

RESEARCH PAPER

Putting inclusion into practice: Designing out Personal Learning Plans for students with mild to moderate dyslexia

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Abstract

This paper reports on a pilot study conducted in the Environmental and Geographical Sciences Undergraduate Network. The aim was to trial learning support for students with mild to moderate dyslexia without the need for a formal Personal Learning Plan (PLP) by ensuring that their needs were met through the provision of an inclusive curriculum. We report on the administrative processes and staff training necessary to ensure the smooth

running of the trial. Data gathered through staff self-evaluation, a staff survey, and student feedback from informal interviews are presented, and indicate that the trial has been successful. While the administrative burden has not changed appreciably, there is good evidence to suggest that disability awareness has improved and that teaching practices have become more inclusive as a result of the project. We briefly outline plans to develop and implement a new Faculty-wide policy around Personal Learning Plans based on the outcomes of this study.

Background

At MMU, Personal Learning Plans PLPs are the most visible method by which the University demonstrates its commitment to making the ‘reasonable adjustments’ necessary to ensure that disabled students get the learning support they need. Over the past few years, it has become increasingly apparent that the value of producing PLPs for students with mild to moderate dyslexia - the biggest group for whom PLPs are produced and circulated - is limited (Figure 1), with most of the recommendations for support being identical, and academic staff feeling overwhelmed with the sheer number of documents in circulation.

Academic year	Number of students with dyslexia	% of disabled students at MMU
2008-09	1287	71
2009-10	1186	65
2010-11	1139	59

Figure 1: MMU students with dyslexia as a proportion of the total number of disabled MMU students

In addition, the University’s Disability Network had identified the need to widen the debate about the value of developing inclusive curricula, inclusive teaching practice and ‘barrier-free design’ (Doyle and Robson 2002). As such, a sub-group of the University Disability Network was formed to identify a possible way forward and this project is the result.

Inclusive practice in the context of HE is really all about developing policies and practices that reduce barriers to learning and participation, and pay

dividends, to the whole population of students (Silver *et al.* 1998, Fuller *et al.* 2004, Williams and Quinn 2007). Therefore, although this project was ostensibly aimed at a relatively small cohort within the MMU student population, it was hoped that the outcomes would provide a springboard for developing and implementing a fully inclusive curriculum, and changing the way that academic staff think about inclusion in the classroom. In the long run, non-disabled students are likely to benefit significantly from inclusive practices such as the provision of learning materials in advance, better management of collaborative work, increased flexibility and variety in assessment and teaching practices (Smith 1997, Healey 2003, Wray 2003, Angelides and Aravi 2007). Evaluation of the project by the students, academic staff, administrative and support staff involved was critical in determining the viability of expanding the project across the whole university.

The overall aim of this pilot project then, was to trial support for students with a mild to moderate dyslexia without the need for a formal Personal Learning Plan (PLP), by ensuring that their needs were met through the development of an inclusive curriculum.

Implementation

In January 2011, a steering group was set up as a working group of the University Disability Network. This group reports to the Diversity and Equal Opportunities Committee (DEOC), but is also informed by Faculty Disability Groups which feed into Faculty Student Experience Groups. The steering group comprised:

- Rita Lewin (Chair) - Head of Student Employability and Success
- Nahida Shabbir - Manager of the Learner Development Service
- Dawn Nicholson – Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow, manager of the pilot in Science and Engineering
- Mike Gorman - Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow, manager of the pilot in Art and Design
- Kath Botham - Centre for Learning and Teaching

Initially, it was envisaged that pilots would take place in the Faculties of Science and Engineering *and* Art and Design, but the latter was postponed and will now start with the new cohort of students in September 2012. The

Science and Engineering pilot focused on first year undergraduate students who entered the university in September 2011, and who took programmes in the Environmental and Geographical Sciences (EGS) Undergraduate Network. In this Level Four year cohort, six students were identified by the Learner Development Service as having mild to moderate dyslexia. The EGS Network was supported by around 25 academic staff. For pragmatic reasons and to ensure consistency of experience, we excluded Combined Honours students from the process as well as students taking other courses that are only partially delivered within the pilot programmes.

