

# **Experiences of Students with Dyslexia in Higher Education in England**

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of

Liverpool for the degree of Ed.D. in Higher Education

by Randal Lloyd Eplin

Original Submission: May 29, 2019

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## **Thesis Declaration**

### **Statement 1:**

I hereby declare that this work has not been accepted in substance for any degree and is not currently being submitted in candidature for any degree.

Candidate Name: Randal L. Eplin

Date: May 29, 2019

Original Submission: May 29, 2019

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### **Statement 2:**

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by references.

Candidate Name: Randal L. Eplin

Date: May 29, 2019

Original Submission: May 29, 2019

Current Resubmission: March 29, 2021

### **Abstract**

Title: Experiences of Students with Dyslexia in Higher Education in England

Dyslexia is a learning disability that can be characterized by difficulties in reading, word recognition and spelling. Such difficulties create learning challenges for students diagnosed with dyslexia. As a result, students with such disabilities would need specialized support in learning environments. Some universities have made positive inroads by enrolling students with dyslexia and establishing centres that assist such students. There is research that identifies varying degrees of support for students with dyslexia but very little research on how students have responded to the support provided. Using phenomenology as the research methodology, this thesis explores the experiences of nine students with a diagnosis of dyslexia at a university in England. In addition, the study explores academic staff members' experiences with students diagnosed with dyslexia. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information from the participants. Thematic analysis was used to identify the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Four main findings were identified. First, tutoring was discovered to be a very effective form of support. Second, the ability to self-regulate and seek out help on their own was important. Third, students and academic staff called for the need for 'inclusive practices.' Fourth, the speed at which services could be accessed could be improved. There were notable variations in students' experiences as well as how academic staff understood issues related to supporting students with a diagnosis of dyslexia. Finally, implications for practice are explored with practical suggestions on how this research can be applied in higher education settings desiring to implement ways to assist students with dyslexia.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

In a university where students are presented with the opportunity to study in higher education (HE) with equal access as well as differentiation designed to meet their needs without the student feeling singled out or stigmatized, it is important to consider the voices of these students in order to determine our success in creating a world where equal access is realized and students are successful in higher education. As it is important that all students enjoy equal access to study in higher education, the focus of this research is to consider the voices of students with dyslexia, and gain some insights from faculty on how they support students with dyslexia. Due to the expansion of higher education, I began to think about how effective current support structures are for students with dyslexia. I also considered how useful student and academic faculty-derived information could be for universities that want to improve their services for students with dyslexia and for universities that are building student support services programs and desire to implement contemporary best practices when developing supports for disabled students. In this thesis I explore the experiences of students with dyslexia and the academic staff who teach students with dyslexia at a Russell Group university in England.

In order to begin to understand the challenges facing students with dyslexia, one must first understand the condition's meaning. Dyslexia is an often misunderstood term used to identify reading problems. This is evidenced by trying to find one common definition of dyslexia. There are definitions that capture the different aspects and challenges that people with dyslexia face each day. Let's begin by defining that the word dyslexia is made up of two different parts: 'dys' meaning not or difficult, and 'lexia' meaning words, reading, or language (Catts & Kamhi, 2005). While this quite literally defines dyslexia as difficulty with words, the definition of dyslexia must also include reading, writing, spelling, and speaking. The challenge



of defining dyslexia is best described by Danermark (2001) who illustrates this challenge by sharing that “in order to be able to speak of dyslexia, we need to live in a society based on reading and writing. This does not mean that dyslexia is merely a social construct. Both the brain dysfunctions and the characteristics of our society constituted necessary conditions for the phenomenon we call dyslexia” (p.58). As we continue to discuss and define dyslexia we must understand that “the degree of difficulty a person has with reading, spelling and/or speaking varies from person to person due to inherited differences in brain development as well as the type of teaching the person receives” (International, 2017, p. 2). My definition of dyslexia for the purposes of this research is further explored in chapter two by looking not only at the neurobiological aspect of dyslexia, but also the social model of dyslexia, as well as considering theorists who do not believe that dyslexia even exists.

This is a topic that deserves a careful consideration as we discuss its implications in the lives of students with dyslexia in higher education. With dyslexia comprising up to 10% of the world’s population (Smythe, 2011), it is important to consider and discuss its history, definition, and the implications of the services that are provided to meet the needs of dyslexic students in Higher Education Institutions. It is not the purpose of the research to explore the challenges of determining the best definition for dyslexia. What is important is that many students with dyslexia have already developed coping mechanisms that help them with course work, yet there are others who might benefit from improved provision for students with dyslexia (Prevett, 2013). Understanding the challenges and problems associated with developing provisions offers students with dyslexia a chance to be successful in higher education learning environments, and this research helps to further the goals of the Access and Participation Plan 2021 to 2024-25 for the university, which include providing opportunities for all students as well as students with

disabilities. This chapter continues by sharing the statement of the problem, the study objectives, the justification and importance of the study, my context as a researcher, and closes with a preview of each chapter that shares a glimpse of what is ahead.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Some universities have made positive inroads by enrolling students with dyslexia and establishing centres that assist such students with support in place, however there is very little research on how students have responded to the support provided (Pino, 2014; Prevett, 2013; Mortimore, 2013). The problem is that not much is known about how students with dyslexia cope or respond to interventions designed to assist their learning. It is important to understand and study how students respond because, without this data, the educational community is unable to develop more effective tools that empower student success in HE and over the course of their lives. In addition, there is little existing research on how HE faculty perceive students with dyslexia as well as their conceptions about their dyslexic students' experiences (Pino, 2014; Mortimore, 2013). The information provided by this dissertation's research participants might allow us insights into the effectiveness of the support being used. If other support is not helping students to become successful, the resources utilized can be moved to other support structures that are highly successful in assisting students. The focus of this research is to listen intently to students and academic faculty to discover what is working and to identify what might need to be improved.

### **1.2 Study objective**

The main objective of this study was to investigate the experiences of students with dyslexia and the involvement of academic staff who work with students with dyslexia at a university in England. This study was guided by the following research questions:

### Specific Research Questions

1. What are dyslexic students' experiences of the support provided to them by the university?
2. What are academic faculty's experiences of teaching students diagnosed with dyslexia at the university?
3. What are the possibilities identified for improvement in terms of the delivery of services for students with dyslexia?

### **1.3 Justification and Importance of the Study**

Some universities are more inclusive and as a result enrol and support students with dyslexia, while other universities are considering providing such support. It is important to explore and understand students with dyslexia and how they perceive their HE experiences as this provides insights regarding what is working well and what might need to be improved. Students with dyslexia also interact with their peers and academic staff in their learning environments. It is with this in mind that I also explored academic staff's understanding and involvement of the experiences of students with dyslexia. The findings might help inform any university that serves students with dyslexia on areas that can be strengthened to support both students and academic staff in order to ensure positive student experiences and success. I also

view the issue of diversity and inclusion in HE as a social justice issue. The reason for this has to do with a sense of fairness regarding equity and access to an education at university.

#### **1.4 Social Justice Theory**

The concept of social justice is important because this research addresses social justice and equity challenges in HE. Rawls (2001) describes social justice as fairness and as concerned with

... assuring the protection of equal access to liberties, rights, and opportunities, as well as taking care of the least advantaged members of society. Thus, whether something is just or unjust depends on whether it promotes or hinders equality of access to civil liberties, human rights, opportunities for healthy and fulfilling lives, as well as whether it allocates a fair share of benefits to the least advantaged members of society (p. 12).

One initiative that addresses social justice in education is the concept of inclusion. Although the definition of inclusion varies greatly, the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion in the United States has developed the following working definition of inclusive education:

Inclusion is the provision of services to students with disabilities, including those with severe impairments, in the neighborhood school, in age-appropriate general education classes, with the necessary support services and supplementary aids (for the child and the teacher) both to assure the child's success – academic, behavioral, and social skills and to prepare the child to participate as a full and contributing member of the society (Lipsky & Gartner, 1995, p. 3).

According to Grima-Farrell, Bain and McDonagh (2011), “Inclusive education represents a whole-school concern and works to align special education with general education in a manner that most effectively and efficiently imparts quality education to all students” (p.118). Forlin (2012) further suggests that the issue of equity has been a major force internationally, underpinning the movement and marking a shift to a more inclusive educational

system. In this way, inclusion can be described as meeting the educational needs of students who do not reflect certain norms or who learn differently. The concept of inclusion is related to social justice because it is an equity and access issue for students with dyslexia. This is relevant to my research because it is important to widen access for students who, without support, would not even consider university enrolment. Hence, discovering what does and does not work when providing support for students with dyslexia can inform and further improve such support. The theory of inclusion challenges professionals who might ignore a student from their class because they learn differently by providing academic staff with simple yet manageable strategies to use when teaching, thereby empowering the student to meet a course's instructional objectives. The focus of this study is to capture the experiences of both students with dyslexia at a university in England and academic staff members who teach them by looking at the data and describing the levels of support that have most effectively helped students with dyslexia experience success.

### **1.5 My Context as a Researcher**

My motivation as a researcher from the USA started over thirty years ago with a desire to help students who were not easy to work with. I have devoted my entire career in education to helping students that others find difficult and challenging to teach. I became particularly interested in helping students reverse reading failure in the early years of my career and then worked in a high school setting providing support for students diagnosed with dyslexia. After working in schools in my home country, I began the journey of living and working overseas and discovered that international schools were in the beginning stages of developing support for students with dyslexia.

An opportunity was presented, and with my expertise, I was able to set up a special needs programme in an international school earlier in my career. This is an area that has now expanded exponentially in more than 6,000 international schools worldwide. At this point in my career, I will not work in a school that does not provide support for students with mild to moderate learning challenges. Hence, in this area of research, it does not surprise me that my HE journey finds me researching in the area of dyslexia and determining to what extent we are helping students experience success in HE and ultimately in life.

The proposed study was motivated by a sincere desire to listen to the experiences of students with dyslexia and academic staff and then used an empirical approach to analyse the data that was collected. Having spent thirty years in K-12 education, my HE experiences have spanned a period of fifteen years while I am presently serving as the director of the Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary extension in Asia. In these settings I have worked with HE students from a variety of backgrounds with learning challenges that they share, often drawing on stories of failure in the K-12 system. This has motivated me to build a program that is more inclusive and supportive of different types of learners. Hence, from my background, I am a constructivist and believe in social justice for students who do not always fall into the normal or comfortable range for teaching and learning.

As I continue to reflect on myself as a researcher, I have also been involved in ministry activity as an assistant pastor as well as a pastor of an international congregation in Tallinn, Estonia. During my pastoring days, I worked with many adults who needed help to varying levels in either preparing for HE courses, or in providing tutoring for students for the TEOFL exam or the IELTS exam. This preparation also made me keenly aware of the challenges that students face when applying to HE courses. Most of the people that I worked with desired to

further their education, but they would see insurmountable obstacles on their road to improving their skills and applying for university. I found myself as an advocate for my congregants. This is the passion behind my motivation to conduct this research because I desire to uncover what is needed for all students to be successful in HE in order to include more students and thereby support their education.

## **1.6 Thesis Chapter Overview**

Chapter 1: Introduction. The introduction described the background of the problem being investigated and continued by examining the understanding of dyslexia, the statement of the problem, the study objective, and the research questions. Also shared was the justification for the study as well as its importance. Finally, this chapter closed with an exploration of social justice theory and the context of the researcher.

Chapter 2: Literature Review. The literature review evaluates the studies that underwrite the research project's formulation of the research problem, the research question, and the significance of the study. The literature review also presents the theoretical framework that informs this dissertation's data analysis and interpretation.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods. In this chapter, the methods and procedures used in the study are discussed in a way that may enable future researchers to replicate this study. The steps are described in order for the reader to be able to follow them clearly. Hence, this chapter outlines how the research questions are going to be answered while the ethical guidelines followed in the data collection process are reviewed and discussed.

Chapter 4: Results. This chapter presents and discusses the data collected for the thesis. The major themes are also presented, summarized, and described in this section. The data are presented, and the results of the analysis are shared.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the Findings. This final chapter evaluates the research alongside outlining personal insights in relation to the major findings while also discussing the implications of the study's results. This chapter also addresses the problems that initiated the study and it interprets the study's results in light of existing findings in the field. This study also explores the implications for practice, thereby addressing explicitly the problems identified in the data analysis.



## Chapter 2. Literature Review

In this chapter the topic of dyslexia is critically explored by first discussing its definition as it relates to provisions for support for students with dyslexia in higher education. The current trends affecting HE for students with dyslexia in the United Kingdom will also be considered and examined. The literature in this field is then explored in order to inform this study, thereby highlighting gaps and the necessity for more research to be conducted regarding serving students in higher education who have dyslexia.

HE trends are also explored by examining what is current in the United Kingdom regarding recent laws passed that effect the funding and subsequently the provision for students with special needs in HE. Further explored are social justice and inclusion, capability theory, and a review of literature in the field of inclusion in HE and dyslexia student support in HE. As our world gets smaller and HE services continue to expand around the world, surveying and exploring best practice has the potential to benefit thousands of students as access to HE expands.

### 2.1 What is Dyslexia?

As we continue to develop an understanding of disability, it is important to have knowledge of the challenges facing students with dyslexia in HE. In order to further this understanding, one must consider and discuss the meaning of dyslexia keeping in mind that the purpose of this research is not to solve the debate, but rather to uncover and identify opportunities for support that is inclusive of students with dyslexia. This discussion, which started in chapter 1, continues by sharing the neurobiological definitions of dyslexia and then continues by presenting the social model of disability. The

discussion of dyslexia must be based upon evidence (Protopapas & Parrila, 2018). This evidence must be grounded in research on what we currently know about dyslexia. The reason that this evidence is important is so we are not so quick to place a label of dyslexia on a student because their brain functions differently, meaning that some students simply have difficulty learning how to read. In a society that places such a heavy emphasis on literacy in order to achieve success, it is important to consider how we define dyslexia as we continue to address how to help people who do not learn to read in traditional ways nor with the speed that others learn.

The history of dyslexia and its study examines how this challenge was perceived years ago by describing it as 'word blindness' (Shawitz, 2003). In surveying this history, word blindness meant that students had difficulty with words and were not able to pronounce words and read, yet they seemed intelligent and capable. Looking at some of the literature, it appears that there is no one shared definition. Despite over 100 years of research, dyslexia continues to be controversial because of the failure to agree on a common definition and its underlying causes (Smythe, 2011). The British Psychological Society (1999), and subsequently the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Reid et al., 2003), include a working definition of what students with dyslexia are challenged with on a daily basis: "Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities" (p. 2). This definition points to some kind of pathological problem that exists in the brain and that affects the central nervous system. As we consider the neurobiological definition of dyslexia, let's make a comparison in order to consider the weight of the label of dyslexia on a person. As an

example, if you are born without the skill of being able to play sports, you do something else with your life and you are not given a label that marks you with the inability to play sports. But if you are born into this world and are determined to not be so good at reading, you have the potential of being labelled with a problem that you were born with that is neurobiological in origin and that problem is dyslexia.

Although the neurobiological definition has been used to define dyslexia in the past several decades, it is important to continue our discussion in the search of a definition of dyslexia by investigating the social model of disability. This particular view causes us to take a wider perspective regarding those who are challenged with learning how to read. The social model of disability, which arose in the 1970s, argues “that people are disabled by discrimination and prejudice” (Riddick, 2001, p. 225). Shakespeare and Warren (1998) identify a problem with the existing literature on disabled childhood by arguing that “Disability is defined as a problem, within a model which is individualistic and medicalized” (p. 225). It may be that the reason for debates on a solid definition of dyslexia stem from dyslexia being seen from a medical perspective (Tonnessen, 1999). Hence a deficit model of dyslexia was applied, and this offered little hope of actual effective support (Riddick, 2001). When a deficit model of dyslexia is applied, the focus is not on what the student could do, but on the negative aspects as what the student cannot do.

