'realities' of time and resource constraints.

The analysis also revealed the discursive constructions through which these themes were instantiated through lexical choices and various micro-level features such as hedges, hypothetical active voicing, hesitations, and extreme case formulations. Edley and Wetherell (1997) have pointed to the utility of discursive psychology in connecting these micro-level features of discourse with macro-level ideological concerns thereby creating an empirically grounded opportunity to show how definitions, policies, actions, and responses are constructed in terms of dilemmas, variations and contradictions. The advisers' talk, both in content and in structure (e.g., contrasting general policies with students' willingness to disclose their difficulties), indicates that there is a need to focus on individual differences in the ways in which dyslexia is manifested at the individual level as well as experiences of diagnoses.

The investigation also reveals what is lacking in terms of a focus on neurodiversity and capability. The analysis shows how dyslexia is constructed as a subject in interviews with the

advisers, mostly in terms of a condition requiring diagnosis. When discussing students with dyslexia and their subjectivity, the responses given mostly focused on the students' disposition towards disclosing their condition or in terms of trying to overcome it through persistence. Nothing was mentioned in terms of a capability perspective by commenting on what students with dyslexia can achieve. In relation to these points, it is evident that as a descriptor dyslexia is considered in terms of being a disability through a deficiency-based lens.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although this investigation is based on a small-scale case study, it has nonetheless provided a detailed examination of how academic advisers, who liaise with a university's support services, talk about students with dyslexia. The core aim was to explore how their talk constructed support for students with the condition. Given this focus, it is neither desirable nor possible to generalize from the study in terms of other higher education institutions' policies and procedures. Having said this, the investigation offers a revelatory insight into ways of talking about students with the condition and the support they are offered, in terms of dilemmas faced in relation to the meritocratic notion of higher education. Given that dyslexia is often considered to be an unseen condition, the advisers' interview responses are revealing in the way that they focus on its neurological basis related to functioning as a higher education student and the concomitant discourse of 'disability' rather than as 'difference'. This is perhaps unsurprising in that, given their role, the advisers are aware of the need for 'reasonable adjustment' under the terms of the Equality Act (2010) and its enshrinement in their university's policy. However, the analysis points to the ways in which this is tempered by drawing upon an equivocal construction through the claim that "some students" require adjustments such as proofread coursework submission while "others" do not and try to overcome difficulties themselves.

The net effect of these discursive constructions is to undermine the idea of considering neurodiversity as part of the variation of the student body and that in doing so to 'normalize' the view that assistance with study in terms of dyslexia is part of a wider range of forms of support for students. This does not undermine the ingrained meritocratic view in higher education that students advance in their studies through their own abilities and efforts. Rather, it accepts that over the course of studying for a degree most students will require some form of support, whether informal through family and friends, or formal in terms of institutional support mechanisms. Studying at higher education level, or indeed any level for that matter, is not separate from how society constructs what is required for achievement. As well as the students' own agency and effort we should embrace the view that support is not an 'add-on' but rather a necessary aspect of what it required to 'come through' a degree and achieve the qualification. For some students this may be related to a 'one-off' event, but for others more repeated longerterm support may be required. Viewing student support in this way in terms of a spectrum of instances and needs, including different forms of neurodiversity, accepts human variation as well as the view that achievement does not simply rest on neoliberal notions of being responsible for oneself.

In terms of practical implications is apparent from this investigation that the academic advisers face tensions in understanding and undertaking their role. The consistent tendency to undermine their support role by turning to the students themselves and their agency in overcoming dyslexia means that measures should be put in place as a corrective to such thinking. All SpLDs matter, but dyslexia is one of the most common neurodiversity issues that students present with in higher education. With this in mind, staff training involving both advisers and lecturers is required that confronts the tendency to invoke a deficit view of students with this condition. Although a discourse of diagnosis is commonplace, there is attendant view that frames this as involving remedial support measures. Framing dyslexia this way implies those with the

condition constitute an out-group beyond the norm reinforcing discourses of deficit and difficulty.

Therefore, staff training should also seek to tackle the view that these students need to develop a sense of resilience that enables them to strive to overcome their difficulties. This could involve countering discourses that problematize the identity and self-concept of students with dyslexia and instead explore the increasing acceptance of neurodiversity as a feature of everyday life. This cannot simply involve one-sided approach in which academic advisers and lecturing staff talk *about* students with dyslexia but rather, in the spirit of all students as being involved in their educational experience, should also involve the students themselves, with a dialogue around learning preferences and ways of removing barriers in subject areas.