The project was managed through four phases:

Project development

In the initial phase, appropriate reasonable adjustments were drawn together from previous PLPs and used as the basis upon which to develop some simple, standardised information sheets for staff and students. These set out the adjustments that would be delivered as standard, in the inclusive curriculum. They also set out student responsibilities and important contact and support information. A much more in-depth document was also prepared that explains the rationale for each adjustment, and highlights examples of good practice in each case. All of these documents are available on the project web site at http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/disability_guidelines/plpproject/index.php.

Staff training and development

The next step was to brief all of the administrative and management staff involved and to provide training for all academic staff. This took the form of:

- Initial meetings with key programme staff in the Faculty with the aim of cascading information about the project and support for implementation within teaching teams.
- Meetings with administrative and support staff (e.g. IT Services, Library, Exams Officers, centre for Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement, Centre for Learning and Teaching, Coursework receipting Office) to discuss procedures. We wanted to ensure that all parties involved in the process were on board, with sufficient information, guidance and support to fulfil their responsibilities and obligations. We also took on board feedback from members of the University Disability Network.

- A half-day training workshop for all academic staff involved, plus Learner development Advisors, and support staff. The training session covered the legislative framework, the condition of dyslexia and its impact upon learning, reasonable adjustments and the rationale for each, the project context. Training was delivered by the project team and included support and academic staff.

Implementation and monitoring

During the implementation phase, the chief concern was to ensure that students had a point of contact to whom they could seek help if they felt that their needs were not being met. In the event, none of the students took up this provision despite being reminded about on several occasions. Academic staff were asked to complete a self-evaluation checklist half way through the academic year. The checklists were submitted anonymously to the manager of the pilot project in Science and Engineering to encourage honesty. It was intended that a cross-Faculty peer support process would also be put in place to highlight good practice in inclusive teaching but this was abandoned when the second Faculty withdrew. Academic staff were asked to highlight inclusive practice in the process of conducting their usual peer support processes, but in the event, only a couple of examples were identified.

Evaluation

Towards the end of the academic year we asked staff to complete a questionnaire survey which asked about the impact of the pilot project on teaching practice (see results section below). Each of the six students taking part in the pilot was also invited to a one-to-one, informal, semi-structured interview. Five of the students took up this opportunity.

The revised process in practice

The revised scheme worked as illustrated in Figure 2. Students who disclosed a mild to moderate dyslexia upon application, or whom were later referred, were invited to meet with Learner Development Service in the usual way. They were screened for dyslexia and then assessed by an Educational Psychologist. Students who then fell within the remit of the pilot study (i.e. first year EGS Network students with mild to moderate dyslexia) received a standard information sheet from their Learner Development Advisor instead of the usual individualised PLP. Their names were then placed on a list, which was circulated to the appropriate people. This included academic staff (the list

sits within a purpose-designed area in Moodle, along with PLPs), who would need to be able to identify these students in case they were approached to negotiate a coursework deadline or provide other one-to-one support. The Faculty Coursework Receiving Office was also notified, as they would need to administer coursework for which an extended deadline had been negotiated (and the information passed onto the Programme Office to amend the QLS student database as necessary). The Examinations Officer was also notified so that they could make provision for these students to have 25% extra time in examinations. Library staff were notified in order that these students would still be entitled to extra loan time on items borrowed from the library. However, aside from these special provisions (i.e. the possibility of negotiating deadlines, and extended loan periods on library books), all of the other reasonable adjustments included in the information sheets were made available to all students, not just to those with mild to moderate dyslexia.