We must focus on what people with dyslexia can do as well as on providing a positive learning environment for students. For example, Corrigan (2002) suggests that someone with dyslexia can be particularly intuitive and creative. Others with dyslexia have entrepreneurial gifts or athletic abilities that are quite remarkable. We must consider

the positive gifting of students with dyslexia as a focus; we should also be looking at the learning environment that is provided for students with dyslexia. Is this environment positive and supportive for our students with dyslexia? Hence, we should look at and illuminate the disabling nature of the environment and not only the disabling challenges of the individual person, which seems to have been the norm when working with and providing supports for students with dyslexia. In this research we explore the disabling nature of the individual aspects of dyslexia while also looking at the challenges and nature of the environment. Dyslexia is a complex challenge, as already stated, and debate continues about its definition as well as its root causes.

## **2.2 Understanding Disability Services in HEIs in the United Kingdom**

The process of the literature review involved collecting and including information that describes the context of services for students and specifically dyslexia in England and not around the world. Because this study was conducted at an undisclosed university in England, the challenges and opportunities identified are unique to England. HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency) reports the fact that the number of student enrolments increased by 3% from 2018/19 to 2019/20, and further reports that the number of first year postgraduate taught students increased by 10% from 2018/19 to 2019/20. HE Institutions in the UK have seen a steady increase in disability disclosure from about 5% in 2003/04 to 12.0% in 2016/17 (Office for Students, n.d.). HESA further reports that in the context of widening participation for disabled students, the percentage of students in receipt of Disabled Students' allowance has risen from 6.8% in 2015/16 to 7% in 2019/20. The Student Support Office at the university (where data was collected) indicated on its website that they are committed to supporting

students and will work directly with students to identify and implement individual reasonable adjustments. The university further states that they aim to reduce disadvantages faced by students as a result of their disabilities. The Office for Students also works with higher education providers as an independent regulator in England to make sure that students succeed in higher education (Office for Students, n.d.). This office has certain regulatory functions that were set out in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. The Office for Students ensures that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers (Office for Students, n.d.). Given the work of the Office for Students and the stated commitment by the university, it is evident that there are efforts to minimize challenges faced by students as a result of their disabilities. The university further listed on its website examples of support they provide that include program-centred support, exam support, library support, campus accessibility, specialist equipment, non-medical help support, specialist study support and mental health advisory service.

In order to further understand the context of serving students with dyslexia in the United Kingdom, it is also important to consider the history and context of serving students with disabilities in the United Kingdom.

Since the 1981 Education Act, there has been a strong movement to integrate students with special needs into mainstream schools (Merry & Wei, 1998). The 1994 Code of Practice outlines how schools must have a detailed management policy and a special needs coordinator to ensure that the policy is carried out. However, there is an emphasis on managing special education through a separate system, and this translates into very little deliberate integration of children with special needs into mainstream schools (Merry & Wei, 1998).

United Kingdom HEIs are required by law to serve students with disabilities. The UK Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 defines a person as having a disability as follows: “s/he has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his/her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities” (Taylor, 2005, p. 22). As the United Kingdom HEI disability discrimination laws continue to evolve and develop over time, the Equality Act 2010 (the Act) represents the culmination of years of debate about how to improve British equality law. It offers individuals stronger protection against discrimination. The Act also gives education providers, employers and businesses greater clarity about their responsibilities, and it sets a new expectation that public services must treat everyone with dignity and respect (Equality and Human Rights Commission, n.d.). The Act specifically makes it unlawful for a further or higher education institution to discriminate against an applicant or student in relation to admissions, the provision of education, and access to any benefit, facility or service (1 Section 91(10)(d) Equality and Human Rights Commission – [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com) 32).

The Equality Act 2010 is further discussed in the Technical Guidance on Further and Higher Education document and the Act makes it unlawful for a further or higher education institution to harass or victimize an applicant or student. The Equality Act further changes the type of support for Disabled Students (Technical Guidance on Further and Higher Education, pp. 31-2). Disabled Students Allowances (DSA) have traditionally supported individual learner needs but the aforementioned changes mean that many new students will no longer be entitled to less specialist non-medical support via DSAs. The practical effect of this is that HEIs will have a greater role in relation to fulfilling their duty in respect of reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. The shift away from supporting individual learners via DSAs means that

HE providers must further develop a more strategic and flexible approach to delivering inclusive practice, accepting that there will be the need for individual adjustments (Inclusive Teaching, 2017, p.11). This specifically effects students with dyslexia who were receiving disability student allowances to fund tutoring services or aid in the purchase of software or hardware.

The risks associated with the requirement on HEPs (higher education providers) to provide 'reasonable adjustments' under the Equality Act 2010 suggests "actions to mitigate those risks" (Inclusive Teaching, 2017, p.9). The aim of the Inclusive Teaching Report is to drive forward necessary changes across the sector and to advise on ways of ensuring the good practice, which has already been developed in many HEPs, is spread across the sector (Inclusive Teaching, 2017, p. 9). The guidance outlines why change is needed and how it will benefit a HE provider, as well as providing support to HEPs in implementing reasonable adjustments and reducing risk by providing inclusive teaching and learning, an approach which recognises and values the diversity of the student body (Inclusive Teaching, 2017, p. 10). As stated in the *Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a Route to Excellence* document, there are four key areas in which inclusive practice will benefit HEPs:

- External scrutiny: It will remediate key issues around differential outcomes for students from different backgrounds. As a sector, our challenges around disabled, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), mature, international and Widening Participation (WP) students are all partially addressed by this methodology. These are core to our successful meeting of Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) expectations, and in Access Agreements.

- Equality Act 2010 and Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs): The changes to DSAs expose HE providers to the need to address the full expectations of the Public Sector Equality Duty and Equality Act 2010. A student who learns inclusively may need no further adjustment to enable them to study effectively.
- Cost saving: Students who thrive are less costly to an HE provider than those who do not. Inclusive learning is a demonstrably effective tool in enabling students to succeed in study.
- Reputational enhancement: Inclusive practice has the capacity to enhance the standing and reputation of an HE provider in learning and teaching (Inclusive teaching, pp. 9-10).

The guidance cited above responds to the changes to DSAs which affect English domiciled students who are eligible to receive Disabled Students' Allowances from Student Finance England (Inclusive teaching, 2017, p. 11). The UK Government announced changes which will affect English domiciled students who apply for Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) for the first time for academic year 2016/17. Students who are already in receipt of DSAs will not be affected (Inclusive p.11).

As the Higher Education Academy (HEA) points out, "inclusive learning and teaching recognises all students' entitlement to a learning experience that respects diversity, enables participation, removes barriers and anticipates and considers a variety of learning needs and preferences" (Higher Education Academy, n.d.). Increasing opportunities for disabled students requires us to consider the social model of disability. This was mentioned when discussing a working definition of dyslexia, and this model emphasizes that disability is caused by the way society is organized, rather than by a person's impairment or difference and looks at ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people. When barriers are removed,



disabled people can be independent and equal in society, with choice and control over their own lives (Inclusive Teaching, 2017, p. 12).

HE providers must consider, embrace, and adopt this approach as it supports and guides the ways in which pedagogy, curricula, and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all. It embraces a view of “the individual and individual difference as the source of diversity that can enrich the lives and learning of others” (Disabled Students’ Sector Leadership Group, 2017, p.12). The Office for Students further shares that it exists to help students to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education. And they want to have the interests of students protected while they study. This office is ready to listen and hear students’ views (Office for Schools, n.d.). The current context calls for a shift in thinking and focus to one which not only advocates the social model of disability but also promotes French and Swain’s (2000) affirmation model which views disability as a normal part of diversity and views it as a matter of pride and not personal tragedy.

### **2.3 Social Justice Theory and Inclusion**

The concept of social justice becomes important to point out because my research addresses a social justice and equity challenge in higher education:

The world which people have constructed is made by and for nondisabled people; for those who can climb stairs, turn doorknobs, and faucets, see where they are going, hear voices, commit instructions and information to memory. Educational programs reflect these values (Jastram & McCombs, 1981, p. A-2).

It is important to recognize that serving students with dyslexia in higher education gives such students a chance to succeed not only at university but also in life. As has been remarked, “Striving for dignity is at the core of social justice movements” (Loewen & Pollard, 2010, p. 5).

Dignity refers to living life with a diverse worldview that allows for an inclusive and supportive environment to thrive in. People involved in the social justice movement believe that oppressed people have a right to fair treatment and a share of the benefits of society based on people's basic human rights and the equality of all people (Longmore, 2003). Institutions could perhaps explore this worldview in order to potentially expand the opportunities for students to succeed in higher education and thus achieve a better quality of life. In order to understand more fully the worldview of social justice, one must seek to understand the disability rights movement.

Understanding the disability rights movement causes the reader to understand the importance of this proposed research, so it is important to underline that the goal of the disability rights movement "has been to change the way the world is constructed so that everyone can participate in life's activities to the greatest possible extent with maximum independence" (Loewen & Pollard, 2010, p. 6). This proposed research is about preserving the dignity of students with dyslexia and helping them to gain a level of equity in higher education institutions. Students with dyslexia have the right to be treated with respect and to enjoy both social and economic equality (Loewen & Pollard, 2010). When thinking about social justice, the theory or concept of inclusion goes some way to inform this study.

Dictionary.com defines inclusion as "the act of including", and while this definition seems simplistic at first, the concept of inclusion in an educational setting invites us to think deeply about people that we could potentially be excluding simply because they have slight yet manageable differences in the way that they learn. The theory of inclusion challenges professionals who might not include or overlook a student from their class because they learn differently by providing the faculty member with simple yet manageable strategies to use, while teaching that could cause the student to meet the courses' instructional objectives.

People who support inclusion believe that it is a civil rights issue and that people with special needs deserve equal rights and access in schools when it comes to education and providing services for students (Loewen & Pollard, 2010). What is important to understand is that the original law mandating education for all students in 1975 in the United States has also gone through three revisions. Although nowhere in the law is the term ‘inclusion’ mentioned, the law continues to change and seems to indicate that special needs students should be educated in a general education classroom. This theory or concept of inclusion or ‘least restrictive environment’ is at the heart of this study.

When reading about the accounts of some students, it is disappointing to hear that some students are afraid or concerned to share with their instructor that they are dyslexic because they do not know what type of reaction or response they will receive (Riddell, Tinklin, & Wilson 2005). In the minds of some dyslexic students, it might be better for them to simply remain quiet about their disability for fear that they will be further stigmatized because of their dyslexia. In today’s modern world, this is something that should not exist, and one of the ways to discover how students are feeling is to conduct research that asks students with dyslexia directly about their experiences, both positive and negative.

It is important to further discuss the concept of inclusion when thinking about higher education in today’s world. Berlach and Chambers (2011) state that inclusive education is a contentious term that lacks a tight conceptual focus, which may contribute to its misconception and confused practice; therefore, we might conclude that in the absence of a solid definition of what inclusion includes results in it becoming difficult to compare or measure the issue of equity issue, which is indeed quite challenging in today’s world. However, in order to really and truly understand inclusion, we must put forward a definition of inclusion that we can all agree

with. According to UNESCO (2009), “an inclusive education system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive; in other words, they become better at educating all the children in their communities” (p. 8).

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes that education should be accessible at all levels within an inclusive education system. It is widely acknowledged that children with disabilities continue to experience different forms of exclusion which are very dependent on their type of disability, place of domicile, and the culture or class to which they belong (UNICEF, 2013). According to Grima-Farrell, Bain and McDonagh (2011), “inclusion education represents a whole school concern and works to align special-education with general education in a manner that is most effective and efficient and imparts a quality education to all students” (p. 118).

Loreman (2009) argues that “the majority of educators know very well what inclusion is, but it is sometimes politically expedient for them to manipulate the term to suit whatever practice they happen to be currently engaged in, be it inclusive or not” (p. 43). Nes (2009) adds that “the curriculum methods and organization are in principle to be adapted to all students in Norway without streaming or segregation but with necessary support. However, these inclusive ideals are one thing; the realization of inclusive practices in many ways has proven to be something else” (p. 305).

So, the question continues to be asked if we are simply speaking empty words or if we are truly engaged in inclusive endeavours in education. When asking if a school is inclusive, it is important to truly understand what this means and to determine if the school is dedicated to meeting the educational needs of its students. For example, Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) propose five ways of thinking about inclusion, namely: as a response to disciplinary exclusion;

in relation to all groups being vulnerable to exclusion; as developing the school for all; with education for all; and as a principal approach to education and society.

When you look at human rights agreements, covenants, or legislation that offers a variety of definitions and understandings of inclusion, based on an analysis of all the source definitions we can probably group these into two categories. The first category relates to conceptualising inclusive education based on certain key features (Berlach & Chambers, 2011), and the second category involves conceptualising inclusive education as the removal of that which excludes and marginalises (Slee, 2011).

It has become obvious that I have identified deeply with the theory of social justice and inclusion in terms of explaining and interpreting the world around us. There have been people who have been excluded for various reasons and cast aside because they are different or due to their needing something more in the form of support. When it comes to disability and a social model it is easy to demand equal access and require that laws be passed to provide equal access for all people. In different parts of the world theories of social justice rage on, whereas in other places there are high levels of discriminatory practice, particularly in relation to accepting students to university and supporting their needs. It is important to point out that in the context of globalization and higher education's internationalization, issues of social justice and providing an inclusive education are important aspects of HE's worldwide expansion. This expansion can build on what has been learnt over many decades in relation to the approaches and methods used to engage students in order to provide all of them, regardless of their challenges, with the opportunity to access higher education. The theory of social justice and inclusion is embedded in the overall research design and revealed further in the findings discussed in chapter 5.

## 2.4 Capability Theory

When focusing on impairment or obstacles to the student and her/his learning, it is important to look at capability theory and how this can inform the approach to providing educational opportunities in today's world. Capability theory concerns this research study because it relates to and informs providing access to higher education for students with dyslexia. As nations consider funding for various needs, capability theory causes us to look beyond social justice and examine each person and their ability to grow and self-actualize. Sen (1993) defines a capability as "a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; it represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be" (p. 30). Therefore, capabilities are opportunities or freedoms to achieve what a person views as valuable.

This is important as we contrast this with other ideas used when considering what is fair in terms of the distribution of resources. Previous ideas have allocated resources in relation to what is best for the society as a whole. Capability theory's central tenet is that **when we** evaluate programmes for the allocation of resources, we must look at each person, not as a means to economic growth or social stability, but as an end in themselves (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). We must expand people's capabilities in order to support people's freedom to make decisions about what they value while removing obstacles to those freedoms, thereby expanding their capabilities. One might argue that to fund a capability approach might mean allocating resources to just a few and then not have enough for everyone.

Sen (1980) asks the core question: "Equality of what?". In education, this question boils down to theorising and analysing the provision of equivalent learning opportunities (Brighouse, 2000; Ball, 2003). Sen argues that what we should equalise is not resources. We

should not demand a strict ratio of teachers to pupils, or certain outcomes, for example, that every child leaves school with a particular qualification. Sen shares that what should be equalised are human capabilities, that is “what people are able to be and do” (Walker & Unterholter, 2007, p. 3). A second core idea in the capability approach is the difference between capabilities and functionings (Sen, 1980). Functionings are the achieved outcomes, such as learning to read, talking to children, or being calm. Capabilities are the potential to achieve these functionings, for example being taught how to read, accessing books or newspapers, and having the conditions appropriate to developing potential; these are all capabilities.

