Thick, problematic and costly? The dyslexic student on work placement

by Sheila Blankfield

Introduction

‘Ultimately, (employers) want people who are going to be good employees, people they don’t have to invest any more time than they have to in. At the moment, dyslexic people or people with disabilities are considered thick, problematic and costly.’

This is the response a dyslexic university student gave when asked why he would not disclose his dyslexia to a potential employer.

The difference between a dyslexic student’s experience at university and in the workplace can be enormous in terms of the support and understanding they receive. In higher education, although provision and service can be uneven, dyslexic students are often keen to disclose their difficulties in order to access funding and support, and claim their entitlements. They also often have contact with what Reiff et al (1997:193) refer to as ‘system advocates’ through whose efforts the education playing field is levelled as far as possible so that the dyslexic student is not disadvantaged. However, when a student enters into a paid work placement, that advocacy provision tends to be lost. While the university continues to be funded for that student’s place, the student him/herself is treated as an employee in terms of employment law. Reiff et al (ibid:193) accurately sum this up: ‘Individuals with learning disabilities experience two very different cultures apropos their learning disability. First is the culture of the (university). Second is the culture of the world of work’. This is emphasised by Crawford (1998: 275) who states: ‘Most employment and education reform initiatives continue to display a lack of awareness of, sensitivity to, or acknowledgement of adults with LD, who represent the largest identified group of learners with special needs seeking employment and adult education services’.

Rationale

The recognition of the importance of work experience for university students has been backed by government funding initiatives. One strand of development projects, funded by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) from 1998-2000, was dedicated to the theme of work experience. One of the conclusions drawn from these projects was that ‘a key element of ensuring quality of learning from work experience is effective matching of student with work opportunity’ (DfEE,1999: 4), indicating the importance of the role of the placement officer who may be involved in arranging a student work placement. Another conclusion, that ‘some students find that their employer is willing to provide some support to their learning, but for many this is unrealistic, so students need support in monitoring and tracking their own learning’ (ibid: 4), seems to indicate the need for awareness of supporting student learning on work placements. Indeed, with the current trend toward vocationality in higher education courses, as well as the incentives to forge links with businesses outside the university, the needs and experiences of students with dyslexia going on work placements requires thorough consideration.

Methodology

This piece of qualitative research explored the issues involved in disclosing dyslexia when a student becomes a paid employee in the third year of a four-year degree (sometimes called a Sandwich Course). The key players in the work placement process were identified as the students themselves (pre-, post- or on placement), placement officers and recruitment officers in organisations that take students on one-year placements (here, employers).

During the 1999/2000 academic year, nine students with dyslexia, four placement officers and four employers were interviewed in depth. The students were from universities in the North West of England and London. Their subjects included business computing, retail marketing, applied zoology, applied maths, hospitality management, computer science, 3D design, psychology and biology. The employers represented organisations in construction, IT, retail and telecommunications. The placement officers were from universities in the North West of England, and represented schools of business, visual communication and 3D design, business and management, and computing and maths.

Discussion

Four key themes emerged during the analysis of the interview data: firstly, dyslexic students do not regard themselves as being disabled, and work placement
documentation and processes do not take account of this; secondly, dyslexia was almost invisible in the experience of the placement officers and employers; thirdly, placement officers and employers considered their procedures and documentation adequate for disclosure, while students did not find this to be the case; and finally, almost no support and advocacy during the transition from student to employee exists.

1 Identity
That dyslexia is a unique case with regard to disability issues generally and to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) in particular, was revealed in the research by the almost total agreement of all participant groups about one issue: that at a personal level, individuals with dyslexia did not regard themselves or were not regarded as people with a disability. As one student put it:

‘I don’t think of (dyslexia) as a disability. My granddad’s blind, my other grandma’s deaf, and one’s got diabetes, they’ve got disabilities. I mean, I’ve got asthma and that’s a disability.’