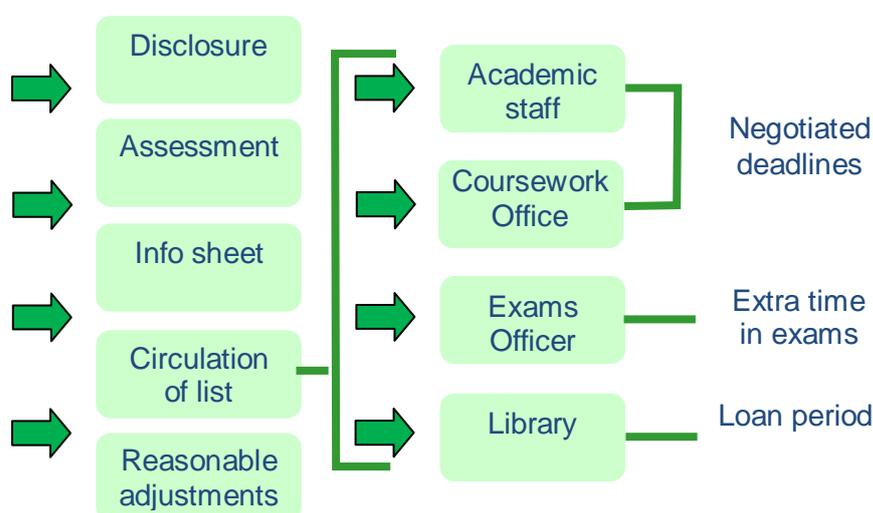


Figure 2: Schematic representation of the revised process (see text for explanation)

Results

Staff self evaluation

The self evaluation (available at http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/disability_guidelines/plpproject/index.php) sought to uncover the perceptions and experiences of academic staff in implementing the reasonable adjustments as standard in their teaching practice. Of the 25 staff who contribute to first year undergraduate teaching on the EGS Network, 13 completed the self-evaluation (48%). Key issues identified through the self evaluation are presented below.

Learning resources 48h in advance: Most staff considered that they had provided learning materials electronically in advance most of the time. They had been unable to for some of the time (or in some cases, all of the time) due to pressure of work. Two scenarios exacerbated this problem: (i) where a unit was new (particularly so for EQALised units), and (ii) where the staff member was new to MMU. Some staff do not think that students make adequate use of materials placed in Moodle in advance (e.g. they do not print out notes and bring them to the lectures or show other signs of having engaged with the materials in advance of the class). It was felt that there could be some clarity over the required timescale for uploading materials where the class was at the beginning of the week (i.e. does weekend uploading count within the 48h?).

Student questions in class: Staff didn't always feel it was necessary for them to repeat or clarify student verbal contributions because their point had been made clearly and other students appear to have heard and understood.

Discreet support: All staff felt that where they had needed to deal with individual support issues, they had done so in a discreet manner.

Time to read in class: In most cases, staff either said that they gave students sufficient time to read materials in class, or they didn't ask them to read in class (but perhaps asked them to read outside of class as part of a student's independent study). One respondent said that they took the majority as the indicator of whether everyone had received sufficient time to read materials in class or not.

Instructions in writing: Most staff felt that they had given instructions in writing, and in advance, of practical activities. Some had started to do that as a result of the project.

Time for note-taking: When asked if they gave sufficient time for students to make notes on detailed instructions and information provided verbally at the start of practical classes, most staff said yes. However, a few argued that students didn't make notes anyway, or that there wasn't sufficient time available in the session to provide extra time for those who were unable to make notes quickly enough.

In-class tests: Where staff included in-class (timed) tests in their teaching, they had always provided dyslexic students with 25% extra time.