Hence, the difference between a capability and a functioning is the difference between an opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement, or you could say between potential and outcome. In briefly discussing capability theory, the question arises in terms of how it connects to education. After analysing the expansion of capabilities from an educational angle, Walker (2007) suggests a framework “shaped by the following elements: a philosophical, a pedagogical, an institutional, and a policy side”, while there are many more issues that “need to be investigated to make education a real driving force for the expansion of human freedoms” (p. 61). Nussbaum (2011) adds “that ‘capabilities approach’ begins with a very simple question: What are people actually able to do and to be? What real opportunities exist for them?” (p. 62). The simplicity and complexity of this question shows that the theory might be well equipped to respond to the complexities of human life and human striving.

This new paradigm has had an impact on international agencies discussing welfare, from the World Bank to the United Nations Development Fund (Nussbaum, 2007, p. x) The idea of capability theory is to shape policy toward human developmental need while moving away from policy that reflects the bias of intellectual elites. Theory does have its place in these discussions

because the way in which resources are allocated are based on some theoretical orientations, and it is important to proffer a counter-theory in relation to the way forward. The current debate informs this research because it can have an impact on the allocation of resources for all students with special needs while specifically affecting resources currently provided for students with special needs. This is worth mentioning because this counter-theory could change and potentially improve the way resources are allocated while the research findings can potentially help to better inform and form discussions regarding allocations for student support.

## **2.5 Inclusive Practices in Higher Education**

When thinking about the practice of inclusion in higher education, Barrington (2004) argues that curriculum, assessment and teaching practices informed by socially inclusive pedagogies have the potential to meet the needs of all learners. When considering the universal participation of students in higher education, Clarke and Nelson (2014) report that universities are attracting higher numbers of students from diverse backgrounds, thus presenting an opportunity to create access and provide life changing educational experiences for prospective students. As a result of this increase in attracting students from diverse backgrounds, universities also have a responsibility to examine the way they teach in relation to inclusion and diversity (Thomas & May, 2005). Inclusive teaching and learning then plays a significant role in the success or failure of students enrolled in higher education.

Inclusive teaching and learning are methods whereby “pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all” (Hockings, 2010, p. 1). Hence, by developing and implementing inclusive methods, students with dyslexia – and indeed all students – benefit by learning the



material and experiencing success. In order to more fully understand inclusive practice, it is important to note that much of the work on this topic has focused on identifying and addressing issues relating to disability or some form of disadvantage (Adams & Brown, 2006). What this has done is to lead academics to focus more on the individual than on the environment and has resulted in a deficit model of difference, as discussed earlier.

Hockings (2011) calls for institutions to be “just inclusive and engaging of all by understanding the nuanced experiences of all students within highly diverse student groups” (p.192). Hence, maybe it is the learning environment and not the individual that needs a closer examination in order to determine if we are meeting the needs of our diverse learners. What this does is shift our understanding to a more sophisticated comprehension of diversity that incorporates a number of characteristics, including previous education, personal disposition, and current and cultural backgrounds (Thomas & May, 2010). Questions of inclusion and equity in teaching and learning have been explored by multiple higher education stakeholders in recent years. Scholars and policymakers alike have discussed the importance of widening participation in tertiary education (e.g. Bradley & Miller, 2010) and of developing campus cultures and pedagogical approaches that value, respect, and work for a wide variety of learners (e.g. Grace & Gravestock, 2009; Ouellett, 2005).

A growing body of work in the area of inclusion in higher education is emerging while Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) suggest that inclusion has become a global agenda for educational institutions, arguing that all such institutions “should concern themselves with increasing the participation and broad educational achievements of all groups of learners who have historically been marginalized” (p. 295). As we consider inclusion in higher education, a well-rounded definition is proposed by Hockings (2010), who argues that “inclusive learning

and teaching in higher education refers to the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant, and accessible to all” (p. 1). This is a definition, that, if achieved, has the potential for lowering the failure rate for students and broadening the opportunity for all students. Thomas and May (2010), for example, suggest four broad dimensions of diversity across which students might differ (educational, dispositional, circumstantial, and cultural), thereby highlighting that all students bring to bear complex constellations of attributes and experiences that vary from those of their peers and from proposed ‘normative’ standards. Like Hockings (2010), they argue for an approach to inclusion that does not target particular groups, but instead “strives towards proactively making higher education accessible, relevant and engaging to all students” (p. 5).

Academic faculty are often positioned as key players in determining the relative inclusivity of learning and teaching (e.g. Moriña Díez, López Gavira, & Molina, 2015; Thomas & Heath, 2014) while the teaching and learning context is seen as a primary site in which inclusion and exclusion are enacted (e.g. Brookfield, 2007). There are many academic faculty who implement and deliver inclusive practices in their classrooms. This impact could be even greater if inclusive practice was articulated across an entire university and has the potential to impact all learners in not just one university, but universities across an entire nation and eventually the world.

Some scholars have begun to articulate the need for integrated approaches to inclusion, approaches that might consider the roles of all members of campus communities in working towards this goal. For instance, Hockings (2010) draws from a review of existing literature to offer recommendations for senior management, instructors, students, academic developers, and student services staff, while Riddell et al. (2007) consider the experiences of administrators and

staff in working towards accessibility for disabled students. Overall, the impact of senior management and other educational leaders could actually streamline the entire process of developing and implementing inclusive practice in universities.

Although there are individual academics who implement inclusive practice for their students, Lawrie et al. (2017) survey the literature relating to inclusive practices in higher education and conclude that inclusive practices in higher education remain unresolved, meaning more educational research needs to be conducted. Inclusive practices also remain largely unrealized in practice due to the inconsistent approach to implementing inclusive practices that could help both dyslexic students as well as all disabled students in HE. The task may be especially daunting for large organizations with significant numbers of learners with widely varying identities and experiences. While absolute inclusivity can only exist in the ideal, yet it is important to point out that some academics develop and apply inclusive strategies in their teaching practice that benefit all learners in their classes. Nevertheless, the significance of the goal suggests the importance of striving continually to reach it. This was the motivational focus for Lawrie et al.'s work (p. 3).

Lawrie et al. identify and use Hockings' (2010) outlines identifying four broad areas of focus which align with the definition provided above: inclusive curriculum design, inclusive curriculum delivery, inclusive assessment, and institutional commitment to and management of inclusive learning and teaching. Broadening these four areas creates a more focused and explicit path for educators to follow in the search for more inclusive practices. Lawrie et al. (2017) have analysed a wide range of sources by bringing international experiences to bear, and sought to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent and in what ways has scholarship about inclusive learning and teaching developed since Hockings' review?
2. What gaps in the literature remain, and what do these suggest about directions for future research?

While many SoTL (Scholars of Teaching and Learning) have explored questions about accessibility and inclusion in teaching and learning, much of this work tends to focus on particular pedagogical strategies deployed at the classroom level (e.g. Dierker, Alexander, Cooper, Selya, Rose, & Dasgupta, 2016; Smith, 2012) or on educational development initiatives that support such classroom-level work (e.g. Considine, Mihalick, Mogi-Hein, Penick-Parks, & Van Auken, 2014; Glowacki-Dudka, Murray, & Concepción, 2012). While there are educators who have employed these strategies that have subsequently helped students, these efforts to employ inclusive practices and pedagogies need to be implemented across all departments and systematized throughout HEIs in order for all students to benefit from the inclusive teaching and learning that have been deployed. The articulation of educational development initiatives helping students will result in more students being helped and supported through inclusive practices across universities.

Lawrie et al. (2017) limited their search to work focusing on higher education published since 2005. They also considered works on school education, and/or written before 2005, if they appeared to be seminal. Beyond this search of the literature, they also drew on work familiar to members of the international team of authors. Based on these initial processes, sixty works were identified as relevant to the focus and reviewed, providing a preliminary understanding of broad trends in the literature. Hence Lawrie et al. (2017) like Hockings (2010) positioned their review as “illuminatory, rather than exhaustive of the field” (p. 21).

A persistent theme evident throughout the review was the multiplicity of ways in which the term ‘inclusive’ is applied. The findings draw from studies in which ‘inclusive’ is used to refer to one or more of the following ideas, amongst others:

- pedagogies should meet the diversity of learners’ needs, and should not create barriers for particular students or student groups;
- pedagogies should enable accessibility and be crafted through consultation amongst a variety of institutional stakeholders;
- assessment should be multimodal and flexible while maintaining academic standards;
- institutions should adopt a more holistic, comprehensive approach to supporting teaching and learning for diverse groups of learners (Lawrie et al., p.22).

Indeed, to some extent, each of these conceptions’ points toward ways in which “pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant, and accessible to all” (Hockings, 2010, p. 1).

Inclusive curriculum design in line with Hockings’ findings shows that evidence has continued to emerge that universal design for learning (UDL) has considerable potential for developing inclusive curricula (Kumar & Wideman, 2014; Smith, 2012). It is important that the curriculum is designed proactively for heterogeneity and that we move away from deficit models that refer to special arrangements or remediation (Lawrie et al., 2017, p.3). Such findings highlight the need for approaches to inclusive curriculum design that extend beyond the efforts of individual instructors (Lawrie et al., 2017, p.6). Regarding the inclusive curriculum delivery, activity around pedagogies for diversity, commonality, and inclusivity has continued to gain momentum in the past five years. Initiatives towards enhancing practices include the implementation of professional development programs (Hockings, Brett, &

Terentjevs, 2012) and the development of instruments that aim to measure the degree of inclusion evident in teachers' practice and reflection (Cunningham, 2013). Common recommendations emphasize the value of presenting information in multiple ways while offering multiple means of engagement (Kumar & Wideman, 2014; Madriaga, Hanson, Heaton, Kay, Newitt, & Walker, 2010; Moriña, Cortés-Vega, & Molina, 2015). However, Lawrie's review of recent literature suggests there are still challenges in establishing that shared understanding. For example, teachers often confuse suitable education with inclusive education (van Gastel, Erkaslan, & De Jongste, 2014), and educator attitudes may impinge on accessibility (Ashworth, Bloxham, & Pearce, 2010) or militate against inclusion (Moriña Díez, López Gavira, & Molina, 2015; Hughes, Corcoran, & Slee, 2015; Marquis et al., 2016b).

When discussing inclusive assessment, Hockings (2010) raised important challenges in regard to inclusive assessment, asking what represents fair assessment and whether it can truly be fair for all. Madriaga et al. (2010) suggests that disabled and non-disabled students experience similar assessment barriers, for instance, while Butcher, Sedgwick, Lazard, and Hey (2010) illustrate that conventional higher education assessment methods disadvantage academically weak students. Based on experience, students with dyslexia could easily fall into the category of 'weak students' if they are not provided with relevant support. Some assessment strategies might not be suitable for students with specific special needs. Conventional assessment methods might include multiple choice tests or relying heavily on only one type of assessment for the course. Along these lines, recent scholarship reiterates the value of introducing flexibility in assessment practices (Kumar & Wideman, 2014; Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2011), perhaps by providing the option of a range of alternative assessments scaffolded by early formative work and timely feedback (Butcher, Sedgwick, Lazard, & Hey, 2010). A

sustained theme that emerged in both the current review and Hockings' (2010) work is the extent to which stakeholders, particularly faculty, worry that inclusive assessment practices may reduce academic standards and erode educational quality (Ashworth, Bloxham, & Pearce, 2010; Marquis et al., 2012; Marquis et al., 2016b). As Ashworth, Bloxham, and Pearce (2010) note, even faculty who value inclusion, struggle to reconcile their desire to teach inclusively with their existing standards and practices.

As we discuss institutional commitment and management, the broader institutional contexts in which education unfolds represent a critical issue for inclusion. The interplay of and potential disconnects between administrative mandates, campus cultures, and the specifics of classroom implementation can have a strong impact on outcomes (Lawrie et al., 2017). Hockings (2010) has pointed out that institutional-level commitment to inclusion is vital, yet research that considers institutional strategies remains piecemeal. This comparative lack of attention to institution-wide or programmatic initiatives in the literature represents an important, persistent void. Questions of policy and legislation likewise figure interestingly within this larger context (Lawrie et al., 2017).

One area that has received increasing attention since Hockings' review is the question of professional development opportunities connected to accessibility and inclusion (Considine et al., 2014; Heesink, de Koning, & Visser, 2015; Thomas & Heath, 2014). Recent scholarship suggests that development opportunities should be part of a systematic program of support (Moriña Díez, López Gavira, & Molina, 2015) and have measures in place to identify and avoid outcomes such as changes in attitude but not in practice (Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2011).

As I conclude this discussion of inclusive practice in HE, it is evident that Hockings' (2010) framework explored existing work by major university stakeholders by analysing four

basic university functions as mentioned previously, namely inclusive curriculum design, inclusive curriculum delivery, inclusive assessment, and institutional commitment and management. The review by Lawrie et al. (2017) corroborates many of her findings, pointing out that similar issues continue to apply, offering further evidence to support her claims, and extending her work by offering new insights and complexities. At the same time, the present review also points towards some compelling gaps that continue to require further attention and research. Foremost amongst these are the following underexplored arenas:

- Holistic institutional approaches that focus on partnerships between multiple stakeholders and attempt to foster cultural change within colleges and universities,
- Examples of excellent practice in the context of the department or degree program,
- Examples of the connections between policy and practice and related affordances and limitations, and
- Greater attention to international perspectives on inclusive teaching and learning (Lawrie et al. 2017, p.9).

While several authors have offered perspectives on the multiple meanings and dimensions of inclusive learning and teaching, examples of specific institutional approaches remain rare (Lawrie et al., 2017, p. 10). With some exceptions (e.g. Testa & Egan, 2014; Rasi, Hautakangas, & Väyrynen, 2015), program-level meanings and practices of inclusivity are generally ignored and in need of much development. At the same time, such attention would align with calls for scholarly investigations at the programmatic level in SoTL more broadly (Hubball, Pearson, & Clarke, 2013; Matthews, Divan, John-Thomas, Lopes, Ludwig, Martini, Motley, & Tomljenovic-Berube, 2013). This finding, which was not emphasized by Hockings in 2010, is a central outcome of Lawrie et al.'s (2017) review.



As we think about the changes to the service model for students with disabilities and dyslexia in HE, and with the moving away from Disability Service Allotments (DASs) as the model for delivery, the notion of inclusion has become more than just an idea. Rather, it has become the way forward in the UK to serve students with dyslexia as well as students with other types of disability. What is important in considering the fundamental shift in the way in which services are provided is to make sure that we continue to listen to the voices of students with dyslexia as HE provision changes are made in order to become more efficient and hopefully more effective in meeting the needs of both dyslexic students as well as all students with a designated disability.

As we follow up with some of the recommendations from this review, more research in the effectiveness of inclusive practice can influence a systematic implementation for policy makers, HEI leadership, as well as the academics facing students each day in their classrooms. Educational inclusion is of fundamental significance to the social and political potential of HEIs. By following up on some of the recommendations offered in this preliminary review of the literature, scholars of teaching and learning can contribute to meeting the goal of developing inclusive practice in HE. Advance HE (2018) stated, “inclusive learning and teaching recognises all students’ entitlement to a learning experience”. In line with the Advance HE framework, the university (as stated on its website) pledges to meet the needs of all learners including those with disabilities.

## **2.6 Dyslexia and Higher Education**

The literature review paints a picture of what has been happening in research regarding educating students with dyslexia in education. I investigated eight research categories in the

literature on dyslexia in higher education, namely: Access to Higher Education; Academic Challenges/Learning Experiences; Inclusive Practice; Disclosure of Dyslexia; Self-Advocacy and Learning Potential; and Gaps in the Literature. The goal of this research study is to add to the literature in the field by identifying a particular challenge (dyslexia) that some students have and discussing with them directly the support they have received and their experiences in higher education, while also asking academic staff who teach students with dyslexia to share their experiences using a methodology that intends to get to the heart of the story.

