

What's Good for Dyslexia is Good for All

A Guide for those working in the Further Education Sector in Ireland

Based on the lived experience of adults with severe dyslexia, these guidelines tell the story of what helps and what does not help when teaching adults with dyslexia.



Introduction

A lack of understanding and knowledge of dyslexia can pose barriers for individuals hoping to progress in further education and training. The experience of adults with dyslexia of accessing support in the Further Education Sector is very mixed and at times described as limiting and negative. Feedback suggests that front-line staff, in the further education and training sector and in government agencies and departments need training in understanding dyslexia. How dyslexia is experienced, its impact on day-to-day living and on how adults learn and communicate is not well understood. This lack of understanding is resulting in adults not accessing necessary supports, withdrawing from participating in state-funded programmes and at worst causing alienation and discrimination.

These guidelines aim to help address this by providing a summary of the key issues that need to be considered by trainers and tutors in the Further Education Sector when providing supports to adults with dyslexia. These guidelines seek to begin to address the knowledge gaps and help tutors and trainers play their role in helping learners with dyslexia to thrive.

The guidelines are based on insights gained through the evaluation of the Career Paths for Dyslexia Programme run by the Dyslexia Association of Ireland and are informed by the feedback given by adults with severe dyslexia participating in Career Paths since 2012, their teachers and tutors.

The Programme is a Local Training Initiative under Kildare Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB) with additional funding for the specialist literacy programme provided by SOLAS. It is a full-time nine-month course for unemployed adults with serious dyslexia.

A copy of the Career Paths for Dyslexia Evaluation Report is available on request from the DAI.

What is Dyslexia and how does it impact the lives of adults?

Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty which makes it harder to learn how to read, write and spell accurately. It is not caused by lack of education or by lack of intelligence. Adults will often have developed ways of coping with these difficulties and even ways of hiding it. Dyslexic difficulties occur on a spectrum from mild to severe. It affects approximately 10% of the population.

How can dyslexia impact students or trainees?

Many people may be very comfortable living with and talking about their dyslexia and have no issue with it at all. Therefore dyslexia may impact marginally as the learner is confident in talking about his/her dyslexia and their needs around learning and assessment.

For others, living with dyslexia is more challenging. It may influence the learner's demeanour, motivation, self-esteem and self-image. Negative experiences of education to date may present in an underlying attitude of 'here I am ready to fail again'. Some individuals report a period of counselling helpful in supporting them to address underlying issues associated with their experience of dyslexia.

Adults may or may not know they have dyslexia. It is important that tutors/trainers in further education know what to look out for and recognise the signs that a learner may be struggling and that dyslexia may be the underlying cause of their difficulties.

Clues to look out for include:

- Reading difficulties – challenges in recognising words; reading may be slow and have lots of inaccuracies; words may be mispronounced.
- Reading comprehension difficulties – in extracting the meaning of text, requiring the learner to read the text many times in order to understand it.
- Weak vocabulary, poor grammar and structure when writing and/or spelling difficulties.
- Big difference between oral and written language.
- Poor memory skills.
- Problems recalling some words.
- Handwriting may be illegible or difficult to make out especially if under stress and/or time pressure.
- In speech, words may be mispronounced and complex words avoided.
- Find summarising hard.
- Difficulty organising and sequencing tasks.
- People with dyslexia often have difficulties with working memory and speed of retrieval of information from long term memory. This can make learning challenging, but support strategies can help.
- People with dyslexia may experience greater stress and frustration as they try to learn, resulting in heightened anxiety, particularly in relation to literacy acquisition.

While dyslexia can cause learning challenges, it is only one part of a person's learning profile. They may also have personal strengths that can include:

- Creative ability.
- Lateral or diverse thinking skills.
- Problem solving.
- Visual and spatial thinking skills.
- An ability to look at the bigger picture and to see information holistically.
- Good oral skills and interpersonal skills.

“She saw me as an expert in my own strengths and weaknesses and gave me confidence to be the expert in my own learning and worked with me to develop strategies for learning my way.”

Career Paths Participant



What to do if you suspect a learner has dyslexia?

Try to establish if the learner knows/suspects they have dyslexia. Ask the learner if they have had it queried previously and if they have, seek to find information about any dyslexia assessment – when it was done, if the report is available etc.

Educational psychology assessment may confirm dyslexia and is an important step towards supporting adults in further education and training. Tutors/trainers in the FET sector therefore must firstly recognise the signs of dyslexia, establish if the learner is aware of having dyslexia and then if necessary know how to access an educational psychology assessment to formally identify dyslexia.

An assessment for dyslexia is usually done with an educational psychologist or specially trained teacher. The process takes between two and three hours which includes an interview, tests and verbal feedback. Adult Learners may or may not want to be assessed. Assessments are costly, however the DAI provide subsidised assessments.

Many adults have a deep sense of relief when they get dyslexia confirmed – it can end long held negative beliefs that they are ‘thick, stupid and unable to learn’.

Assessment can greatly help learners to reframe and relabel. Identification of dyslexia is often the first step to enabling an adult with dyslexia to begin to achieve their full potential.

However, if you suspect dyslexia, respond to the learner accordingly, trust your instinct. Do not wait for the results of an assessment. Creatively adjust how you support the learner in line with the principle – what is good for dyslexia is good for all!

Look at how trainees with dyslexia may be put in contact with each other and/or put in contact with DAI so that they can attend one of the free monthly Adult Seminars run by the DAI. Feedback from adults strongly indicates the value they place on meeting others with comparable dyslexia challenges.