Good practice: Respondents highlighted a number of areas of good practice:

- Paying special attention to students who appeared to be struggling in practical classes, and where necessary, arranging for additional one-to-one support from the student experience tutors.
- Discussing good practice in collaborative work with the students (i.e. in order that they were more aware of different learning styles and individual characteristics) to encourage and reinforce the value of peer support.
- The use of narrated presentations (i.e. PowerPoint presentations with pre-recorded commentary) for students who find it difficult to use notes and deliver orally at the same time, or to reduce anxiety.
- Putting the student experience at the forefront when preparing and delivering teaching.
- The use of a reader document, distributed at the start of the course, and containing lecture slides and other supporting materials for the whole of the unit.
- Giving out hard copy handouts.
- Always repeating, re-phrasing and clarifying contributions from students (this also reinforces the learning).

Staff questionnaire

Of the 25 staff contributing to first year teaching, 12 completed the staff questionnaire (44%). These are not necessarily the same staff who completed the self evaluation. Questions focussed on the project rationale and how to take it forward. The majority considered that their teaching practice had changed 'a little' or 'quite a bit' as a result of this pilot project (Figure 3) and had been encouraged to think more widely about inclusive practice (Figure 4).

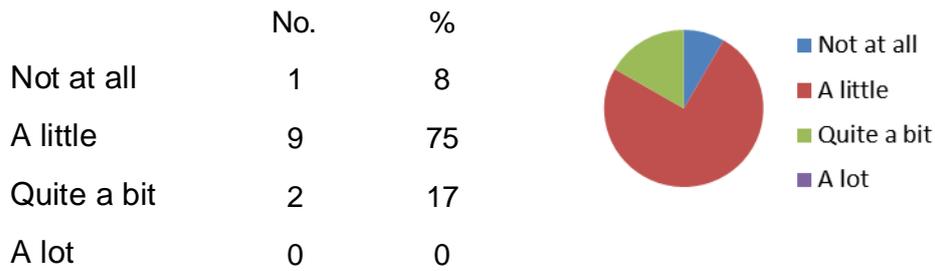


Figure 3: Has your teaching practice changed as a result of this pilot project?

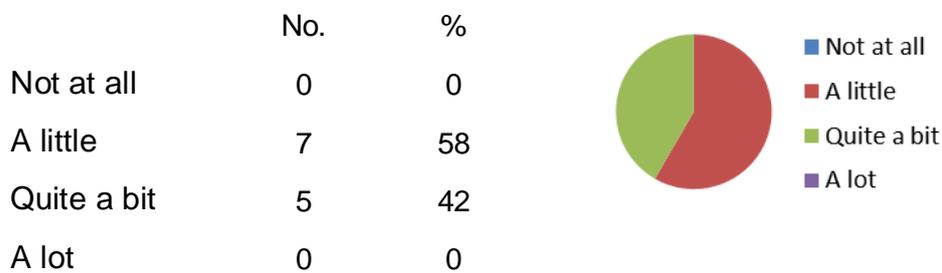


Figure 4: To what extent has the project also encouraged you to think more widely about inclusive practice (i.e. teaching that meets the needs of all students)?

Similarly, the project had encouraged the majority of staff to plan their teaching more carefully to ensure that no students are excluded from the learning experience as a result of their dyslexia (Figure 5).

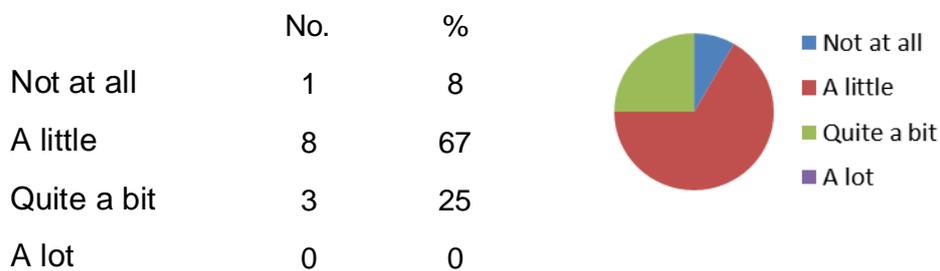


Figure 5: To what extent has this pilot project encouraged you to plan your teaching delivery more carefully to ensure that no students are excluded from the learning experience as a result of their dyslexia?

