

The University of Oxford

Guidance for diagnostic assessment of students with specific learning difficulties

The following guidance for diagnostic assessments was originally developed from the recommendations of a Working Group on Specific Learning Difficulties of the University of Oxford, which reported in Trinity Term 2011. The recommendations are rooted in the extensive data collection, interviews, research and analysis undertaken by the group whose membership included internal and external experts.

The University of Oxford considers that the primary purpose of a diagnostic assessment report is to provide the student with a greater understanding of his / her profile of strengths and weaknesses and an opportunity to consider how this profile might impact upon academic study. The assessment report will be used to support the student to develop greater self-awareness and inform strategy development in managing key academic tasks whilst studying in a demanding and challenging academic environment. It is important therefore that a diagnostic assessment is not viewed simply as a route to obtaining extra time in examinations.

In order to provide support and make reasonable adjustments, including examination adjustments, on the grounds of a specific learning difficulty, the University Proctors require that:

- a full diagnostic assessment has been carried out by a psychologist or a specialist teacher which confirms the presence of a specific learning difficulty. The psychologist or specialist teacher must hold a qualification recognised under the SpLD Working Group 2005/DfES Guidelines and, as appropriate, hold a valid Assessment Practising Certificate;
- the assessment has been conducted when the student was aged 16 years or over, using adult tests, and on an individual rather than a group basis;
- undergraduate students' reports are normally no more than 5 years old and postgraduate students' reports no more than 8 years old at the date of entry to the University. (Students over 24 years of age are advised to present any existing evidence and the Disability Advisory Service will advise on suitability. Oxford students continuing directly from undergraduate to postgraduate study will not normally require a new diagnostic assessment but should contact the Disability Advisory Service for guidance on how to proceed.);
- that a signed copy of the diagnostic assessment report has been supplied to the University and that the report follows closely the guidance of the SpLD Working Group 2005/ DfES report and its subsequent updates. This applies to the tests used, the format of the report and the detail of the content. Please note that "top up" assessments are not acceptable nor are copies of the JCQ Form 8.

Tests

With reference to test selection we ask that professionals administer the following assessments to provide comprehensive evidence of the impact of difficulties on study. For assessments conducted in the UK, the test materials should be those approved by UK national professional standards

bodies¹ in line with the SpLD Working Group 2005/ DfES guidelines, and utilise the most recently available standardisation information. International reports must include the same range of assessment areas and use internationally recognised materials with similarly robust standardisation.

We ask that the following **core** aspects are included to allow the University to make decisions about support and reasonable adjustments for a student with a specific learning difficulty.

- Underlying cognitive ability
- Working memory
- Visual processing speed
- Phonological processing speed
- Single word reading speed (sight word and non-word)
- Text-level reading speed
- Reading comprehension of extended text
- An assessment of free writing composition skill and speed. This should use a piece of free writing over a time frame of at least 10 minutes by hand. This should be supplemented with a further assessment of free writing skill using a word processor over 10 minutes, especially in cases where the use of a word processor in an examination is under consideration. The writing tasks should constitute a sufficient test of a student's ability to plan and compose in order to adequately inform decisions on reasonable adjustments.
- Qualitative commentary regarding the approach to each assessment task and the anticipated impact of any observations on academic study activities such as reading, research, note taking, planning, writing, proofreading and editing etc.

In addition to these core tests, to inform the University about the nature of the SpLD, we request further specific information to underpin particular diagnostic conclusions.

In cases of **dyslexia** suitable tests of phonological awareness, single word reading and single word spelling alongside evidence of a history of difficulty in literacy skill acquisition.

In cases of **dyspraxia or dysgraphia** tests of graphic speed, visual-motor integration alongside evidence and extensive history of gross and fine motor co-ordination difficulties. Please note that illegible handwriting is not considered sufficient evidence to substantiate a diagnosis of dysgraphia. Underlying difficulties in cognitive processing and written composition are expected.

In cases of **ADHD** evidence which applies the guidance for assessment by educational professionals provided by the SpLD Assessment Standards Committee. Please note that medical evidence of ADHD is also acceptable when it sets out *both* the diagnosis and reports on the impact on study; a comprehensive letter from a GP, an adult psychiatrist or a consultant at a specialist ADHD clinic are likely to be acceptable.

¹ Further Information can be found on the SpLD Assessment Standards Committee website on their SpLD Assessment page. This includes the diagnostic assessment report proforma, the SpLD Working Party 2005 / DfES report and its updates. www.sasc.org.uk

Recommendations

Recommendations for appropriate student support in teaching and learning activities, as well as examinations and assessments are welcome.

Please note the University of Oxford has intensive 8-week terms, written examinations often last for 3 hours and undergraduate and graduate students will **not** normally be allowed extra time for coursework (including theses and dissertations) on the grounds of a specific learning difficulty unless additional extenuating circumstances apply.

Recommendations for examination arrangements should be clearly and explicitly stated, with any time allowances quantified. The standard extra time allowance for students with SpLDs is **25%** (15 minutes per hour) both for hand written and word processed exams. Any recommendation for additional extra time over the standard 25% would need to be fully justified with evidence of a very substantial impact on measures of attainment. Oxford will consider all reasonable adjustments to examinations including the use of assistive technology.

Diagnostic assessors and students should be aware that the final decision on adjustments rests with the University Proctors.

Last revised May 2016