## **2.7 Access to Higher Education**

Although some research has been conducted to capture the experiences of students with dyslexia, there is room for more research in this area, including looking at theoretical orientations mentioned above to better allocate resources based on capabilities. Research is needed that can help to uncover and identify potential or capability as well as the specific support that can help a person to realise their capability. It is important to know that there has been an increase in the number of higher education students who identify themselves as having dyslexia (Mortimore, 2013; Pino & Luigina, 2014). Increasing access to higher education for students with both physical and learning disabilities can be attributed to the availability of information on such conditions and the support that students are offered in higher education (Kritzer, 2012). Mortimore (2013) reports that the number of students in the United Kingdom stating that they have a specific learning disability increased from 8,370 in 1999 to 32,655 in 2009-2010.

Stampoltzis (2015) remarks that a student with learning difficulties in higher education is an issue of equal opportunities for any student concerned. This returns us to the social justice issue discussed earlier as well as the creating capabilities concept which allows students with

dyslexia the opportunity for equal access. There are several countries, including the U.S., Australia, Canada, and Israel, that have officially recognized the rights of these students in higher education (Stampoltzis, 2015). The law-making bodies in these countries have been forced to develop written policies and practices that enforce provisions for students with dyslexia. As educators, we should always be ready to understand our student and do whatever it takes to meet their needs.

However, Fuller, Bradley and Hearly (2004) and Denhart (2008) concur that there are still organizational and social barriers that prevent the full participation and inclusion of students with dyslexia in higher education. What is interesting about dyslexia is that it is the most commonly declared disability at university (Thomas, 2000; Richardson & Wydell, 2003) and it is noted that up to 10% of the student body suffers from dyslexia (Smythe, 2011). It is also important to highlight the good work that is included in The Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25 which boasts a long term track record of improving social mobility for students that enables access to and participation in Higher Education. References in this section are not cited in order to protect the privacy of both students and faculty participation in this research. The university in this study is one of the most successful in creating opportunities for all students in the Russell Group universities for widening participation. But the university is ready to build on this reputation by thinking carefully about the best way that it can be a welcoming and supportive for a diverse range of student backgrounds. The ambitious plan will be accomplished in two ways: first, by identifying what the barriers to access and participation are found to impede success and second, by creating a culture that enables student to fully engage within the university community of learning, whatever the background. The five year APP (Access and Participation Plan) sets out to overcome institutional, regional, and national

access and participation challenges by first, creating a diverse student body, and second, to provide fair access and participation for anyone who can benefit from higher education.

In addressing disabled student access, the following examples of increased student support for students with disabilities include the following:

- Learning and Teaching Support Officers to provide additional support for students
- Support plans which allow reasonable adjustments such as sitting exams in smaller rooms, provision for rest break during exams, deadline extensions upon request and longer library book loan periods
- A review of funding for dyslexia and autism assessments
- Support for self and students through implementation of Mental Health First Aid courses

One of the OfS (Office of Students) key performance measure 5 aims is to remove the gap in attainment between students with and without registered disabilities. And finally, as part of the preparing for APP delivery in 2019-20, further work will be commissioned with the Student administration and support service to better understand the student support issues behind this data. Several case studies were mentioned that demonstrate the commitment of the university to continue to support students with disabilities and one such idea is the KnowHow program that offers face to face workshops and online tutorials aimed at breaking down barriers to the academic success of students. Another such program is a whole approach towards mental health and wellbeing using the UUK Step Change approach.

As my research has sought to hear the voices of students in higher education, the report shared that more time on exams, longer periods of time for book loan, as well as providing additional support for students at the very beginning of their university experience were some of the many services planned for present and future. As you read and discover the findings of my

research shared in chapter 4, the findings in this research validate and corroborate the efforts of the university while also highlighting the need for the university to continue to listen to the voices of students enrolled, and especially students with dyslexia which make up 10% of the entire population. My contribution to knowledge is that by listening of the voices of students with dyslexia and academic faculty who teach students with dyslexia, we discover what services are working for students and faculty and any additional services that are needed for support. Let's continue to listen carefully and hear what it is that they have to say. In doing so, this is an opportunity to widen participation for dyslexic students through the APP.

## **2.8 Academic Challenges/Learning Experiences**

When thinking about dyslexia and the impact of the challenges faced by students who have this diagnosis, Matthews (2009) argues that it is the 'hidden disability' because it interferes with academic and day-to-day functioning, but it is something that you do not notice as a physical disability in students. According to Mullins and Preyde (2013), "having a disability that is invisible can make it easier for these students to be treated as normal; it also means, however, that the validity of the disability can be disputed and that others may not fully understand the full extent of the limitations" (p. 147). I discussed earlier the challenges and ongoing debate in the literature about the nature and definition of dyslexia. Stampoltzis (2015) observes that a lack of available screening and assessment tests makes it more difficult to define this challenge in students in higher education. Michael (2011) suggests a definition of dyslexia as manifesting itself as an imbalance of skills whereby the dyslexia is unable to commit to paper ideas and information which are in line with their intellectual ability as evidenced by their spoken understanding. A working definition is outlined earlier and helps to showcase the hidden

nature of dyslexia, which can affect support systems because without a definitive definition of the condition, educational institutions are not ready to spend resources on supports for students that could actually help all students enrolled in HE.

Despite increased access to higher education by students with learning disabilities, another study has explored the academic challenges faced by dyslexic undergraduates in 17 HEIs and found that dyslexic students were at a higher risk of discontinuing their study or earning inferior degrees in the absence of appropriate support (Mortimore, 2013; Pino & Luigina, 2014). Inferior degrees could be described as degrees that do not properly prepare students for success. This failure further contributes to a lack of social justice for students with dyslexia who deserve a solid opportunity to be successful.

What makes dyslexia challenging to understand is its variation with individuals experiencing different levels of severity and challenges. Students with dyslexia may have some serious weaknesses, but they can also come with some incredible strengths in areas such as writing, maths, sports, and the arts, to name a few areas of ability. Richardson and Wydell (2003) remark that students with dyslexia are not uniformly represented within particular academic disciplines such as languages, law, education, and medicine. In addition, they are more likely to withdraw during their first year of study and less likely to complete their programmes. MacCullagh (2014) observes that what we know for certain is that people with dyslexia are under-represented internationally. Fuller et al. (2004) and Mortimore and Crozier (2006) further characterise the weaknesses of dyslexic students as including taking notes in lectures, written assignments, spelling, organizing time and work, using the library, and written exams. When looking at and reading about the experiences of students with dyslexia in this

study, the reader can readily see the aforementioned list of weaknesses mentioned by the student participants.

Denhart (2008) shares three issues in the autobiographical literature concerning students with dyslexia-type difficulties: a) being misunderstood; b) needing to work harder than their peers; and c) seeking out their own strategies for success in HE. Rodis, Garrod and Boscarding (2001) argue that, intrapersonally, dyslexic students describe themselves as being stupid while others feel that they cheat the system when they ask for additional HE support (Riddell & Weedon, 2006). In interpersonal interactions with fellow students, they feel the latter judge other students with dyslexia to be lazy or intellectually inferior.

Rodis, Garrod and Boscarding (2001) state that several students recalled that some professors had a negative attitude towards them. In this study, student experiences were varied where one student described an academic staff member as being hugely supportive, observing that he himself was dyslexic while another experience described by a student related to a professor who made fun of students with dyslexia, calling them lazy. It should also be noted that the student in this study never mentioned to that particular professor that he was diagnosed with dyslexia.

Stampoltzis (2015) also mentions an important theme in higher education, one that derives from the heavy workload students with dyslexia experience which is quite different compared to their non-dyslexic peers. Hence, more time is needed for reading papers and textbooks as well for writing assignments, studying for exams, searching for books in the library, and preparing presentations. As a result, it is unsurprising that students in this study mentioned the extended book loans and extra time on exams were very helpful to them. Both of these forms of support involve 'more time,' and for the dyslexic student, this can mean the

difference between success and failure. Fuller et al. (2004) has outlined findings of a study where students observed that lecturers were talking too quickly, visual material was being removed too quickly, and academic staff would not allow reasonable adjustments.

Borland and James (1999) developed research that investigated the social and learning experiences of students with disabilities in a UK university. The students targeted for this study had some form of physical disability. A total of 22 students were interviewed as well as some senior tutors and representatives of the university's central services. The findings of the most concern related to disclosure, access, quality assurance, and the moral basis of the institution's disabilities policy. The researchers did not go into great detail on how the data was explicitly analysed, and the findings add to the limited body of research available when investigating the experiences of students with some form of disability in higher education. Some of the greatest difficulties that students with dyslexia face are described by Holloway (2001) and Mortimore and Crozier (2006), namely that such students have communication problems with academic staff who were at certain times dismissive and indifferent to students with dyslexia, which is also corroborated by students who participated in this study.

Finally, Holloway (2001) states that dyslexia in HE is the result of limitations of the systems available for accessing course materials. Hence, the learning needs of dyslexic students can be viewed as part of a range of learning needs for all students, and these practices could be helpful and be of benefit to all students in the classroom. Matthews (2009) concurs by arguing that all educational environments must be restructured so that all kinds of students can flourish in them, rather than be disabled or disadvantaged by them.

## **2.9 Disclosure of Dyslexia**



According to MacGullagh (2014), students have also experienced a high degree of stress and anxiety, which may be a contributing factor to the low participation rates of students with dyslexia in higher education. Stampoltzis (2015) also mentions a dominant theme of disclosure, meaning that because of stress and anxiety associated with dyslexia, many students simply do not disclose that they are dyslexic. Jones and Hopkins (2003) emphasise that “people surviving in a disabling society make decisions about disclosure based upon previous experiences” (pp. 102-103). Some students in this study mentioned that they were afraid to mention that they were dyslexic for fear of being stigmatized; hence, it is possible that some students who have mild dyslexia would rather not disclose that they even have the condition. Furthermore, Harrison (1998) argues that the challenge for such students is that the advantage of ‘coming out’ and sharing that they have dyslexia did not outweigh the fear of being stigmatized or being denied admission to certain courses because of their condition. Finally, some students with disabilities simply want to be treated as regular students and they will often not disclose their dyslexia in order to appear ‘normal’ (Stampoltzis, 2015).

### **2.10 Self-advocacy and Learning Potential**

Richardson and Wydell (2003) report that although dyslexia may have an adverse effect on progression and achievement, it is “by no means incompatible with a high level of success, given appropriate commitment on the part of the students and appropriate resources on the part of institutions” (p. 475). When exploring the experience of sixteen students with dyslexia, Madriago (2007) found that students did not have the information needed to make the transition from secondary to tertiary education. However, the students in this study demonstrated a high degree of self-advocacy in fighting for their rights and access to the support available. Lock and

Layton (2001), Madriago (2007) and MacCullagh (2014) have underlined the relative strengths that dyslexics have, including creativity, high-level reasoning, critical thinking, problem-solving, lateral thinking, patience, volition and determination. It is important to highlight these relative strengths to underline that students with dyslexia are intellectually capable and often very bright who, with proper support, can achieve and grow in a higher education environment.

## 2.11 Gaps in the Literature

Researchers generally agree that diagnosing cognitive impairments and remediating and addressing these impairments is not a straightforward matter (Pino & Luigina, 2014). Prevett et al. (2013) reviews other papers in a special edition of the *Journal of Research in Special Education Needs* to set out an agenda for future research in the field, with the collection drawing on themes of “identification and assessment, training, emotional well-being, systematic support and development and narrative research” (p. 1). The major finding in this review is that “although the pluralistic nature of the research is a major strength in the field, we are aware of a gap although this type of research is emergent” (p. 2).

According to Prevett’s (2013) findings, the three tenets of research are as follows:

- Research in identity in relation to people with dyslexia and how this is influenced by educational and other institutional culture and practices;
- Longitudinal narrative methods research into the lives of people with dyslexia, their educational trajectories, decision-making and choices;
- Cross cultural comparative research studies that examine how the lives of people with dyslexia are mediated by culture and how such culture can be changed to become more inclusive (p. 4).

The implication of these tenets is that additional research into specific areas is needed to uncover and unlock practices that could help people succeed.

Stampoltzis (2015), Murphy (2011), Child and Langford (2011), and Mortimore (2013) have all conducted research centred around listening to students with dyslexia. What is different about my research is that I listen to students with dyslexia while also exploring the ideas and attitudes of two academic staff members who teach students with dyslexia. When thinking about the gap that exists in the research in relation to listening to students with dyslexia, it is important to point out that Pino and Luigina (2014) have conducted a systematic review to retrieve and synthesize the available evidence on how the inclusion of students with dyslexia can be fostered. Fifteen studies were identified over a period of twenty years that fit the criteria identified in the narrative review, which included approaches to the exploration of students' perceptions of the impact of teaching, support, and provision in their own learning experience (Pino & Luigina, 2014). It is clear that more research of this nature needs to be conducted in order to narrow the gap that exists in terms of listening to students with dyslexia.

In summary, the literature related to this research underlines the theoretical implications that affect the programmes and support provision that are in place for students with dyslexia. This literature review also reveals that although there is a broad range of literature in the overall field of special needs in education, there are still limited studies that focus on specific types of disabilities and impairments that can limit access to higher education. This study does something that few other studies do. First, it goes straight to the student and academic faculty member and asks specific questions about the support that is available and how this is working for them. It is laudable that the university has a well-developed student support services department and that this department has developed good services to support students with

dyslexia. All nine students in this study made me promise to share how much they appreciate the services that are provided. However, the students also thanked me as a researcher for taking the time to ask them directly which support is working and which could possibly be improved. The implications of both the existing literature and the theoretical dimension of this research are discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Second, this study listens to the voices of the students with dyslexia as well as those of academic staff, while the research also paints a broader canvas or picture of their individual stories. This presents a unique opportunity for the higher education community to respond to the needs of those students with dyslexia as well as the faculty members who teach them.

## Chapter 3. Methodology and Methods

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of the ontological and epistemological position of myself as a researcher, and then in detail explores the following: phenomenology, the chosen methodology: the phenomenological approach, research context, recruitment strategy and process, data collection method, data collection tools, interview schedule, data analysis, and demanding rigour and reflexivity in qualitative research. Methodology refers to the lens used to ‘see’ or ‘capture’ the experiences of students with dyslexia in HE. I describe and justify the methodology used to answer why and how the research questions were investigated. I will also explore the participants’ details and briefly review the thematic analysis approach used when thinking about research and its role in our culture, education and society. A summary of its role is best seen as the way the researcher answers questions, solves problems and develops knowledge (Punch, 2013). This is true across all areas of life, including social areas.

As we understand the importance of research as a process, an integral part of that process is choosing the methodology for the research conducted. In this chapter the methodology selected will explain the methods used to proceed with the research. I will also show the various techniques used to conduct the interviews and demonstrate the correct procedures used in order to obtain credible answers to the research questions. Finally, I will explain the use of the methods by discussing the chosen methodology.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the main objective of this study is to investigate the experiences of students with dyslexia at a given university. In addition, it also explores academic staff’s perspective on the experiences of students with dyslexia. Calfee and Chambliss (2003) define empirical research as “the systematic approach for answering certain types of

questions” (p. 152). The methodology chosen for this research is associated with the interpretative paradigm, which consists of – but is not limited to – participant observation, role-playing, non-directive interviewing, episodes and accounts (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The methodology chosen has aided the research in answering the research questions.

