
How does dyslexia impact on academic agency at university

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Research questions

'Do students with dyslexia present a lower level of academic confidence than not only their non-dyslexic peers, but also than their unidentified dyslexic peers?'

What the research is attempting to find out

The aim of this research project is to explore the relationship between the learning difference of dyslexia and academic agency amongst Higher Education students.

Zimmerman (1995) spoke of academic agency as 'a sense of [academic] purpose, this being a produce of self-efficacy and academic confidence that is then the major influence on academic accomplishment' and it is through the principal concepts of academic self-efficacy and academic confidence that this research project will be tackled.

This is important to explore because relationships revealed may contribute to the emerging discussion on the design of learning development (aka 'support') for groups of learners who feel marginalized or disenfranchised because conventional learning curriculum delivery tends to be misaligned with their learning strengths, or due to their perceived stigma about being labelled as 'different' or even more so,

'disabled' in a learning context. In other words, exploring the impact that the stigmatization of labelling has on academic agency.

This project is particularly topical at this time in the light of dyslexia scheduled to become detached from the (UK) Disabled Students' Allowance in the near future and hence the access to extensive additional support, technology and other 'reasonable adjustments' is likely to be withdrawn, or at best dispersed to other agencies in universities. Hence the research may contribute to an expected raised level of discourse about creating more inclusive curricula that supports a social justice agenda by arguing for a wider provision of undifferentiated learning development that is fully accessible and actively promoted to the complete, coherently integrated student community in HE - that is, following a universal design for learning agenda.

The key research focus will test the hypothesis that, for a significant proportion of students with dyslexia, it is their awareness about their dyslexia that has a more significant impact on their academic agency rather than the learning differences that the dyslexic condition itself may present. This is important to explore not only because attributes of academic agency and in particular, academic confidence, are increasingly widely reported as markers of future academic achievement but also because it further raises the issue of how to tackle the 'dilemma of difference' (Norwich 2010) especially as in many studies, dyslexia has been shown to be negatively correlated with both academic confidence and academic achievement (eg: Barrett, 2005, Asquith, 2008, Sanders et al, 2009) suggesting that there may be inter-relationships to tease out.

The process that has been designed to explore this research agenda is by collecting primary data through an 80-item, self-report electronically delivered questionnaire which collects elements of personal information such as gender, learning status and learning difference disclosure, together with 8 Likert scales designed to measure:

- academic behavioural confidence - a metric developed by Sander & Sanders (2006) to explore university students' approaches to their learning;
- 6 psychometric attributes measuring associated factors to academic confidence and learning efficacy that have been developed as a legacy of the project's pilot study (Dykes, 2008)
- dyslexia index - this is an especially developed profiler based on 'at the chalkface' data collected from university dyslexia support and learning development tutors which is designed to act as the key discriminator for finding students with unidentified dyslexia-like learning profiles.

One final section of the questionnaire provides a free-writing area where respondents are encouraged to unload their thoughts, feelings, issues or anything else that they want to verbalise relating to their studies

at university, particularly for those with identified dyslexia, how their learning difference impacts on their studies and their university experience.

Data collected will be visualized using new web technologies available in HTML5 which will be presented on the project's webpages and which will aid the exploration and analysis of the data.

References

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