Both declared and undeclared dyslexic students may develop coping strategies that sometimes bypass the support mechanism they can access (Hamilton Clarke, 2024). Nevertheless, these support mechanisms are there and should be offered in a timely manner. This is all the more important in terms of widening participation and ensuring that these students can take advantage of the benefits of higher education. For this reason, a more coordinated pedagogical and assessment framework would benefit all students. Learning resource departments in universities can work with academic advisers and lecturing staff in way that ensures learning materials and slides are accessible. The issue of early slide release can be problematic at times, particularly when a staff member is teaching new material and is preparing slides on a weekby-week basis. This requires careful management and, without denying that such early release may not always be possible, it is worth considering recording lectures as a way of mitigating against the problems for students associated with just-in-time delivery.

Finally, on the vexing question of coursework extensions, a common practice alluded to in the interviews with the advisers, is for students with dyslexia to submit on the due date followed by the provision of a proofread version one week later. While this adheres to the principle of equity amongst the student body in that all students submit coursework by a given date, it still places pressures on students with SpLDs, to prepare the work by reading and writing at the same pace as other students. In other words, there is an invisible labour for these students that is also compounded by awareness that academics may use writing errors to judge a work in its totality (Wang and Piper, 2022). While assistive technology can sometimes alleviate this issue, there is no easy answer to the question. The academic advisers were wary of advocating in favour of automatic extensions for students with dyslexia. Nevertheless, this does not preclude exploring alternative assessment formats or granting extensions on a case-by-case basis where courseworks are in subject areas requiring extensive reading and writing. While in general extensions should not be viewed as means of enabling time management, it does seem reasonable to permit students with dyslexia additional time for coursework submissions where assistive technology is of limited use.

Ethical Approval

The project was subject to Abertay University's ethical guidelines and was granted approval accordingly (EMS8853).

Acknowledgements

A sincere thanks to the academic advisers who gave up their valuable time to take part in this study. An appreciation is also offered for the reviewer comments that helped improve the rigour of the paper.

References

1. Abbott-Jones, A. (2023). *Cognitive and emotional study strategies for students with dyslexia in higher education*. Cambridge University Press.

2. Alexander-Passe, N. (2015). *Dyslexia and mental health: Helping people identify destructive behaviours and find positive ways to cope*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

3. Beals, S., Kidman, K., & Funaki, H. (2020). Insider and outsider research: Negotiating self at the edge of the emic/etic divide. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *26*(6), 593–601. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419843950

4. Billig, M. (1991). *Ideology and opinions*. Sage Publications.

5. Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D., & Radley, A. (1988). *Ideological dilemmas: A social psychology of everyday thinking*. Sage Publications.

6. Bolt, D. (2014). *Changing social attitudes towards disability: Perspectives from historical, cultural, and educational studies*. Routledge.

7. Bolton, P., & Lewis, J. (2023). *Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England*. House of Commons Library. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/researchbriefings/cbp-9195/

8. Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (2011). Politeness. In *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the language sciences* (pp. 635–636). Cambridge University Press.

9. Brunswick, N., Wilson, N. J., Kruger, I., Chamberlain, R., & McManus, I. C. (2025). The prevalence of specific learning difficulties in higher education: A study of UK universities across 12 academic years. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *58*(3), 179–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/00222194241281479

10. Bukamal, H. (2022). Deconstructing insider–outsider researcher positionality. *British Journal of Special Education*, *49*(3), 327–349. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12426

11. Cameron, H., Coleman, B., Hervey, T., Rahman, S., & Rostant, P. (2019). Equality law obligations in higher education: Reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 in assessment of students with unseen disabilities. *Legal Studies*, *39*(2), 204–229. https://doi.org/10.1017/lst.2018.31

12. Chatzitheochari, S., & Platt, L. (2019). Disability differentials in educational attainment in England: Primary and secondary effects. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *70*(2), 502–525. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12372

13. Edley, N., & Wetherell, M. (1997). Jockeying for position: The construction of masculine identities. *Discourse & Society*, *8*(2), 203–217. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926597008002004

14. Elliott, J. G. (2020). It's time to be scientific about dyslexia. *Reading Research Quarterly*, *55*(S1), S61–S75. https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.333

15. Elliott, J. G., & Grigorenko, E. L. (2014). *The dyslexia debate*. Cambridge University Press.

16. Equality Act 2010. legislation.gov.uk https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

17. Glassman, M., & Patton, R. (2014). Capability through participatory democracy: Sen, Freire, and Dewey. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *46*(12), 1353–1365. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.828582