This contrasts with the legal and bureaucratic status of the condition where to all intents and purposes, albeit with some lack of clarity, dyslexia is included as a disability in law, in employment legislation and procedures, and in the corporate view represented by the employers and placement officers interviewed in this research. In the view of one employer:

‘Personally, no, I don’t think (dyslexia) is a disability but as a company, yes.’

However, some of the students believed that placement officers and employers did regard dyslexia as a disability, particularly since little in the documentation or procedures lead them to think otherwise.

These findings have implications for several areas of the work placement process. Firstly, the way in which application forms are worded do not encourage students to disclose (see disclosure below) and this will need to be addressed if the disclosure desired by employers is to be achieved. Secondly, students were unsure about how to talk about their difficulties to placement officers and employers at interview stage, if at all. They had no clear indication of whether the condition was understood, nor of how others viewed the condition. In addition, they did not trust that the current legislation would be of help to them if they needed to resort to it. Thus, a great deal of demystification and information dissemination is required across and between all the groups in the study.

2 Invisibility
Given the incidence of dyslexia amongst higher education students, and its impact in the lives of the students interviewed for this study, it was remarkable that dyslexia was almost non-existent in the experience of placement officers and employers. For example, one placement officer had been in post for 11 years, placing about 400 students per year, and she had only been aware of placing two dyslexic students in all that time. Only one of the employers had knowingly interviewed or employed a dyslexic student.

For the employers, dyslexia remained organisationally invisible by its inclusion under disability and in terms of the procedures and documentation used in the work placement process. If equal opportunity for placement students with dyslexia is to amount to more than what Earle (2000:55) calls ‘false rhetoric’, this situation needs addressing as a matter of urgency.

For placement officers, clearer lines of communication between themselves and other units in the universities holding information about students with dyslexia need to be established. There is also a need for greater clarity about the confidentiality of disseminating this sensitive data within the institutions. Above all, placement officers would be providing a much more sensitive and informed service if they were more aware of the nature of dyslexia and the issues involved in disclosing it amongst the students they are placing.

3 Disclosure
With one exception, disclosure to a placement officer or an employer proved to be a contentious issue for the students.

Some were adamant about not disclosing their difficulties’ unless circumstances forced them to:

‘I will not mention it on my CV because I think it’s hard enough to find a job already without labelling something that people don’t understand and will instantly put you down upon it … If I had to answer a direct question about dyslexia in the interview, I would try to answer in a Machiavellian sort of way like “Well I get by with it so it’s not really a problem”.’

Even for those students who felt that, on balance, disclosure was probably a good idea, there was a great deal of emotion and anxiety attached to disclosure:

‘It was a bit like the feeling telling somebody that you’re going to dump them. You don’t know what words you’re going to use, you get this horrible feeling, and it was like I thought “This is it. I’m going to lose my placement and oh my God!”’
The students’ responses to the issue of disclosure illustrated the double invisibility of dyslexia. Not only is the condition itself invisible, but the anxiety and emotion involved in disclosing it is equally hidden. If, as has been argued in much of the literature on dyslexia, the ‘Long-lasting and deeply negative consequences (of the cyclical pattern of failure at school)’ (Hughes & Dawson, 1995:181) are still present for students going on work placements, then there is a clear need for this to be recognised and acknowledged by all parties and at all stages of the placement process.

This recognition and acknowledgement was certainly not in evidence amongst the placement officers and the employers. With the exception of the placement officer who was also a tutor to students, the placement officers either simply ignored the issue, or did not facilitate or encourage disclosure:

‘I don’t really encourage them to disclose. I don’t specifically say ‘Don’t disclose but I don’t make a point of highlighting it.’

Apart from the placement officer who also taught the students he placed, placement officers showed a poor understanding of the nature of dyslexia:

‘Dyslexia is often hidden from employers because it’s on hand-written work that you would see it.’

The employers were rather better informed as to nature of dyslexia, yet misconceptions remained:

“We always ask them to fill out the application form (by hand) because we like to see their handwriting and their spelling.’