The aim of methodology is described by Kaplan (2017): “Methodology is the study – the description, the explanation, and the justification – of methods, and not the methods themselves” (p. 41). Perhaps the best way to describe the purpose of methodology is that it should aid the understanding of the process of inquiry in the research itself. Hence, I would like to present in this chapter the ‘spectacles’ that I have chosen to look through in undertaking the research for this study.

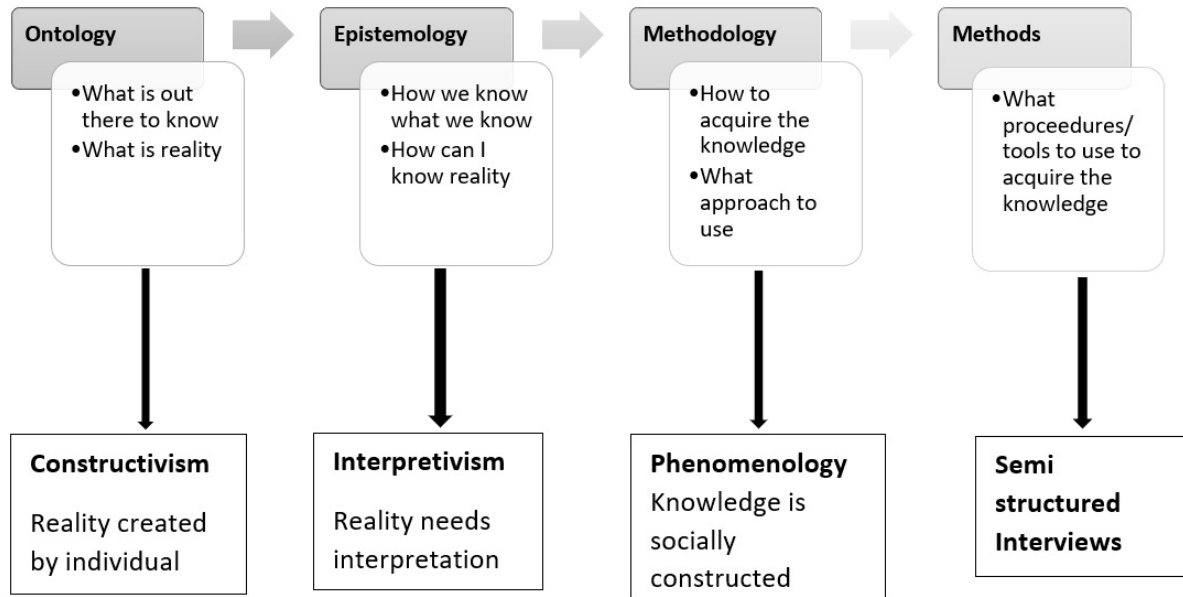
### **3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Position**

Philosophical assumptions are deeply ingrained views about the types of problems researchers study and how they go about studying them. These ideas, or beliefs, are instilled in us through our educational training and experiences. Philosophy has developed in a way that can answer two fundamental questions about the nature of human perception, experience, and understanding. The first is:

“What is the nature of whatever it is that exists?’ And the second is ‘How, if at all, can we know?’ The investigation into the first question is what is known in the branch of philosophy as ontology, and the investigation into the second question is about the nature of knowledge that attempts to understand how we know that we know something is epistemology” (Magee, 1998, p.7).

It is vital to explore the range of theories available to researchers, and it is necessary to consider how to select them (Gray, 2015). The diagram below is a visual representation showing the relationship between the theoretical position and research approach for the study.

Figure 1.1: Philosophical Positions



*Adapted from Hay (2002) and Crotty (1998)*

Crotty (1998) identifies that one of the problems in selecting from a range of theories is the fact that the theoretical terminology applied is often inconsistent or even contradictory. Hence, it is important to get the terminology right in order to be explicit in research design based upon a theoretical approach.

It is important to note that researchers are informed by different theoretical perspectives, and in addition, there is no single nomenclature for these perspectives. However, our ontological and epistemological inclination informs the type of research we are interested in and the methodological choices we use. My ontological position is informed by constructivism. This perspective acknowledges that reality is constructed by an individual as they make meaning within their context. In this study, I acknowledge that the participants had their own reality

within their context. My epistemological view aligns with interpretivism, which highlights that reality is subject to interpretations. In this study, participants interpreted their experiences as they took part in semi-structured interviews. In addition, my analysis is also another form of interpretation as I tried to make meaning of the lived experiences of the participants. My ontological and epistemological positions aligned with the methodological approach used in this study, which was phenomenology. Furthermore, I decided that semi-structured interviews would be the most effective method for data collection. This decision was based on my theoretical position that interpreted meaning as something that was constructed in real time.

The approach used for this research is embedded in interpretivism and looked for “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Thomas (2009) shares that interpretivism is “interested in people and the way that they interrelate – what they think and how they form ideas about the world; how their worlds are constructed” (p.75). Selecting phenomenology as the methodology allowed me to get as close to the participants as possible, and the interpretivist paradigm allowed me to eliminate the “distance” or “objective separateness” between myself and those being researched (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 94). Hence, the phenomenology as methodology helped me to construct the lived experiences and share the stories of each participant. The choosing of semi-structured interviews as the method used for data collection afforded me the flexibility to ask follow-up questions in the interview process. Using an interpretivist paradigm, the data was collected by seeking to understand the place and environment where participants studied and worked.

The data collected through the interview process, which was varied and multiple, led me to look for the complexity of views and not to narrow the meaning. Hence, I tried to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2019).



Finally, I positioned myself as a researcher acknowledging that my personal experiences made an interpretation that was shaped by what I discovered in the data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2019). Following the advice of Thomas (2009), “we have to immerse ourselves in the research contexts in which we are interested – for example talking to people in depth, attending to every nuance of their behaviour, every clue to the meanings that they are investing in something” (p.75). The advice of immersing myself in the research context greatly enhanced the philosophical approach which allowed for rich data collection and led to a successful treatment of the research questions.

### **3.3 Phenomenology**

Creswell (2013) purports that phenomenology explains the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of participants’ experiences, developing descriptions of the experiences, but it does not explain or analyse such descriptions. Gray (2009) highlighted that some phenomenology includes the basic belief that the world is socially constructed and this important attribute implies meaning and experiences are being socially constructed. In this study, I do acknowledge that participants’ experiences are their subjective interpretations socially constructed. Phenomenology is about exploring the personal construction of the participants’ “world” (Tesch, 1994 in Gray, 2009). The key elements of the phenomenological approach include the study of the human experience, and the exploration of personal construction of these experiences. These key elements highlight the importance of individual experiences because they led to the use of in-depth interviews and small sample size used for this research. With phenomenology, “value is ascribed not only to the interpretations of researchers, but also to the subjects of the research themselves” (Gray, 2019, p24). This approach captures the socially constructed details of the experiences in the research conducted. The gaps identified in the literature show that there are few studies asking

students with dyslexia about their experiences, neither does the literature determine if the tools developed for their support are helping them to be successful. The phenomenological position proposes “that any attempt to understand social reality has to be grounded in people’s experience of that social reality” (Gray, 2009, p. 24).

The researcher must set aside any preconceived understanding of phenomena and look again at immediate experiences in order for new meaning to emerge (Gray, 2009). Van Manen (1997, p. 41) translated the words of Van den Berg and profoundly captures the idea of this phenomena and what it has to say to us in the paragraph below:

(Phenomena) have something to say to us-this is common knowledge among poets and painters. Therefore, poets and painters are born phenomenologists. Or rather, we are all born phenomenologists; the poets and painters amongst, however, understand very well their task of sharing, by means of world and image, their insight with others- an artfulness that is also laboriously practiced by the professional phenomenologist.

Understanding the importance of phenomena and lived experiences is vitally important for the validity and reliability of the research because the researcher must attempt to remain neutral while being aware of their own potential bias when conducting research. Phenomenological research emphasises inductive logic, seeks out participants’ opinions and subjective accounts and interpretations, relies on qualitative data analysis, and is concerned with contextual description and analysis. It is not so concerned with generalizations in terms of wider or larger populations; therefore, this method is a good fit for the research that I am proposing because the dyslexia audience is a smaller group comprising up to 10% of the population (Gray, 2009). This approach has been used to identify and examine the authentic experiences of students with dyslexia in order to gain insight about the support they receive and if such support works for them. This would be difficult if not impossible to do using quantitative analysis because the

details of the students' experiences might be absent or unavailable using a quantitative data collection method.

### **3.4 The Chosen Methodology: The Phenomenological Approach**

The methodology chosen to answer the research questions is the phenomenological approach. When considering the chosen methodology, it was important to consider other qualitative methodologies when considering how to approach answering the research questions. The narrative approach explores the life of an individual, tells stories of individual experiences, while the grounded research theory approach develops a theory grounded in data from the field, thus a theory is grounded in the views of the participants (Daiute, 2014). I did not choose the narrative approach because my research was designed to explore multiple experiences and not the lives of individuals. The grounded theory approach, where a theory is developed, was not a proper fit for my research design; the purpose of my study was not to develop a theory (Birks, & Mills, 2015). An ethnographic research approach describes and interprets a culture-sharing group, and it also interprets the patterns of the culture of a group. This approach was not chosen because this research was not focused on cultural patterns, but on capturing experiences and analysing those experiences to determine which supports are most effective for the participant (Madison, 2011). The case study research approach develops an in-depth description and analysis of a case or cases and provides an in-depth understanding of the same. The case study approach was not chosen because this research involved multiple participants in a specific environment (Gomm, Hammersly, & Foster, 2000).

The aforementioned qualitative approaches to research address certain aspects in exploring the answers to research questions. The phenomenological approach to research

attempts to understand the essence of the experience and describe the essence of a lived phenomenon. It was the best fit for answering the research questions in this study because the goal of the research is not to develop a new theory, nor to, respectively, explore the entire life of a person. The main goal of this research was to investigate the experiences of students with dyslexia and academic faculty who teach students with dyslexia at a university; therefore, the phenomenological research approach was the best fit because the methodology allows for a description and interpretation of a lived phenomenon or experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The idea behind the phenomenological approach is to give a full appreciation of the participants' accounts, and for this reason the samples are usually small. Hence, it is unsurprising that, according to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012), there is no rule regarding how many participants should be included in a particular study. Indeed, thus the size is viewed as depending on: (1) the depth of analysis of a single case study; (2) the richness of the individual cases; (3) how the researcher wants to compare or contrast single cases; and (4) the pragmatic restrictions one is working under (p. 364).

Finally, it has become clear that the phenomenological approach and methodology is well suited to answer the questions for this study. Phenomenology as methodology is well suited and a good fit because I am trying to capture the lived experiences and phenomena of the student and faculty participants and to get into their shoes in order to discover what helps them experience success in higher education, and what best equips faculty to meet the needs of their students with dyslexia. As more research emerges that asks students and faculty members directly about their experiences, it is my hope as a researcher that programs and opportunities can be strengthened to add to many already effective supports to meet the specific challenges and needs of students with dyslexia in higher education.

### 3.5 Research Context

The study's context is an established university environment where students may 'self-identify' as a student with dyslexia and receive testing to confirm a diagnosis. The setting also has support in place for students with dyslexia. Not naming the university protects the identities of the study's participants. Students that are already diagnosed with dyslexia are not required to disclose during the admission process that they have dyslexia. Any student experiencing academic challenges may seek help at the student support centre. This help comes in the form of assistance that is not limited to a laptop, an individual tutor, special software designed to assist the student, and other help designed to enable students to be successful. The academic staff are encouraged to post their teaching materials online, including lecture notes and presentations.

When collecting data based on interviewing participants, it is important to discuss the ethical guidelines used to ensure that the participants were adequately supported and that their well-being was considered (see Appendix C for the VPREC Ethical Approval). The ethical considerations included to safeguard the participants were as follows: participants were informed of the project's concerns, what was expected of them, and that they would take part in an interview that would be taped and transcribed. Participants were also informed that they could stop the interview at any point and were reminded of the interviews' confidentiality. Also, participants were told that any identifying information would be removed from the transcript, and that the interview was designed not to cause distress and that, if they experienced distress, steps would be taken to offer counselling or help as required (Breakwell, 2004, p. 242). Each student participant and staff member who participated in this study acknowledged that they understood the guidelines mentioned above at the beginning of the interview, having received the study information sheet and recruitment flier. At the start of the interview, participants were

again informed of their right to stop the interview at any point during the interview process while students were informed of support services in place in case the interview caused any stress.

### **3.6 Recruitment Strategy and Process**

The selection of participants was purposeful in that both students and academic faculty volunteered for this study after receiving a flyer that explained in detail the purpose of the study both for students and faculty members. Proposed requirements for the study included a diagnosis of dyslexia while also being enrolled in any degree program at the university. The intended level of convergence and divergence was designed to provide a level of detail in terms of students (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). The intended divergence and convergence for students ranging from undergraduate to masters to doctoral levels yielded rich data that showcased the type and level of support that was provided. Academic staff were also included in the study to provide a view from the academic faculty in terms of how the university trains faculty to provide teaching and learning for students with dyslexia. The data collected yielded some solid results in determining what is needed to go forward and this is evidenced in the findings. The goal for the findings was for them to be usable and transferable to other contexts and institutions that are similarly situated.

The recruitment strategy for student participants initially involved sharing an opportunity for participation in this study on bulletin boards around the campus. As this did not yield any participants, I reached out to my supervisors who helped and shared the approved flier included in the appendix with the head of student support at the university. It was after the student support services leader shared the flier that participants began to respond to the

invitation for participation. As the interviews commenced by using Skype on a 'first come first served basis' as mentioned in the flier, this meant that once the desired number of participants was reached, any additional participants would not be included in the study. The idea behind sharing that participants would be accepted on a 'first come first served' basis for participation in the study was to make sure that students would understand that once the desired number of participants was reached, that there would not be a opportunity for participation. A total of nine students responded and all nine students met the criteria, or purposeful selection and sampling, that included being enrolled in the university as a current student and having a documented diagnosis of dyslexia. Once the potential participants emailed me to indicate that they were willing to participate, I sent a follow-up email inviting them to add me to their respective Skype accounts and I suggested interview times. Although I do not know how many students received the invitation to participate in the study, the nine students who contacted me all participated in the study.

The recruitment strategy for faculty also involved sharing an opportunity for participation in this study on bulletin boards around the campus. In the recruitment of academic faculty, there continued to be challenges with obtaining academic faculty participants. The recruitment of faculty participants happened after the recruitment of student participants. Once again, my supervisors helped to put me in touch with academic faculty at the university that would be willing to participate. Two academic faculty were included in this study and met the criteria of teaching at the university as well as teaching students with dyslexia. It was my goal to interview academic faculty who were directly immersed in the learning environment.

Students and academic staff received an information sheet and recruitment flier (see Appendices D-G) that was approved by the ethics committee (see Appendix C) so that potential

participants could read and inform themselves regarding what the research was about before responding to the call for participants. The students with dyslexia as well as the academic faculty members in each case thanked me at the end of the interview for the opportunity to share their story and experiences, and I once again reassured each participant that their experiences would be shared without their name being used in the research. The participants shared their consent verbally at the beginning of each interview after making sure that they had read the information sheet, the recruitment flier and the consent form. All in all, the ethical guidelines were rigorously followed and helped the participants to experience a positive interaction between themselves and myself as the researcher.

