Annexe 1

Guidelines for marking and feedback for students with specific learning difficulties (SpLDs)

1. Introduction

1.1 This annexe provides practical guidelines and information to support individual markers to implement marking and provide appropriate feedback, as an anticipatory reasonable adjustment for students with dyslexia and/or other Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs), whilst maintaining academic standards.

1.2 Students experiencing dyslexia are currently the largest sub-group of students disclosing a SpLD at the University of Liverpool. Dyslexia causes difficulties in learning to read, write and spell. Short term memory, mathematics, concentration, personal time organisation and sequencing may also be affected.

1.3 The British Dyslexia Association explains that Specific Learning Difficulties (or SpLDs) affect the way information is learned and processed. They are neurological (rather than psychological), usually run in families and occur independently of intelligence. They can have significant impact on education and learning and on the acquisition of literacy skills. SpLD is an umbrella term used to cover a range of frequently co-occurring difficulties, more commonly:

- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Dyscalculia
- ADD/ADHD
- Auditory Processing Disorder

1.4 The British Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as a specific learning difficulty which mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills. It is likely to be present at birth and to be lifelong in its effects. It is characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual’s other cognitive abilities. It tends to be resistant to conventional teaching methods but its effects can be mitigated by appropriately specific intervention, including the application of information technology and supportive counselling.

1.5 These guidelines apply to those students who have been formally assessed by a specialist assessor e.g. Educational Psychologist. Students also need to have been identified and recommended for specific support i.e. reasonable adjustments are required and recorded as such on SPIDER. Arrangements for identification and access to these assessments are made by the Disability Support Team.

1.6 The Equality Act 2010 requires reasonable adjustments to be made by institutions in order to alleviate or remove the effects of a ‘substantial disadvantage’. In practice this means we should do things differently if the usual way would substantially disadvantage a disabled person. Or it might mean providing additional services or equipment. Marking guidelines is an example of an anticipatory reasonable adjustment.

1.7 What is deemed to be reasonable depends on the individual circumstances of the case, including how important the adjustment is, how practical it is and the financial or other resources of the institution. It should be noted that it is the financial resources of the institution as a whole and not the budget of an individual department or service area that is applicable in this regard.

1.8 While treatment of assessed work submitted by students experiencing SpLDs and in particular dyslexia could imply the disregarding of errors of spelling and grammar, the work itself must be
effective and fulfil the assessment criteria that have been set within academic standards. Marking of assessments associated with professional and clinical programmes with fitness to practise considerations (i.e. those where assessment measures performance against clinical or professional criteria) should take account of these guidelines as recommendations only and relevant areas should implement the guidelines as and when appropriate.

2. Guidelines for Marking

2.1 When marking assessments completed by students identified as experiencing a SpLD, the marker is encouraged to focus on the awareness of difficulties faced by students and implement marking as outlined below:

2.2 Marking considerations:

2.2.1 For many students experiencing SpLDs, in particular dyslexia, there is a continued difficulty with presenting work in the standard academic format. This is due to the ways in which dyslexia affects the student. Although each student will have individual support needs, there are often common characteristics amongst the work of those experiencing dyslexia. Markers should be aware of these considerations which include:
   a) Omitted words or punctuation
   b) Evidence of slow reading skills/slowness to answer written questions
   c) Excessive or misplaced punctuation
   d) Repeated information or phrases
   e) Unsophisticated language structure – in order to avoid grammatical errors many students experiencing dyslexia adopt simplified language structures which do not necessarily denote unsophisticated thinking
   f) Simplified vocabulary when writing
   g) Difficulties with sequencing or word-finding may produce a stilted style of writing which may not match the student’s oral performance in seminars and other activity.

2.2.2 When grading work, markers should mark primarily for content, ideas and critical thinking, without penalising the student for specific weaknesses of expression, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure and spelling.

2.2.3 If academic standards are to be safeguarded, sympathetic treatment cannot extend to written expression which is so poor that coherence and intelligibility are at issue.

2.2.4 Marking should not penalise poor handwriting, which is a common trait for many students with SpLDs.

2.2.5 During feedback students should be made aware of the focus of marking, e.g. if the marking is purely for material and use of ideas. Without this information students may be under the impression that there are no errors in their work.

2.3 Feedback considerations should include:

2.3.1 Sensitivity towards individuals and their work. Many students will have experienced negative reactions due to their difficulties throughout their educational lives. Constructive criticism that is sensitive to the student’s difficulties can help individuals to progress.