Where to get an assessment

- Occasionally students in college or further education may be able to get assessed through their college. Talk to your tutor or the college Disability/Access Service for advice.
- The DAI operates an assessment service on a not-for profit basis at our national office in Dublin, and offers reduced rates to those in financial need (www.dyslexia.ie).
- There are also educational psychologists in private practice who offer assessments. The Psychological Society of Ireland maintains a list (www.psihq.ie).
- Financial support for the cost of an assessment may be available from DSP Intreo offices, or your Local Employment Service. Organisations like St. Vincent de Paul, and Elizabeth Finn Care have also helped people.

Tutors and trainers — what you can do to help

When training adults with dyslexia, the following should be considered.

— Adjust your materials, methods and style.

Ensure how you train/tutor is thought through and considered. Training needs to be designed in a manner that acknowledges the participants as adults and as peers. It will be necessary to adjust your teaching materials, methods and style when supporting adults with dyslexia to learn and to reach their potential.

— Remember dyslexia is not about intelligence or ability.

With the right support all adults can thrive in their chosen education and training course.

— Invest in developing a trusting respectful relationship.

Many adults entering further education may not have felt safe or respected in school and may have been labelled as less able than others. Invest in building a trusting relationship with your learners, ensuring the learner feels safe and respected. This may take time and you may meet with resistance. Such resistance may take the form of shyness or of 'acting out'. The behaviour may be part of the individual's coping strategies to date. Keep trying, keep investing in gaining their trust.

— Address literacy challenges

The development of a student's literacy skills may be *the* most significant contributory factor to enabling adults with dyslexia to progress successfully. The length of time needed to address literacy challenges needs to be firstly acknowledged and secondly supported. Some adults may need intensive literacy support, and sourcing this support as part of their further education and training may be an important first step. Talk to the Disability/Access Officer in your college or the local Adult Literacy Organiser to see what's available in your area.

— Manage your own mindset

You must want success for the learners and be very committed to knowing that every learner, with the right help, can and will make progress and develop. Research indicates the adage of 'what we see is what we get' is true. Have expectations for your learners; if you expect them to succeed they will!

Don't label and limit your expectations due to an assessment of dyslexia. Have an unshakeable belief in each student.

Be authentic – intention will outsmart technique. You can't pretend to believe in someone; your falseness will leak out! Develop a 'growth mindset' that encourages students to understand that intelligence and success can be developed and is not static. There is room for growth and improvement no matter what the starting point or the previous experience of learning.

“The tutors understand you. They know how we feel, how we have to hide away and pretend we don't have dyslexia... I used to get slagged at school... although my previous placement were good, they didn't understand dyslexia...”

Career Paths Participant

“Had I had access to the way dyslexia was explained to me when I was on my PLC course or when I was in school, it would have made a huge difference.”

Career Paths Participant

Tips when designing learning

Tutors/trainers need to identify the strategies that are already being used and work with adults with dyslexia, rather than imposing how they think the person 'should' learn.

- Consider how your learners learn and how you are going to design how you teach to reflect how each individual learns. This may take some time and can be worked out with the learner.
- Adults with dyslexia do better when learning is very structured and uses a variety of techniques to impart information. Use structured, multi-sensory learning, not just chalk and talk. Using visual images, verbal discussions, practical exercises and multi-media resources will all help.
- Ensure learning is sequential, allowing students to build skills and knowledge gradually and logically.
- Learning should be cumulative, helping the students to connect earlier parts of the programme to what is currently being covered.
- Check in to ensure that everyone has understood.
- Repetition is important in helping students to consolidate their learning, so opportunities for repeating what has been covered will help the learner. This aids the transition of knowledge into long-term memory.
- If available, explore any types of assistive technology that may support the learner.
- Other simple aids can be a great help. For instance:
 - Use Post-it notes to record simple reminders.
 - Coloured pens may reduce visual stress when reading (for some).
 - Highlighter pens to aid memory of key facts.
 - Coloured paper to reduce glare from black and white paper.

- Pen grips can assist pen control and therefore hand writing.
- Coloured keyboard letters may help distinguish letters that otherwise may be confused.
- If using handouts, provide them in advance in an accessible style and format, including digital forms.
- Never ask students with dyslexia to read aloud in class, unless they are happy to do so.
- Encourage students to submit work done on computer rather than handwritten.
- Don't focus on spelling mistakes but do encourage students to use spell-checking facilities (including those with speech feedback) but remember that these are not fool proof. Students with dyslexia may not always recognise the correct spelling.
- Build in time and tools that support the learner to critically reflect on the information or tasks. Encourage problem solving.
- Discuss with the learner if they need to apply for accommodations in formal assessments. For example, they may need a reader, or extra time, or they may need not to be penalised for spelling errors. Investigate what accommodations are available and are suited to each individual's needs.

Most importantly, remain open and be flexible in how you respond to an individual's needs, and remember that what is good for dyslexia is good for all!

If you would like further information, advice or support, please contact the **Dyslexia Association of Ireland (DAI)** at:



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Dyslexia Association of Ireland



[@DyslexiaIreland](https://twitter.com/DyslexiaIreland)

The DAI website contains lots of information on assessment, learning support, assistive technology, as well as links to other useful sites.

In 2016 DAI published a new "Adult Dyslexia" booklet, and posters to raise awareness of adult dyslexia, available from www.dyslexia.ie.

AHEAD have a very useful booklet "Supporting Students with Dyslexia: Practical guidelines for institutions of further and higher education" available from www.ahead.ie (published in 2009).

Other useful websites:

www.nala.ie

www.writeon.ie

www.aontas.com

www.onestepup.ie

www.ahead.ie

www.qualifax.ie

www.careersportal.ie

www.cao.ie

www.accesscollege.ie

www.employability.ie

www.welfare.ie