### **3.7 Data Collection Method**

It is important to point out that a given data collection method can be derived from a number of methods, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, telephone interviews, field notes, and taped social interactions or questionnaires (Heaton, 2004, p. 37). Given that data collection is an essential research task, O’Leary (2004) argues that “Collecting credible data is a tough task, and it is worth remembering that one method of data collection is not inherently better than another” (p. 150). Hence, the data collection method chosen depends on the research goals and the advantages and disadvantages of each respective method. When considering the appropriate method to use in this research study, it was important to consider the goals and type of data required. Gray (2004) shares the following reasons for using interviews for the purpose of collecting data:

- There is a need to attain highly personalized data.
- There are opportunities required for probing.
- A good return rate is important.
- Respondents are not fluent in the native language of the country,



or where they have difficulties with written language (p. 214).

Although there are many types of interviews including structured, semi-structured, unstructured, and non-directive interviews respectively, the semi-structured interview was chosen as this dissertation's data collection method. When using this method, the interviewer does not conduct the research to test a particular hypothesis (David & Sutton, 2004, p. 87); instead, participants have the flexibility to ask questions and are free to share data during the interview process. This was a good fit for my research because my goal was to capture the experiences and voices of students with dyslexia and academic staff who teach students with dyslexia, thereby helping me to gather rich data from the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as a method that facilitates in-depth, one-on-one accounts where the researcher and the participant speak to each other in real time (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Adams (2018) also suggests that semi-structured interviews are superbly suited for when "more than a few of the open-ended questions require follow-up queries" (p. 494). Adams continues by remarking that "if you need to ask probing, open-ended questions and want to know the independent thoughts of each individual" (p.494), then the semi-structured interview is the proper tool for the data collection. With the goal being to collect rich data from the participants of this study, asking open-ended questions with the ability to follow up in order to go deeper in discussions matched the goal of the data collection needed to fulfil the goals of this research.

In order to be successful, Cousin (2009) suggests that one must develop solid interviewing skills that include building rapport with the participant, thereby giving them the chance to guide a natural flow in the interview. My experience in working with people, and as a pastor and counsellor, helped me to reassure the participants so that they would share their

experiences and simultaneously feel supported. I prepared a list of questions beforehand as suggested by Cousin (2009) and this helped me to steer the conversation and cover all of the topics that needed to be covered during the semi-structured interviews. Adams (2018) suggested that instead of thinking of using a questionnaire, it was better “to think of the list as an agenda” when going into the interview process (p. 496). The questions developed would then serve as a guide and asking these questions throughout the interview process as well as follow-up questions to probe more deeply served as a vehicle to specifically address and answer the research questions developed for this study.

As my research is qualitative in its approach, the interviews sought to capture the lived experiences of students with dyslexia and academic staff at a university in the United Kingdom. Therefore, the central task was to understand and capture the interviewees’ meaning and intention (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). In this case the research interviews sought to capture specific details of the educational experiences of both students and academic faculty in order to fully understand their experiences as it relates to student success. On this point, McNamara (2009) argues that interviews are helpful in accessing the story behind a given participant’s experiences, and in this way the interviewer can pursue in-depth information on and around the topic.

The semi-structured interviews were recorded so I could transcribe them at a later stage, after which they were used for data analysis. When considering the data collection aspect of this research, it was important to consider the optimal way to collect the ‘facts’ or gain proper insights and understanding regarding the opinions the participants expressed. Interviews are a common way to collect such data in qualitative research, while a common consideration is to potentially choose between interviews and questionnaires (Rowley, 2012). Selecting semi-

structured interviews for this qualitative study was best suited for this research because rich data was needed for this research with a smaller and targeted group. Interviews are also classified on the basis of their structure. Structured interviews ask quite a few questions and the answers expected are relatively short, while in unstructured interviews the interview is based on a limited number of topics with the focus on encouraging the respondent to share their insights in relation to a given theme. The interview questions were related and centred around answering the research questions for this study. The interviewer then adapted questions in accordance with what the interviewee shared (Bryman, 2001). Kvale and Brinkman (2008) view the interview as a professional conversation where knowledge is constructed through the process of the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interview is an “interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 2). Roulston (2010) explores the role of the neo-positivist or skilled interviewer who asks good questions, minimises bias, takes a neutral role, and produces valid findings.

The semi-structured interview approach was chosen for this research because it presented the opportunity and flexibility that allowed the participants to share their experiences in the form of a story about their lives. The questions used in the interview and data collection process are included in Appendices A and B. Using the semi-structured interview process helped me to hear each participant’s story and university experience. My goal was to set each participant at ease while allowing them the chance to respond to questions and enjoy the experience. The information gained from the participants provided an inside perspective on the process of admissions, how the given participant was diagnosed with dyslexia, the process for finding out about the support, the type of support available, and the support that proved the most helpful to students. The academic faculty interviewed were able to share insights into the

support in place for them as they teach students with dyslexia. Both the student and academic faculty participants 'opened up' and remarked that they enjoyed the interview experience and that it helped them to recount their struggles while sharing how they overcame different obstacles.

In line with the advice of Smith (2010), the interview plan was followed by composing a list of questions that made for a natural conversational flow. During the interview I monitored how the participants felt while answering the questions. I provided a supportive environment while participants responded toward the end of the interview regarding how they felt and they often expressed a sense of relief as they shared their responses and appeared pleased with the interview process. In total, nine student and two academic staff interviews were conducted that lasted on average about 50 minutes with the shortest interview lasting 20 minutes and the longest 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded only after verbal permission was given. Preparing a list of questions beforehand and working to establish a good rapport with the given participant helped to mitigate challenges during the interviews and subsequent data collection.

All of these students indicated their consent at the beginning of the interview process and agreed to allow me to record the interview. The sample consisted of four male students and five female students. Three of the students in the sample were currently working on their PhDs, most were in their first or second year at university, and one student was in her third year in veterinary school. All but three students entered the university with dyslexia and three students discovered that they had dyslexia during their first year at university. The two academic staff members interviewed were lecturers at the university and they communicated that they enjoyed the interview process by remarking on the importance of this study. All of the interviews were conducted over Skype and both academic staff and students were forthcoming and willing to

participate. The use of Skype and why it was selected will be explored further in a forthcoming section on data collection tools.

### **3.8 Data Collection Tools**

In the data collection phase, I used semi-structured interviews (see Appendices A and B) to collect the data and Skype was used as a way to converse with the participants. Although there are other ways to conduct interviews and capture interview data, Skype was selected for ease of use due to both academic staff and student participants' familiarity with the platform. Sullivan (2012) suggests that the use of Skype has potential for data collection in social science research. Markham (2008) adds that "a researcher's reach is potentially global, data collection is economical, and transcribing is no more difficult than cutting and pasting" (p. 255). Although research on the use of Skype and other technologies as data collection tools is "a little slow to the game" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 7), the benefits of using Skype or other Voice over Internet Protocols (VOIP) as data collection methods – especially in place of face-to-face interviews – do outweigh the drawbacks.

Although there may be concerns regarding the authenticity of VOIP interactions, whether the true self is being presented can be questioned, regardless of whether it's a face-to-face or Skype-facilitated interview. It is important to note that not only can we communicate verbally using Skype, we can also discuss and interview visually, thus allowing for at least "a mimicked face to face interaction" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 7). Although there may be some disadvantages to using Skype, technology allows us an unlimited potential to collect data globally. After all, technology is our friend most of the time. In the interviews that I conducted over Skype, I called using Skype while in Estonia and the connection was solid and I used both

the audio and visual capability of the platform, thus making the most of the opportunity to establish rapport with the participants. When there was a technical difficulty, we would mutually hang up and then I would call back for a better connection. In each case, I was able to enjoy a solid connection when interviewing this study's participants. I interviewed the academic staff while in China using a VPN in order to support a solid connection. Skype does not work well in China because the PRC government has banned its use. All in all, Skype was an effective data collection method in that I was able to establish a good understanding with the participants, conduct the interview, and gather the rich data that I needed for this thesis.

### **3.9 Interview Schedule**

The interview guide included a limited number of questions that were developed around the research questions (Appendix A). The focal point during the interview process was to make the participant feel comfortable and at ease where she or he would actually lead the discussion. Smith and Osborne (2007) recommend a process that would allow for freedom and reflection. The result was that as participants began sharing their experiences, I would encourage further and deeper reflection as participants shared, using the prepared questions as prompts to deepen the discussion. The questions were intended as conversation starters allowing for a broader conversation while making sure that all of the questions were covered. The goal was to capture the lived experiences of the participants while affirming and supporting each participant as they shared. The shortest interview lasted twenty minutes while the longest interview lasted ninety minutes. The shortest interview participant was nervous and seemed hurried at the beginning of the interview. Since we reviewed each question, the shortest interview was deemed valid and was included in this research because the data collected represented the richness of his

experience, and there was no intended time frame for the interview schedule. In the end, the participant interviewed was relaxed and thanked me for taking the time to speak with him. He shared that in some ways, it was therapeutic to speak with me about his experience.

### **3.10 Data Analysis**

Although data analysis is a rewarding experience because of the time devoted to listening, transcribing, and reading the data, it is also a lengthy process. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) recommend that the researcher totally immerse themselves in the data by attempting to walk in the participants' shoes. It was important to look at the data from an outsider, as well as an insider, perspective with the goal of immersing myself in the lived experiences of the participants in this research study. What the phenomenological approach offered was a flexible set of guidelines that were adapted for my research. The guidelines that I am about to present were not treated as a recipe for analysing the data but instead were used pragmatically in order to experience the richness of the data (Smith, 2012).

The best strategy to use when analysing data based on semi-structured interviews is the inductive approach. Why? This approach is informally described as 'bottom up' in that I started with observations that led to patterns that caused me to posit a tentative hypothesis and then to arrive at a theory. The inductive approach allowed me to let the ideas, concepts, and themes emerge from the interview. This particular approach works well with the phenomenological approach and allows the researcher to collect rich and descriptive accounts of experiences and events during the semi-structured interview process. To break this down further, I followed a six-stage process during the thematic analysis to ensure that I considered every piece of the data collected (Braun & Clark, 2006).

In Stage 1, the first step was to identify the units of analysis. This was accomplished by breaking up the interview into usable pieces of data into key words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. In this research I choose to focus on sentences, then I conducted a line-by-line analysis of the data by printing out the interview double spaced and then allowing a large margin on the right hand side of the page. Stage 2 involved going through a given interview and assigning a one or two-word summary or code for each section of line or data. It was important that the code accurately described the meaning of the text. This open coding technique used a word from the data to help me formulate a list of all the codes. I then reduced this down to 20-25 codes and, using the constant comparison technique, I compared the code with the original text to make sure that they matched.

Stage 3 involved coding my codes with the aim to identify five to seven overarching themes or categories that grouped my open code. This was done in stages whereby I reduced the 20-25 codes down to 10-15 codes. The next step was to narrow these down to my final five to seven overarching codes. When analysing these final themes, it was important to ensure that they reflected the purpose of the research. They should be exhaustive while also sensitive to what the data is saying. Another aspect that emerged was that there were ordinary themes, unexpected themes, difficult to classify themes, and sub-themes which fit inside the major themes.

Stage 4 involved collecting all the major quotes within a theme and then examining the ideas that emerged. I thought about how these quotes interacted with each other, and I looked for evidence of the relationships between the overarching themes. Stage 5 involved my completing these series of steps with each of the interview transcripts. With each new interview came the opportunity to identify new and emerging themes. As mentioned earlier, I used the



constant comparison technique to ensure that the themes were represented in the data collection. What I tried to do was to move from the specific to the general, starting first with the interview, moving on to the codes, assigning sub-themes, and then identifying the themes. Stage 6 was the write up. After finishing all of the interviews, I constructed a narrative from the themes, sub-themes and code. In addition, a discussion of the relationship between the sub-themes and the themes was included. This was the essence of the theory that I set out to develop in my thematic analysis. The idea was to use quotes that support sub-themes and then feed into a theme.

In the process, the interviews involved data collection using Skype, the data collection process went smoothly for all but one student who expressed a desire to participate but was in a hurry. This interview was the shortest lasting a little over twenty minutes, but in this time frame I was able to ask all of the prepared questions as well as some follow up questions and collect good data that was included in the overall research.

The final discussion includes a given participant's account of his or her experiences as well as interpretive commentary from myself as a researcher. In the discussion section the narrative relates the themes to the literature and includes a reflection on the research that comments on the study's implications, its limits, and ideas for future development, a framework suggested by Braun & Clark, 2006. My aim and subsequent goal was to arrive at conclusions derived from the data and not from my pre-conceived notions. In my attempt to achieve this, I carefully gathered valuable data, used my interviewing experience, and conducted careful, systematic and rigorous analysis that required patience to step into someone else's shoes. In addition, I consistently attempted to not impose my own views on the data or its subsequent analysis.

### 3.11 Demanding Rigor and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

Lincoln and Guba (1986) have identified the challenge of how to maintain rigour in qualitative research, noting that real-world conditions of social action programs have led to the increasing relaxation of the rules of rigour. (p. 15) Reflexivity is one way to improve data reliability and proves to be an invaluable tool to promote the relationship between the research and the participants. Reflexivity relates to the degree of influence that the research exerts on the findings, and it is one of the pillars of critical qualitative research (Fontana, 2004). Reflexivity is defined as “a continual process of reflection by the researcher on her values, preconceptions, behaviour or presence and those of the participant, which can then affect the interpretation of responses” (Parahoo, 2006, p. 383). Hence, reflecting on your own research and trying to understand how the researcher’s views might influence the findings adds credibility to the research and thus is why it is included in the discussion of this qualitative study (Jootun, 2009). Reflexivity is achieved through detachment, internal dialogue, and constant dialogue of ‘what I know is’ and how ‘I know it.’

Reed and Proctor (1995) highlight the debate regarding the researcher’s relationship with the project by proposing that the researcher occupies one of three positions: the outsider, a hybrid, or the insider. The outsider has no professional experience, while the hybrid is one who undertakes research in their practice area, while the insider is the actual practitioner-as-researcher researching his or her own colleagues’ practice. I would characterize myself as a ‘hybrid’ researcher who has undertaken research in an area where information is known about the field of dyslexia, but the level of higher education and the university itself where the data was collected is unknown to the researcher. This in itself does create some detachment from the research which adds to the reflexivity of my approach to both the research and the participants.

It is good to remember that the aim of a qualitative researcher is to understand the complexity and richness of people's experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). It should be acknowledged that it is difficult not to be influenced by the research participant and a reflexive researcher acknowledges that any finding is the product of the researcher's interpretation (Jootun, 2009). As I conducted the research, as much as possible, I used bracketing as a way to see the participants' experiences without injecting my own bias; this helped to create a deep level of understanding regarding the participants' lived experiences. In addition, I was able to construct meaning that a reader with no prior knowledge of dyslexia would have. This added to a deeper level of understanding in the field of dyslexia.

When evaluating key points to promote reflexivity and rigour, I kept a diary and also enjoyed the richness of discussions with my supervisor who questioned my assumptions in the research while I analysed the research content by providing commentary after the interview responses. In the recording and transcribing phase, and as suggested by Jootan (2009), I gained an awareness of any subtlety in terms of the way I collected the data for the research.

As also suggested by Jootan (2009), I thought deeply about the choice of participants, and I held to the criteria that a participant must self-identify as having been diagnosed with dyslexia while being enrolled in any program at the university at either the bachelor, master, or doctoral levels. This provided a cross section of participants from a variety of program areas across the university, thereby allowing for rich data collection and access to a wide range of experiences. The interpretation of the data involved capturing the lived experiences of participants while also employing a double-hermeneutic whereby the researcher was interpreting the lived experience at the university while the participant was sharing and interpreting their own experience as a student with dyslexia at university. By sharing and

evaluating the process of reflexivity and rigour in my research, it has been my goal to make the relationship between and the influence of my participants explicit as suggested by Reed & Proctor (1995.)