2.3.2 Provision of clear explanations of what is required and what is wrong. Simply stating that a point needs developing does not tell the student how to change their work. Students with dyslexia may find direct constructive comments about their work particularly useful.
2.3.3 Provision of examples of how points can be developed, which will be beneficial to students with SpLDs.

2.3.4 Consideration of the use of an alternative to red pen corrections as this colour has negative associations that students with SpLDs will have encountered in their past.

2.3.5 Typed feedback and comments on a separate sheet as, even if feedback is positive, students may have difficulty reading handwriting.

2.3.6 Provision of a friendly and confidential setting to provide feedback to students. It should always be assumed that the student does not wish other students on their course to know of their SpLD and comments about a student’s support needs should never be made in a public setting.

3. **Additional Impact of SpLDs**

3.1 Students may also have additional recommendations for practical support during assessments and examinations e.g. extra time or the use of a PC and/or specialist software. When considering additional support for such students it is important to clarify that this provision does not remove the difficulties which the student experiences. Rather the additional support compensates for some of the characteristics of SpLDs, e.g. dyslexia and processing speed when reading, but does not compensate for all. In some cases assessed work is likely to be work processed (and spell-checked). Some problems are likely to remain in the student’s work after spell-checking has been performed. This may include:

- Homophone substitutions (e.g. there/their, where/were, effect/affect)
- Phonetic equivalents (e.g. frenetic for phonetic)
- Incorrect work substitutions (e.g. distance for disturbance)
- American spellings (e.g. color for colour)

3.2 Students may proof read work several times over but due to their difficulties e.g. dyslexia, will often not be able to identify incorrect use of words.

3.3 The majority of students experiencing SpLDs can, with careful teaching and guidance, learn to present coursework such as essays and reports in an appropriate academic format. However, students experiencing SpLDs will often continue to have difficulties with logical sequence of ideas and with moving smoothly from one point to another.

3.4 The Disability Support Team can offer a consultation service for students to meet with an external Learning Support Tutor to help identify support strategies within these areas. Academic and support staff should encourage students to visit the Team for this and other related support.

4. **Adjustments for students with Dyslexia or other SpLDs**

4.1 Evidence to support a SpLD diagnosis comes in a number of formats but nearly always as an Educational Psychologist Assessment or in some cases an Occupational Therapist’s Assessment (e.g. for dyspraxia). This assessment, which provides detailed findings of tests that have been performed to clarify if a SpLD is present and if so, a description of the difficulties, is offered with recommendations on how best to support the individual. The description may offer guidance on the level of difficulty and may include the terms mild, moderate and severe. There is no standard definition of each level of SpLD applied to a student, but it is in the prescription of the type of adjustment where the level of severity is supported and thus further defined. No examiner or assessor will need to apply criteria against the level as this is used by the Needs Assessor.

4.2 Once a student is in receipt of evidence of a disability, the student may be entitled to apply for a Needs Assessment via their funding body e.g. Student Finance, Research Council, NHS. The
assessments identifies accessibility equipment, non-medical human support e.g. specialist dyslexia tutor and in some cases further recommendations, all of which will help the individual student to work on a par with their non-SpLD peers.

4.3 As well as students arriving at University who have a diagnosis, many others will visit the Disability Support Team during the course of their studies to ask for support and consideration of accessing a full Educational Psychologist’s assessment.

4.4 Any member of staff who believes a student may be experiencing a SpLD should sensitively encourage the student to visit or consult with the Disability Support Team.

4.5 All work produced for assessment and submitted by a student experiencing a SpLD and identified as such on the SPIDER screen GOAMED and confirmed by the Disability Support Team, is eligible for support including what is classed as appropriate marking where recommended.

4.6 All students experiencing SpLDs and who hold proof of an assessment that recommends appropriate marking and who have requested support via the Disability Support Team, should have the facility to have their examinations scripts, class tests and any other work for assessment identified. This identification should highlight that the student requires consideration of marking and this should be flagged up as “appropriate marking required” rather than labelling someone as SpLD or dyslexic.

4.7 For University examinations the central Examinations Team will identify any such examination scripts. For any other departmental tests and assessments the academic School/Department will need to make this identification.

4.8 Support for non-written examinations will be subject to additional support recommendations and should be discussed separately, e.g. in a support meeting held by the Departmental Disability and Dyslexia Contact, the student and when required a member of the Disability Support Team. Specific recommendations for these areas can be negotiated to suit the Department’s delivery of the curriculum and the individual student’s support needs.

4.9 All markers/assessors of work should be informed by the academic Department of these guidelines.