Three quarters of those responding attended the training event provided in support of the project. Even so, 50% considered that they would benefit from further information and guidance on implementation of the reasonable adjustments included in PLPs, and guidance on how best to meet the needs of students with dyslexia. When asked about rolling the project out over a wider area (to Level 3, 5, 6 and 7 students in the EGS network, across the rest of the School, the Faculty, the University), only one person disagreed that the project should become policy and be rolled out more widely. There was more support for rolling out the project across the rest of the EGS Network (67%) than there was for rolling it out more widely (50%). A quarter of all respondents were unsure about whether it was the right thing to roll the project out beyond the EGS Network (Figure 6).

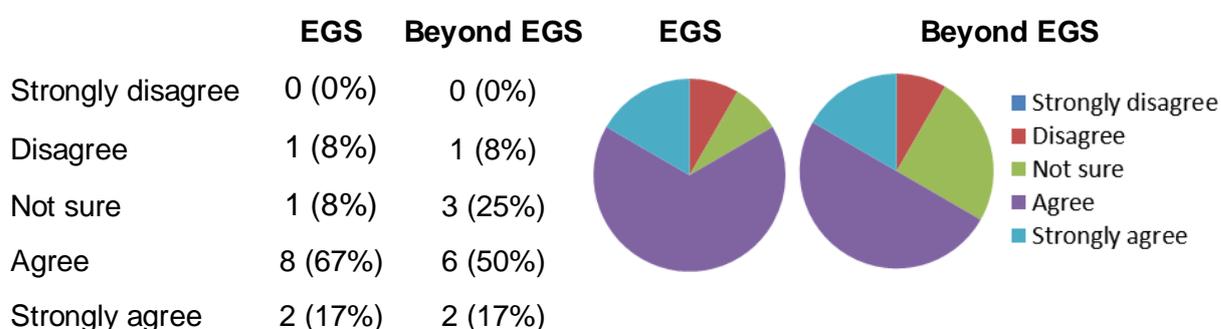


Figure 6: To what extent do you agree that this should be rolled out across the rest of the EGS Network, the rest of the School, the Faculty, the University?

Respondents provided some examples of how their teaching practice had changed as a result of the pilot project:

- Giving more one-to-one time to students who needed it (e.g. in practicals).
- Making lecture notes available online (in Moodle) 48h in advance.
- Re-considering clarity of lecture notes.
- Posting practical material as well as lecture notes in advance.
- Repetition of questions at the end or during lectures.
- Making learning resources available in Arial 12pt font / sans serif font.
- Reminding other members of the teaching team to make learning materials available in advance in Moodle.

Some respondents made further suggestions and comments and these included:

- The need to look at good practice across the curriculum to see if there are other things that can become 'normalised' in this way.
- The good practice included in here should be available to all students - students with dyslexia in other Faculties should not be treated differently.
- This approach reduces staff paperwork and does not take much staff time.
- The benefits of this approach are available for all students – not just those with dyslexia (e.g. raising awareness of diversity and encouraging tolerance).
- The need to roll out this process as a student progresses and not introduce it half way through their time here at MMU [*this has always been the project team's philosophy too*].
- We should not take students with dyslexia as the baseline for all students.
- There should be more diversity training for staff in general.

Student one-to-one interviews

Of the six students who were subject of this pilot project in the EGS network, five agreed to be informally interviewed on a one-to-one basis by Dawn Nicholson. Interviews were recorded and took place in a staff office during March 2012. Students identified a number of areas of *good practice*:

- The inclusion of breaks in longer classes.
- PowerPoint presentations that included a variety of media (e.g. a mixture of web links, video, text and graphics).
- Interactivity in lectures (including practical activities, demonstrations and mini-group activities during lectures).
- Proactive support from tutors and demonstrators during practical classes:

“When they come around [tutors] and ask you more personally, or you and your friend, if you understand - it’s better - sometimes you don’t want to put your hand up and ask for help”

- Small group tutorials with closer contact with tutors.
- Repetition and clarification (e.g. re-phrasing) of verbal questions from students and instructions (e.g. for practical classes and assessments), and provision of instructions in different modes (i.e. written and verbal).