18. Griful-Freixenet, J., Struyven, K., Vantieghem, W., & Gheyssens, E. (2020). Exploring the interrelationship between Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI): A systematic review. *Educational Research Review*, *29*, Article 100306. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100306

19. Griful-Freixenet, J., Struyven, K., Verstichele, M., & Andries, C. (2017). Higher education students with disabilities speaking out: Perceived barriers and opportunities of the universal design for learning framework. *Disability & Society*, *32*(10), 1627–1649. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1365695

20. Hamilton Clark, C. H. (2024). Dyslexia concealment in higher education: Exploring students' disclosure decisions in the face of UK universities' approach to dyslexia. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, *24*(4), 922–935. https://doi.org/10.1111/14713802.12683

21. Holmes, J. (1990). Hedges and boosters in women's and men's speech. *Language and Communication*, *10*(3), 185–205. https://doi.org/10.1016/0271-5309(90)90002-S

22. Keefer, N. (2017). The persistence of deficit thinking among social studies educators. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, *8*(3), 50–75.

23. Knight, C. (2025). Dyslexia: Identity, labelling and its place in inclusive education. *British Journal of Special Education*, *52*(2), 251–257. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.70028

24. Macdonald, S. (2009). Windows of reflection: Conceptualising the social model of disability. *Dyslexia*, *15*(4), 347–367. https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.391

25. Missingham, B. D. (2017). Asset-based learning and the pedagogy of community development. *Community Development*, *48*(3), 339–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2017.1291528

26. Pennington, B. (2006). From single to multiple deficit models of developmental disorders. *Cognition*, *101*(2), 385–413. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2006.04.008

27. Pino, M., & Mortari, L. (2014). The inclusion of students with dyslexia in higher education: A systematic review using narrative synthesis. *Dyslexia*, *20*(4), 346–369. https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1484

28. Pomerantz, A. (2021). *Asking and telling in conversation*. Oxford University Press.

29. Potter, J., & Hepburn, A. (2008). Discursive constructionism. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 275–293). Guilford Press.

30. Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. Sage.

31. Prince, E. F., Frader, J., & Bosk, C. (1982). On hedging in physician–physician discourse. In R. J. Di Pietro (Ed.), *Linguistics and the professions* (pp. 83–97). Ablex.

32. Pumphrey, P. D. (2008). Moving towards inclusion? The first-degree results of students with and without disabilities in higher education in the UK: 1998–2005. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *23*(1), 31–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250701791229

33. Richardson, G. (2021). Dyslexia in higher education. *Educational Research and Reviews*, *16*(4), 125–135. https://doi.org/10.5897/ERR2021.4128

34. Riddick, B. (2001). Dyslexia and inclusion: Time for a social model of disability perspective? *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *11*(3), 223–236. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210100200078

35. Riddick, B. (2012). *Living with dyslexia: The social and emotional consequences*. Routledge.

36. Rolak, M., Heerkens, Y. F., van Bakel, H. J., & van der Klink, J. J. (2023). Factors contributing to realizing valuable goals of students with dyslexia in higher education. *Dyslexia*, *29*(3), 199–216. https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1746

37. Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation*. Blackwell.

38. Sen, A. K. (1980). Equality of what? In S. M. McMurrin (Ed.), *The Tanner lectures on human values* (pp. 195–220). Cambridge University Press.

39. Sen, A. K. (1985). *Commodities and capabilities*. North-Holland Publishers.

40. Sen, A. K. (1993). Capability and well-being. In M. Nussbaum & A. K. Sen (Eds.), *The quality of life*. Oxford University Press.

41. Simmons, K., & LeCouteur, A. (2011). 'Hypothetical active-voicing': Therapists' 'modelling' of clients' future conversations in CBT interactions. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *43*(13), 3177–3192. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.06.002

42. Snowling, M. J., Hulme, C., & Nation, K. (2020). Defining and understanding dyslexia: Past, present, and future. *Oxford Review of Education*, *46*(4), 501–513. doi.org

43. van der Klink, J. J. L., Bültmann, U., Burdorf, A., Schaufeli, W. B., Zijlstra, F. R. H., Abma, F. I., Brouwer, S., & van der Wilt, G. J. (2016). Sustainable employability—Definition, conceptualization, and implications: A perspective based on the capability approach. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, *42*(1), 71–79. https://doi.org/10.5271/sjweh.3531

44. Waitoller, F. R., & King Thorius, K. A. (2016). Cross-pollinating culturally sustaining pedagogy and universal design for learning: Toward an inclusive pedagogy that accounts for dis/ability. *Harvard Educational Review*, *86*(3), 366–389. https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-86.3.366..