Finally, it should be noted that reflexivity is a contested term and there is a lack of consensus regarding its meaning when it is employed as a rigour strategy in qualitative research studies (Darawsheh, 2014). Although further research is needed to explore the outcomes of employing reflexivity for ensuring rigour in qualitative research, the research in this study, using reflexivity, has found that the process of detachment, bracketing, and developing the relationship between the researcher and his participants has been a worthy exercise in validating the trustworthiness of both the research design, process, and overall findings including their validation and authentication. As this chapter comes to a close, a discussion of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this research has been explored as well as exploring phenomenology, the chosen methodology. The chapter closes with a section on demanding rigor and reflexivity in qualitative research. In the next chapter, the themes are identified and discussed.

## Chapter 4. Findings

### 4.1 University Context

According to the Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25, the aim of the university, where participants studied and academic faculty taught, is to support students as they become highly employable, creative and culturally rich graduates, with the capacity to find employment that will enable them to be agents for change in a connected world. The university is a research-intensive university, with over 16,400 UK undergraduate and over 1,500 UK postgraduate students (as of 2019). The main campus is based in the City bearing its name and also has a presence in London (focused on postgraduate and professional courses) as well as internationally in China, Singapore and online.

When considering access to the university regarding disabled students, the proportion of UK-domiciled undergraduate first degree students with a registered disability has risen year on year, equivalent to a 3.5% increase over 5 years. There have been sustained increases in the number of students with cognitive and learning disabilities accessing the university. Provision of support for these students has increased to reflect the changing needs of students and this will continue to improve over the course of the implementation of this plan. The provision comes in the form of student support that includes targeted support for disabled students and it is called Disability Advice and Guidance. This team is responsible for the coordinating support for disabled students and provides a specialist guidance and support service for all prospective and current students. Support is provided for a range of impairments that include Specific Learning Difficulties that include dyslexia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia. Student support provides a confidential service, and this support includes services that include but are not limited to access to independent specialist support tutors, the loan of specialist equipment and software, and

assistance with obtaining funding to support disability-related study needs with the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA).

Reasonable adjustments are provided and are defined as any change which will help a disabled person to access the same opportunities as a non-disabled person. These adjustments include but are not limited to exam support, library support, extra time, use of a PC, covered overlays, and longer library book loans. DSA is awarded to eligible students who have a specific learning difficulty and are purely based on need while helping to pay for extra costs students may have when studying a selected course that might include a one-to-one study skills support tutor, travel costs, or mind mapping assistive software. The university shares on its website that the aim in providing these services is to reduce any disadvantage a student may experience as a result of their disability and support students in their independence. The university is clearly dedicated to serving a wide range of students and promotes a positive learning atmosphere for students with dyslexia. To ensure confidentiality and that all participants stay anonymous, the specific university sources used in this section have not been included.

## **4.2 Description of Participants**

Table 1 summarises the participant information for the reader. The participants' dyslexia diagnosis is also included in the table. There was a total of nine students interviewed for this study: as mentioned previously, five students were first or second year students working on their bachelor's degree, one masters-level student, two PhD students and one student in the final year of veterinary school. The wide range of students at different levels in their journey had two things in common. They all had a diagnosis of dyslexia and they were all degree-seeking

students at the university. The different levels added to the richness of the data collection in relation to capturing their experiences. Students participated on a ‘first come first served basis,’ meaning that the first eight or nine students that responded to a call for this study and who fit the criteria of being enrolled in the university and self-identifying as dyslexic were invited to participate in this study. The fact that three students were not diagnosed with dyslexia until after they started university shows that there might be students who are struggling in the secondary system while a formal diagnosis could lead to school-based support given the challenges that they face. It was important to hear from students in their undergraduate, graduate, and PhD levels to understand the experiences of students overall across the university. This finding demonstrates that there are some students who are likely never to have been supported during their secondary schooling and subsequently are never given the opportunity to enrol in higher education.

### **4.3 Description of Faculty Participants**

The recruitment of the faculty participants came later in the data collection process due to the difficulty in finding participants. There was a point when it was considered to not include faculty participants in this research study because of the challenges in recruiting academic staff. I laboured on because I needed to hear from faculty about the implications for the best way to move forward and to also share their recommendations in the form of the research findings. Academic faculty have power in the learning environment and see first-hand the types of support that students receive. Academic faculty can play an inclusive role and therefore add significantly to the learning environment of their students, and this includes those students with dyslexia in their classrooms. Hearing how the academic faculty members create this inclusive

environment from their point of view enhances the overall study and hearing directly from academic faculty gives insight regarding how their efforts to help students can be supported.

Hence, it was of utmost importance to include academic staff because we need the perspectives of academic staff in the learning environment as well as understanding the skills they have and are supported with in the learning environment. It was important to discern what was similar or different that academic faculty shared in comparison to what student participants shared. Hence, after repeated attempts, I was able to reach my intended goal of interviewing two academic staff members for this study. Both were female and had been with the university for over ten years. They welcomed the opportunity to be participants and both commented in the interview that they felt that the study would be worthwhile and yield positive results. Finally, both participants were teaching, or had taught, students with dyslexia in their respective roles. One participant was teaching face-to-face while the other was teaching some face-to-face courses while also conducting online courses.



1.1 Table 1. Participants

<b>Male or Female</b>	<b>Degree Programme</b>	<b>Dyslexia diagnosis</b>
<b>Male #1</b>	<b>First year bachelor's degree student</b>	<b>Grade 9 in high school</b>
<b>Female #2</b>	<b>PhD candidate and mature student</b>	<b>Grade 5 in primary school</b>
<b>Female #3</b>	<b>PhD candidate</b>	<b>Third year at university</b>
<b>Male #4</b>	<b>Master's degree, applying to a PhD programme</b>	<b>Primary school</b>
<b>Male #5</b>	<b>First year bachelor's degree student</b>	<b>First year at university</b>
<b>Male #6</b>	<b>First year university student</b>	<b>First year at university</b>
<b>Female #7</b>	<b>Third year veterinary school</b>	<b>Primary school</b>
<b>Female #8</b>	<b>Second year, bachelor's degree</b>	<b>Grade 1</b>
<b>Male #9</b>	<b>First year bachelor's degree</b>	<b>First year at university</b>
<b>Academic Staff Participants</b>	<b>Full academic staff</b>	<b>PhD in field of study</b>
<b>Female #1</b>	<b>Academic Instructor</b>	<b>Diagnosed with Dyslexia in secondary school</b>
<b>Female #2</b>	<b>Academic Instructor</b>	<b>No Dyslexia</b>

#### 4.4 Emerging Themes

The themes that emerged during the research are summarised below while the details shared by students help to support the themes that have been identified with an emphasis on hearing precisely what the students are experiencing. The ‘voices’ of the student participants and academic staff can then help to support policy- and decision-making bodies that conceptualise and fund the support mechanisms provided to students with dyslexia in higher education. Five main themes were identified during the thematic analysis of the interview data. Within each theme I present data from students as I explain their experiences with dyslexia. What follows are three themes that emerged through the thematic analysis of the data gained from interviewing the two academic staff members that participated in this study. The themes that emerged for students are:

1. Most preferred support – this is where students explained the types of support that helped them through the education system;
2. Self-advocacy – within this theme, I explain how students advocated for themselves as they navigated their way through the education system;
3. Tutoring – it was evident from the interviews that tutoring played a significant role in the students’ educational experiences;
4. Faculty knowledge and skills in supporting students with dyslexia – under this theme I highlight some of the challenges faced by staff as they try to support students with dyslexia;
5. Delays caused by financial challenges – students experienced challenges with their funding and that impacted their educational experiences.

Two academic staff members were interviewed for this study and three main themes were identified during thematic analysis of the interview data. Each respective theme is briefly described and the themes are also mentioned throughout the analysis when they intersect with the students' themes. A summary of the themes is included toward the end of this chapter:

1. More education and training and share inclusive strategies – the academic staff members interviewed shared the types of education and training they received, as well as described the training that would be beneficial for academic staff as it would promote inclusive practices in their teaching;
2. Inform academics which students have dyslexia – the academic staff interviewed shared that they would like to know which of their students in their classrooms have dyslexia;
3. Develop skills and support for students – the academic staff members interviewed stated that they saw a need for more skills development and support for their students.

This chapter presents the findings from the participants' interviews. Having interviewed both students and academic staff, the findings are organized according to the emerging themes identified through an inductive thematic analysis where I have allowed the findings from the interviews to speak for themselves. Within the themes there are further subthemes that were identified in accordance with the data that was collected. Each theme and subtheme is described, commentary on and analysis of these themes and subthemes are provided, and then findings are presented. Some tables are also included with analysis summarising some of the data that seemed relevant to answering the dissertation's research questions. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of students with dyslexia at a university. The research further explored the academic staff's understanding of the experiences of students with

dyslexia. The following questions were developed to help guide the research in order to hear the voices of students with dyslexia in higher education:

1. What are dyslexic students' experiences about the support provided to them by the university?
2. What are academic faculty's experiences with students diagnosed with dyslexia at the university?
3. What are the possibilities for improvement in terms of the delivery of services for students with dyslexia?

#### 4.4.1 Theme 1: The Most Preferred Support

For students who experience problems and challenges in school, the idea that there is something not right or that different types of specialized support might be available is often not considered. One student shares: "I dismissed it and thought I am not very good at math and words just jumble around when I read, it is what it is" (#1). Hence, many students go through their lives with dyslexia without receiving specialised and sometimes easy to implement support that could help them access learning and achievement. One student's perception about the university was that "It's difficult for the university to really know whether or not you are dyslexic or just struggling" (#3). What is interesting about this is that we now have tests and can determine with accuracy if a student has dyslexia and we can also identify what is needed to help a student access information by providing learning support.

Another student shares his experience of being "statemented," which is the term he used to describe the process of gaining some support that a student can get if diagnosed with dyslexia: "So anyways, I went to university and after getting there you are promised all this support. However, and this is changing now, but when you first get acknowledged as having a disability you get 'statemented'" (#5). The student explained that being 'statemented' involves a

psychologist diagnosing what your condition is, which is then certified by the psychologist. As the student continued, “Then you go for a needs assessment as well where someone determines what is required to assist you so that you’ll learn so that you’re not at a learning disadvantage.”

This student succinctly explains the idea behind the support in place to ensure that students are not at a learning disadvantage. These insights are interesting when thinking about the academic staff who shared that many of their colleagues have never been given any professional development concerning special needs or how to meet the needs of students with special needs. Of the faculty staff interviewed, Academic #1 stated that they do know of a working definition of dyslexia, but this is because this academic staff member was diagnosed with dyslexia as a student in secondary school.

When it comes to getting support in place for students with dyslexia, there were varied responses about the ease of access. One student shared “So I have gone through university, but the support was always lacking and it was always late” (#6). Another student shared ‘I went to the dyslexia support centre, which is next to the guild’ while another student shared ‘I am on the mailing list for the dyslexia support people, so they will email me about things like that’ (#7). So it seems that the students interviewed did find out about how to get support, while they were also added to mailing lists from the “dyslexia support people.” There were other students who found the process challenging: “They have to go through the whole process of getting a meeting, which is quite hard” (#7). This student was offering advice for anyone who maybe did not know how to receive the help that is offered or needed. It was also observed that “... for the people whose parents don’t know, or for the people who get the support from the college, they have to get the test done again at the college.” This shows that there are steps to take and students need to take the initiative to get the help that they need at university.

Students who were able to find the support that was needed were notably appreciative: “I mean with the university you email them with any inquiries and they’ll get back to you straight away” (#5). Another student mentioned that the people with whom they worked “are really non-judgmental” (#6). In addition, the support team was well regarded with a student remarking “... if I was struggling, I know where to go, they have a really good support team there. They make it very clear, and it’s all about support and things.” There was another student who shared that the university really was trying to help, stating that there was “help that I wasn’t that aware of, so I think that they really made a movement towards making me take [up] the opportunity” (#6). He describes this as a “movement towards” him to take advantage of what is available. The students interviewed were highly appreciative of the work and effort being made to help them: “I think you can always be more and university has been a really good support and really helpful” (#6).

The insights of students at the university demonstrate that a lot of good things are happening to address the challenges that students with dyslexia face. This research specifically asks students what is working and what is not working for them. There were some affirming comments made by students concerning the steps the university has taken toward them as students in order to help them learn and grow. As this discussion continues, the themes that emerged from the data collection in an HE setting will be reviewed.

Students with dyslexia sometimes need support during their learning processes in order to be successful in their studies. This support can be, but is not limited to, extra time for exams, tutoring services, additional time to check out a book, or receiving orientation training at the beginning of the semester which helps students to understand how to get the help that they need. These supports are offered at different universities and vary from university to university.

A theme based on ‘the most effective support’ emerged through the interview process while discussing the types of support that were available to the participants. The participants were very open to sharing what was most helpful in order to help them through some of their difficulties, thereby allowing them to experience success in their university study. Success is defined as earning passing grades that enable each participant to continue studying the following semester, hence they do not drop out of university. What emerged is a general description of the most effective support theme.

### *Extra Time*

Participants in this study indicated that they felt supported because they are provided extra time both to complete assignments and to write examinations. Students who received 25% extra time for exam completion found it to be very helpful, and the students mentioning this support overwhelmingly expressed the positive impact that this support provides in the teaching and learning process. Extra time can be defined as up to 25% additional time given to students for the completion of exams. An example of the impact of extra time was remarked on as “one of the supports extended examination times, so having that little bit longer time in the examination room, that 25% extra that is very useful” (#3). This student was appreciative of the time they get to write examinations. This is important because dyslexia is a reading disorder, and when students are placed under time pressure, it can exacerbate the reading challenge, thereby causing the student to underachieve and consequently not allow them to demonstrate what they know during the exam. These sentiments were echoed by student #4 who remarked

When I did the exams I got 25% of extra time and I got use of the computer as well. Because they were actual exams I could type up which really helps in terms of it stopping from being all jumbled... So yes, the final exams were on a computer and were with extra time. (#3).

The student highlighted that using the computer coupled with the extra time “stopped it (the actual exam) from being all jumbled.” This means that the student’s output was supported by not having to traditionally write on paper and the extra time gave them some room to collect her thoughts and perform well in a pressurised exam situation.

Although awarding extra time is not mentioned directly by the academic staff who were interviewed, the reason for this might be due to not receiving professional development that would share different types of support and then explain the reasons for why such support is made available to students. The academic staff members interviewed shared that professional development and support that equips faculty to understand students with dyslexia is not available in their professional development training.

### *Extended Book Loans*

Extended book loans are made available for students with dyslexia to give them more time with printed material. Because dyslexia affects reading and the ability to comprehend written text, allowing for additional time so that students can access printed material can be a game changer for students. One student shared that

... probably one of the most critical features that they put in place for me was an extended book loan which meant that I could take a book out from the library and you would loan then for normally 5 days but I got 19 days. (#5)

It is important to note the use of the phrase ‘critical features’ because, from the point of view of the student, this facet of being able to have a book for a longer period of time made the difference in his success and learning. There was another student who stated that “Well, I have extra time in place and when I come to the library to loan out books I get extra loan time on them. You also get different technology as well” (#6). This student was thinking about the



support that helped him succeed and to access academic material, and he mentioned the library loan period as a necessary support behind his success. The university library is a very important resource for students to be able to access in order to conduct research by reading books and articles. Access to these printed materials is important for all students while extended access to these printed materials helps students with dyslexia to potentially succeed in higher education. Hence the extended time for book loans directly assists students with dyslexia who generally need more time to comprehend written texts. This suggestion points to students needing more time to support their reading and comprehension of the texts assigned as mandatory reading.