There were further practices that were regarded as *essential* to these students:

- The provision of learning resources, in advance, electronically (i.e. in Moodle). There was some variation on the length of time that students considered to be ‘in advance’:

“It’s helpful just generally to be at least the night before because otherwise if the notes are put on in the morning and your lecture’s at nine, there’s no way you get a chance to read through it - and sometimes it’s put on that day, and then you get a chance to look through it beforehand”.

All of the students interviewed made use of online learning resources in some way. For example, they printed notes out in advance and annotated during the lecture, or just read the notes in advance, or read the notes after the lecture to improve their understanding and fill in gaps of material missed, and one downloaded the materials onto his laptop for annotating in the class. Most said they also used the resources as a longer term backup for revision and independent learning:

“I tend to read it all online anyway so I have an idea of what’s to come in the lecture so I can be prepared to write notes then if the notes don’t go up in advance, I just manage as best as I can. It does help having the notes in advance – it just does”.

- The facility to be able to audio record lectures (not for all students, but essential for all of those who recorded lectures as normal practice).

- Extra time given for exams and in-class tests. This was universally regarded as absolutely essential and most of the students said that even with this extra time they rarely / never finished writing before the time was up.

One of the issues raised was the difficulties faced when constrained to work in a particular way, or in a limited time period, thus affecting the normal pace of their working. Examples included groupwork, where students had to 'comply' with the working methods of the whole group and were unable to work at their own pace:

“you have to work in groups, and that’s always hard because I like to just go through it at my own pace”

Practical work, where the activities had to be completed within a timetabled period (but were not 'in-class tests', as such) were also problematic for the same reason. Practical classes were also challenging for some students who felt they were expected to engage in a number of different activities at the same time:

“It probably takes me slightly longer to work out what I’m doing in lab classes..... I find it easier to concentrate on one thing - when they have the small screens on the tables, the sound is coming from them and you’ve got to read from the instructions, and the lecturer is moving around, and it’s difficult.”

Emergent themes and issues

The ‘increased workload’ argument

Tensions have been identified between the requirement for staff to put in place measures that some might regard as 'extra' and therefore contribute to increased workload pressures, and the need for them to meet legal and moral obligations. Clearly, there is a need for further, ongoing education and awareness raising to resolve these views. As a starting point, we need to remember that academic staff have for many years been obliged to put in place the reasonable adjustments outlined in students' PLPs. This project has simply asked that those adjustments be put in place for all instead of the few. For most adjustments this results in no additional time commitment (e.g.

clarifying questions from other students in class). For others, there is a potential *reduction* in workload. For instance, it is easier, and takes less time, to make learning resources available to a whole cohort of students in Moodle, than it is to set up groups and groupings, and selectively release those materials to a small number of named individuals. But we can go on from this baseline and suggest that there is a need for academic staff to look for efficiencies (e.g. a reader document, narrated PowerPoint presentations), share good practice, and make better use of student peer support mechanisms.

Making assumptions

The temptation to make assumptions about students' learning processes and opting for a 'majority rule' approach is strong, particularly when there are time pressures on classroom activity. It is evident that the majority are commonly used as a gauge to judge if a cohort have completed a reading task, or finished taking notes, for example. Alternatively, and again with time pressures to consider, it can be easy to fall into the trap of judging students' comprehension based on our own. So if a student asks a question in class that we hear and understand clearly, we make the assumption that the same is true for the rest of the cohort. However, this approach does not just potentially exclude and isolate students with mild to moderate dyslexia, but also can impact upon students with a hearing impairment, mental health conditions, English as a second language, dexterity difficulties, other learning difficulties, or even just have a weak vocabulary. The solution is to avoid making assumptions about the cohort and their learning processes and modify practice such that all students can engage with an equal chance of success. But it is also good practice to build more time into a classroom activity – to clarify, to re-phrase, to give people a chance to think and reflect upon their learning. It is likely that some of the time pressures perceived to preclude such practice stem from tutor-centred teaching practices that focus on information delivery rather than real student-centred learning.

