

Case history: HE Student Support Manager with dyslexia

Background	<p>I am a person who is dyslexic. I discovered I was dyslexic two terms before GCSEs. Before this I gained the impression from my teachers that they felt I tried too hard, but would not really get very far with my studies. When I discovered I was dyslexic there was a change in attitude by the majority of my teachers. However, I still recall being told by my Head of English at School that I would not really get any A-levels or go to University.</p>
Experience of higher education	<p>Initially, I wanted to obtain a degree to thank those members of my family who supported me. Also I wanted to prove myself that a person with dyslexia could obtain a degree. Before I started university I wanted to be either an archaeologist or a solicitor. When I started university, I decided on undertaking a combined studies degree instead of a legal qualification because I was not 100% sure I would be successful if I undertook a law degree.</p> <p>I believe I achieved my aim as an undergraduate, as I graduated with a 2:1 which enabled me to undertake a postgraduate legal qualification. The aim of undertaking the postgraduate legal qualification was to help me to undertake the legal career I wished to undertake before I started University.</p> <p>I undertook a research degree after I completed a research project at university. I think I had caught the 'academic bug' or I had realised having a research degree would open up more doors for me at a later date in my career. I must also admit the opportunity to show that a person with dyslexia could achieve a PhD was also a challenge too good to miss. The opportunity to still be a student was also an appeal. However, I recall my parents not being a 100% happy with me carrying on as a student!</p> <p>I think my dyslexia tutor always encouraged me with my studies. I believe as a result of her support I developed the self-confidence within myself to undertake postgraduate research. I owe her a great deal of thanks. The support I mainly had in preparing my application was through my two supervisors, who helped me to put together my initial proposal. It was great to have their help, as they helped me to put together my application into the right format. I also recall looking at the book 'How to get a PhD' on the proposal chapter. However, I would suggest that it was mainly my two supervisors who helped me to work up my application.</p>
The research environment: challenges and strategies	<p>I am not really sure the research environment presented me with any particular new challenges as a disabled student as I was already aware of the barriers students with dyslexia would face when undertaking written work, and developed appropriate strategies. However, I would agree that as a postgraduate research student I faced new challenges e.g. undertaking</p>

	<p>independent study and second-guessing what my supervisors wanted from me! Reflecting on my experiences with fellow postgraduate research students, I would suggest they were similar. I talked through the issues concerning me with fellow research students, friends and my supervisors. I think I managed to deal with the issues ok.</p> <p>The support I received was mainly through my supervisors and fellow research students proof reading my chapters for me, or allowing me to discuss ideas with them. I did not receive any support through the postgraduate DSA scheme, as it had not been extended to postgraduate students (at that time). However, my School agreed to pay me a sum of money to arrange for my thesis to be proof read which I found very helpful.</p> <p>For someone who is dyslexic and was told s/he was stupid and would not get any A-levels or go to university, achieving a high level qualification and being able to call yourself 'Dr' is a major achievement. Undertaking the research degree also showed to me that I had the academic ability to undertake high level academic study. I must also admit I was attracted at that time to an academic career, and I realised that, if I wished to have one, it would be necessary to have a PhD.</p> <p>I believe also I received a level of respect from my colleagues and friends, as I believe having a PhD showed to them and even to myself that I am a recognised expert in my area of research.</p>
<p>Your experience of employment</p>	<p>I am responsible for managing and providing the support for students with disabilities at the university and its partner colleges. I did not initially receive any support when I started my job here. However, I must admit I did not believe I needed it, as I thought I had the strategies in place to support me within the workplace.</p> <p>However, I do recall that since asking for the assistive software available for dyslexic students, this has made a difference to my work. I believe other support provided is similar to what is provided to anyone whether or not they have a disability e.g. asking colleagues or friends to read over work. The reasonable adjustments I have in place are the software packages available to support people with dyslexia e.g. Text-Help and Inspirations. When I asked for the software packages and additional memory I have found my employer very supportive.</p>
<p>Developing good practice</p> <p>Disabled students or graduates thinking about research study</p>	<p>My advice is 'Go for it'. Find a subject you are interested in and supervisors you believe you can work with! It will be hard work, but there is no reason why you cannot be successful with your studies. Make sure family, partners and friends are aware that you are going to undertake postgraduate research as it is likely they will be sharing the experience as well.</p>

<p>Personal and professional development</p>	<p>I would say to those working with disabled research students “Do not be scared! Draw on your experiences of supporting disabled students as undergraduates. Consider asking the student how you can help them, as by the time they start a research degree they are the best experts.”</p>
<p>Transition to employment</p>	<p>Ask the student themselves about the career path they wish to follow. Once you have this information, it would be helpful to be aware of the resources available to support disabled students in this area. Local disability organisations or national organisations such as the Disability Rights Commission should be able to help.</p>
<p>Employers: recruitment and retention</p>	<p>Follow existing good practice in the field. The Disability Rights Commission provides helpful resources. Most importantly, look at the individual’s ability not their disability.</p>

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