In addition, there was a lack of clarity as to where the responsibility for disclosure lay in the placement process. One placement officer felt:

‘It’s the student’s choice to disclose or not.’

whereas another believed:

‘We have a moral obligation to disclose to the employer.’

Certainly the placement officers had little idea about the anxiety and emotion associated with disclosure of dyslexia amongst the students they were placing.

Without exception, the employers regarded their application and interview procedures to be very fair and equitable, taking due account of employment law with regard to applicants with disabilities. In all cases, students on placements were put through the same processes as any other applicant. However, an analysis of the application forms, the information for applicants and the procedures for interview in all cases showed a lack of awareness of the issues relating to disclosure which the student interviewees so poignantly articulated. The word ‘dyslexia’ did not appear on any of the literature. The ‘invitation’ to disclose was located in either the ‘health’ or ‘disability’ or ‘equal opportunities’ sections of forms. The ‘invitation’ was couched in language which reflected the medical model of disability, and showed scant regard for hidden disabilities. Earle’s (2000: 46) statement that the term ‘equal opportunities’ is particularly elusive was certainly illustrated in the employer interviews. Earle adds that equality of opportunity should ensure equality of outcome, and what was proposed by these employers as equality of opportunity to disclose certainly did not ensure equality of outcome.

This analysis reveals that there is much work to be done if placement officers and employers are to make it safe and inviting for work placement students to disclose their dyslexia at any point in the placement process.

Furthermore, the students themselves would benefit from a clearer understanding of their entitlements on a work placement, as well as benefit from being supported and even trained in finding ways of disclosing their dyslexia in the most positive manner.

4 Success

For many of the students, having a year away from the foreseen pressures of dealing with academic work was as important a reason for choosing a sandwich course as the work experience element. For others, the work placement was seen as an opportunity to control some of their fears about coping with their dyslexia in the real world after university:

‘I saw it as putting the wolves to sleep - all the doubts about working outside the university.’

However, not all the students adequately anticipated the familiar dyslexic phenomenon in which the transition and adaptation to new situations demands new coping strategies. As Reiff et al (1999:211) state ‘success in the workplace will be difficult without an employer who is open to compensatory strategies for successful performance’. Some of the students had to disclose their dyslexia when they started to run into difficulties on the placement. In some cases, their employers and colleagues were understanding and accommodating, but in one case, the student was fired from his job. In no cases were the placement officers involved in negotiating or advocating on the student’s behalf when there was a difficulty at work arising from the dyslexia.

There seems to be a singular lack in continuity of support and advocacy for the work placement student once they enter the world of employment. If such students are to experience success in this endeavour, there is much work to be done in informing and raising awareness about these issues for placement officers and employers. Of equal importance is helping dyslexic students to ‘realize their full potential in the work-
place’ by mastering ‘the complex skills of self-advocacy’ (Reiff et al 1997:199).

**Recommendations**

This study revealed four key themes which underpinned all the other issues and themes that emerged from the interview data. The following recommendations are made based on the findings discussed above.

- Firstly, distinguishing dyslexia from other disabilities in the documentation and processes of work placements is highly desirable.
- Secondly, raising awareness of the condition and a student’s entitlements on work placement in relation to the condition is crucial and urgently needed for placement officers, employers and dyslexic students themselves.
- Thirdly, if the problematic nature of disclosure is to be tackled, placement officers and employers need to revisit and revise their documentation and procedures as a matter of urgency.
- Finally, if dyslexic students are to experience success on a work placement, training, support and advocacy in the transition from student to employee are needed.

**References**


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**Editors note:** Journal readers will be interested to know that from 1 September 2002 institutions will have new legal responsibilities towards disabled students seeking work placements. These follow changes to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 introduced by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001. The Department for Education and Employment has commissioned Skill to produce guidance on these new duties. The guidance should be available by the Summer.

Full reference (this does not appear in the original article):


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