Student support

The evidence suggests that there is considerable scope for making much better use of other sources of student support in the classroom. Making use of student experience tutors in laboratory classes, for instance, can provide that one-to-one support that academic staff are unable to give. Peer support, through effective group working practices can also be very effective in meeting the needs of students who need that additional one-to-one attention. Peer support can be encouraged if the level of general disability awareness is raised through instruction. Increased disability and diversity awareness is not

only a useful mechanism for student-to-student support in the classroom but also a valuable life skill (Hockings 2010). In a nutshell, teaching practices that place the student at the forefront of decision making and curriculum planning and delivery are more likely to result in effective support processes for those that need them. High quality, effective teaching is about learning, and the learner, not about the teacher and the content.

Conclusions and recommendations

Stated success criteria

In the original project definition, the stated success criteria for the project were:

- That the student participants feel that they have been supported in the learning environment. There is evidence that this is the case from the interviews.
- That academic staff involved in the project can demonstrate a good understanding of what is meant by 'inclusive curricula' and benefit from having fewer PLPs to deal with. It is not entirely clear that the reduction in bureaucracy has had a significant impact on staff because of the small number of PLPs involved in this case. However, feedback from the questionnaire suggests that most staff have benefited in terms of their understanding of inclusive curriculum and have embedded new or modified practices in their teaching as a result.
- That the project is adopted as standard procedure across the University, if appropriate. This is addressed below.

The way forward: Phase two

Following a presentation of the outcomes of the project to the Faculty of Science and Engineering Executive Group, it has been agreed that the Faculty will adopt the approach set out in the project as new policy. The policy will roll out across the Faculty at Levels 3 and 4 from September 2012, and that all academic staff in the Faculty who have a teaching role (including Associate Lecturers), will undergo a bespoke two-hour training session delivered by Dawn Nicholson and the Learner Development Advisors. The training will focus on dyslexia and how it manifests itself in student learning, and on appropriate reasonable adjustments and their implementation. At the time of writing, around two-thirds of staff have undergone this training and further sessions are planned in September and October. During the course of

the forthcoming academic year, School Disability Coordinators will work with the project team to gather data from staff and students to enable an evaluation of the implementation of this new Faculty-wide policy.

Beyond phase two

It is the hope of the Learner Development Service that if the Faculty roll-out reaches a successful conclusion, a recommendation will be made to consider an institutional roll-out (possibly in stages to make the workload associated with training more manageable) thereafter.

Dissemination of the project outcomes

The outcomes of the project have been reported to Faculty Executive group and Faculty Academic Development Committee. A written report will be presented to the Diversity and Equal Opportunities Committee and the University Disability Network in October 2012. A one-hour workshop was presented at the Annual Conference of the National Association of Disability Practitioners in Oxford in June. There is a project web site (http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/disability_guidelines/plpproject/index.php) that hosts all of the supporting resources for the project including:

- Training documents and project documentation
- Information sheet for students setting out what they can expect in different learning contexts (e.g. in lectures, practical sessions, fieldwork, assessment etc.), what is expected from them, and where they can go for advice and support. (second click)
- Information sheet and FAQs for staff
- Detailed and very practical guidance document for academic staff which builds on the student information sheet by providing a rationale (explanation as to why reasonable adjustments are needed for students with dyslexia), and providing examples of good practice in each case.

If you would like further information about the project or would like to host a workshop or seminar on the topic please contact one of the project team.

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