### *One-to-one Support*

One-to-one support is described as support or assistance provided by a knowledgeable and responsible adult for students to help with reading and writing or with whatever else was needed at the time. This subtheme was identified directly in the thematic analysis as something that was described by participants in the research. One participant identified their most effective assistance as “probably the one-to-one support. We went through an essay I had written and that was probably the best support I have had. It was really useful, she showed me a few tricks on the laptop that I hadn’t realize were there” (#6).

Another student characterises the one-to-one support as “basically she helps me with anything that she thinks I need help with. She is a really good tutor. She proofreads all of my work and helps me figure out sentence structure, paragraph structure” (#8). In other words, one-to-one support is described as help that comes in the time of need. Student #7 described it as being “available and it is solid help with what is needed to be successful.”

Student #2 stated that I think my mom always suspected I was dyslexic throughout school as well because she used to help me with my homework in the same way she would help

out kids at her school that had dyslexia. Because my mom treated me like that I kind of suspected that something was up.

In the case of another student, they remarked "... through[out] the tests my Dad tutored me every evening and that really is what got me through" (#4). Hence parents were the people involved in making the difference in a one-to-one support relationship. More support came in the form of a mother who knew the right questions to ask. Some students can potentially be disadvantaged because they do not know what to ask or how to ask for help. As student #5 shared,

I did not think to ask those questions, but my mom is a teacher. So for someone whose mom or dad or whoever doesn't think to ask those questions when that student gets to university, it's not really an equal opportunity for them.

'Equal opportunity' could refer to the help received by a parent who is knowledgeable and understanding about how to access services at a university. As student #8 stated, "My mom's an educational psychologist so she kind of knows all about that field and she took me to one of her psychologist friends. Who then did a test on me to make sure this was a solid thing." As a result, when your mother is a school psychologist, you would certainly have an advocate that you can discuss your questions with, one who can explicitly tell you what to do and how to do it. For example, this mother could potentially advise the student to call student support services and make an appointment because she knows that help is available for students.

In these next instances, there was someone there who knew about dyslexia or who could help at that moment. Student #2 stated that "There was some people and they were accessible whenever I had a problem or required a deadline." The idea of having help that is accessible is important to point out because students are completing assignments that have a deadline and when they need help, it is needed at that moment or the assignment is turned in without any

support provided. Still another student (#4) mentioned a significant person: “But with the help, it was a gentleman in the university counselling service; it was a bit sporadic, but it was there”. Although sporadic at times, the student shared, it was help that was there and it was accessible. In another instance, it was a mother who actually worked with students who were dyslexic. Student #5 underlined that “My mom works in a primary school with children that have learning disabilities so well, so my mom’s always kind of been like, yeah, you’re probably a bit dyslexic”. The mother of this student was able to give the kind of counselling and support that was described as ‘pastoral’ by another student. These participants mentioned that there were significant people who helped with planning and organizing activities for students at university. Although in this case a parent was helpful, it is important to point out that parents are not always objective and rational where their children are concerned. Although this can also depend on the professional background of the parent as to how helpful they can be, it often depends on a professional who has the background in dealing with learning challenges that makes the difference between success and failure for the student.

Another aspect of dyslexia which can be challenging involves organizational and time management skills. The students shared that significant people helped them to stay organized and focused on what they needed to do. For the student to be able to know the correct question to ask can make a huge difference to their academic experience. Three students were not diagnosed with dyslexia until they started attending university. One student shared that school was “difficult most of the time,” especially “without the supports.” Student #5 remarked that “We somehow need to anticipate what is the ‘right’ or proper question for students and then provide answers to those questions.” We can see yet again that someone in the student’s life gave advice and assistance to help them access what they needed to be successful.

As we conclude this subtheme, it is important to point out that there were some students who were aware of the support that was available, but that support did not help the student to succeed. Student #3 underlined that they did not find useful support for the sciences: “I found tangible supports but did not find them useful for the sciences. I get a few letters mixed up, so I get the words mixed up, and also the long words.” This student also shared that, “I mentioned it to the dyslexia support, and they told me that do not know how to help me.” She concluded that, “Regarding dyslexia support at the university, they are good, but they’re not geared towards the clinical sciences”.

Academic #1 shared that they did not receive specific training in different ways to support students with dyslexia. This same academic staff member stated that the only way that this would change was if there is a change in policy and that faculty are required to attend training. Although the support centre did not have a person who could help the student, there is help available for students as they continue to work towards a level of success.

A final thought shared by a participant highlights that there are professionals who still do not think that dyslexia is something that is real in the life of a student. Student #9 observed that “I heard other people say that it [dyslexia] wasn’t a real thing.” This comment has far-reaching implications because it points to students’ perception of the mind set of some of the academic staff. More critical conversations need to be had and professors need training on how to support students with dyslexia at the university level. Finally, the subthemes that emerged in this first theme regarding the most effective support were extra time for tests, extended book loans, and one-to-one support. Students made it very clear how these supports helped and supported their learning journeys.

#### 4.4.2 Theme 2: Self-advocacy

A common understanding of the meaning of self-advocacy is the ability to seek out help for oneself even though you may face obstacles or find it difficult along the way, such as experiencing thoughts in terms of either giving up or continuing to persevere. The theme of self-advocacy emerged in the thematic analysis in that there were participants who simply kept looking for help until they found it. Based on participants' responses, such resilient behaviour was evident in all of the participants. As I analysed the themes, I continued to ask myself where these particular students learned how to advocate and fight for themselves. There seemed to be something in their background that helped them to realize that they were self-aware, possessed a confidence in themselves, and that they could achieve positive results even in the midst of difficult and challenging circumstances. Students seemed to be able to rise to the occasion and do things for themselves that caused them to achieve a level of success. One student stated that:

I applied ahead of time and they put this support plan in place so that when I arrived to the university it was all there and ready for me so I had the support, along with extended time in examinations. (#1)

What is interesting here is that the student knew that she should or could apply ahead of time.

The same student remarked on her sibling's experience:

I have an older dyslexic brother; he went to a different university but he went without knowing that he had dyslexia. While he was there the psychologist determined that he does have dyslexia, and so I had an inkling that universities do support students that have dyslexia so then it was a case of going online and doing the research myself.

This student knew about potential university support because her brother had dyslexia. Because of this knowledge, he knew what he needed to access in order to get the support that was available; in other words, her sibling acted on this 'inkling' and he was able to get the support he needed.

The two students below stated that they had to go to a psychologist and share that they were having problems: “I had to go personally and see an educational psychologist and pay to have a report to send to the student finance office” (#2). In this student’s instance, “the university did not advertise the availability of any assistance, it was very much a case of you having to go yourself and say look I am having a problem” (#3). It was highlighted that the university did not advertise the help that was available. This is very much from the point of view of a student who is trying to organize certain support to help them succeed. The university has a student support services centre and it also has a manual for students. What is challenging here is that from the point of the student, there was no advertisement of the help available. Hence, in order to help students with dyslexia, we need to find ways to reach students so they are aware of support as and when they need it.

Student #5 stated that support “was not proactive either” while “if you wanted student support you had to set an appointment.” It would appear that, once again, a student needed to self-advocate in order to receive the support. This might mean that the support was not easy to access and it was not easily communicated to this student in terms of where to go or what to do to get this support. Student #4 observed that “I worked, hence university students with dyslexia had to be persistent to get help, and it was not always so easy to obtain.” This student found it even more challenging to access support because of having a part time job outside the university. The student support services office is generally open from 9:00am until 5:00pm Monday through Friday, therefore students who both work and attend university often find it challenging to manage the traditional schedule of open office hours.

Still more students describe their experience. Student #5 remarked that “For the first couple of weeks you don’t know what you’re doing. I had to research it, and once I had

researched it and rung a few people up I had a better idea of what I was doing”. This student instead called others to get help. Another student shared that “I just went over there on my open days. I went to the university open days about four times and so I was pretty familiar with the support team” (#6). Hence, a student with dyslexia has to actively seek out the people needed to get a support plan in place: “If you want a support plan you have to actively seek out the people you need” (#7).

These two students described their experiences by sharing that “It was very much ‘find it yourself and organize yourself,’ which is not a trait most dyslexics have” (#6). This student is quite self-aware in observing that finding things themselves and organizing things themselves are not strong skills sets found in dyslexics. Students mention a more proactive approach, namely where the support centre might be more proactive in communicating the help that is available and which dyslexics need: “So I am trying and I got at that on my own [and] I am quite stubborn so I am probably not the right person to ask, I will first try to do things by myself” (#7).

This student added the word ‘stubborn’ in the attempt to describe ‘sticktoitiveness’ in terms of making sure to get the help needed in order to be succeed. What about the student who is not ‘stubborn’ and who simply does give up? It is important that we consider the nuance of the experiences of students. The above student shares insight into what it is like to be dyslexic by adding to the fact that students with dyslexia can struggle with organization and independent self-advocacy. Still other students interviewed described self-advocacy in a slightly different way. It is described as anticipating the challenge of being a student in higher education. Student #2 remarked that “Whereas I know that this was going to be such a massive step up and it was going to be a lot of reading.” In addition, “The difficult level was going to hike up a bit, I knew

that I needed to have that support.” This same student decided not to wait. “I figured that I wouldn’t wait until I got to the point that I couldn’t cope, but instead I would have the support in place already before I get to that point”. It is also interesting to explore what it takes for students to reach out for help and in this vein Student #3 observed that “I don’t really know what made me seek them out. I think it got to the point where my grades were starting to matter in that I wanted to go to graduate level study.”

As students continued to share examples of self-advocacy, some of their insights included mentioning potential ideas about more support, thus advocating for themselves albeit using a respectful tone. Student #3 observed that “It would be good if there were a bit more [support]. Just general support for everybody and go from there,” adding that they meant general support for everyone and going from there might potentially assist students with dyslexia as well as other students in the class.

Faculty member #1 interviewed advocated strongly for what was termed ‘inclusive practices’ that could potentially benefit all students: “Inclusive practice in the form of good practices is what is needed to address the issues for students with dyslexia”.

The idea and concept of inclusive practices relates to providing good teaching and learning pedagogy to all students, thereby meeting the needs of students with dyslexia as well as other students in the classroom. The challenge of inclusive practices is that by implementing them, students with dyslexia and their varied needs could potentially be missed. Nevertheless, some of these individual supports are described by Student #4:

As I said it is not very typical to get an email that says ‘Hey how are you getting on, I understand that you’ve got a deadline coming up pretty soon you should really think about doing that now’.



This student is describing a level of intimate and caring support that does not exist in his experience, and remarks that it might be worthwhile for students to receive this level of support. Indeed, receiving an email reminder might be helpful for students. Student #4 continued in this vein: “I understand that some people think that would be a bit overbearing, a bit parental, but at times that’s really what you required.” Although potentially perceived as excessive by some students, this student remarked that this could be the difference between success and failure. Indeed, this student went even further: “Or even for them to send out emails as reminders and put a note there that says if you don’t want to receive these emails anymore just reply and that’s fine”.

Giving students the chance to ‘opt out’ of these emails could be a worthwhile idea that might require little effort to implement by the student support team. It might simply be a matter of sending emails to students and giving them the opportunity to receive a more intimate and ‘parental’ level of service. By ‘parental’ I understand that the student means that there is someone who is rigorously checking up on them to ensure that they are doing well, and that this level of support would be welcomed by some of the students with dyslexia. The reason for these ideas is described by Student #6 who observed, “It’s not like, advertised or anything, openly saying ‘come here and we will sort you out,’ [and] I kept asking what I would need to do to get a support plan.” The experience of this student denotes a frustration that support was not advertised, meaning that she needed to seek it out aggressively and that she kept asking what was needed to get a support plan in place. In other words, there was a level of persistence on the part of this student meaning that she kept pushing for a support plan until one was put in place.

Students with dyslexia shared their experiences in a way that highlights the struggles they face when describing their experiences advocating for themselves: Student # 8 shared “I

find reading quite difficult, I need it to be quite an easy book to read". The literature review and definition of dyslexia all point to students with dyslexia struggling with reading. Student #9 discussed her grades involve maths being lower and her experience reading as a student with dyslexia: "My grades in general were always just a bit lower in math than in the other subjects and also with my reading as well." This student described her own experience as well as the experiences of other students with dyslexia as the latter group generally achieve lower grades as a result of their challenges. Student #8 remarked that simply ordering off a menu can sometimes be a struggle: "So last night I actually ended up ordering the wrong pizza because I didn't read the menu right 'cause everything just sort of jumbled together". The feeling of just lagging behind and feeling lost was expressed by Student #9: "Basically I just felt like I was lagging behind a little bit, I felt like I wasn't on the same page as others".

Both organization and sequencing are struggles that many students with dyslexia experience, which they then try their best to resolve:

It's almost just help with organizing your stuff, and things that people with dyslexia tend to struggle with, and since I have an issue with sequencing sometimes it can be a bit of an issue just sort of...doing a bunch of things at once it's difficult so just breaking it up into different shapes and forms it is helpful when someone says okay well, study this on Tuesday, do that on Wednesday. (Student #6)

This student very aptly describes the plight of a student with dyslexia and provides an example of an intervention such as having someone to help to break things up into more manageable parts and also that they might be trained in some time management skills in order to achieve this.

Finally, Student #6 stated that "I'm not going to lie. So it's a bit stressful especially when you've just moved to university." This student underlined that it is stressful to move to a university city, start classes at the university level, and then have to first find out that support is

available, and to then find the office that provides the support, and then get a support plan in place and actually receive the level of support that is required.

In the final analysis of self-advocacy, students who possessed skills that caused them to keep fighting and diligently pursue support were the students who received the support and benefitted from it by achieving a positive result in the classroom. A potential idea expressed earlier by a participant is for students to receive explicit instructions on what it means to advocate for one's self and to seek and not stop until the support that is available is in place and working positively on behalf of the student.

#### 4.4.3 Theme 3: Tutoring

Dictionary.com defines tutoring as to act as a tutor: to teach or instruct, especially privately. Tutoring offers direct specialist help that is delivered one-on-one by a specialist in the academic field. The tutor meets with the student at a mutually agreeable time and subsequently provides support for the student. The theme of effective tutoring emerged as part of the data analysis and it was a powerful tool in that it greatly helped many students to the degree that they did not know what they would have done without it. The descriptions of effective tutoring offer us an insight regarding what this support looks like from the point of view of the student, reveals the challenges that students have, and also shows the type of tutor that should be sought after and recruited.

Social and emotional understanding was mentioned by several students while others expressed that they wondered how the tutor was so knowledgeable about dyslexia. Student #2 remarked that "Yes, she [the tutor] understands the kind of support you need going through the process." The same student was impressed by the knowledge of dyslexia. "I was wondering

about her knowledge about dyslexia. She must know an awful lot about it and is able to provide the type of support that you need.” In addition, Student #3 expressed that “I don’t know where she gets her knowledge, just maybe from the company itself.” From these quotes, it appears that the tutors are employed as capable academics or support staff and that the student is paired with the tutor. The knowledge of the tutor of dyslexia is described as ‘impressive’ by two different students who enjoyed this type of support.

Another student described the tutoring as ‘pastoral’, as if the tutor validated the student as being capable while also facilitating their freedom to share their challenges. The idea of pastoral care means supportive counselling, a guiding, and encouraging individuals. Although there is little research in the area of the tutor as encourager or providing pastoral support, Ireson (2004) states that the effectiveness of tutoring relates to the content and structure of the programme that is followed. Student #5 remarked that “Oftentimes, it’s more pastoral. It’s like, ‘Ah, yes, I understand that you feel this difficulty, here are some notes’. You know what I mean?” When the student shared “You know what I mean?” he is describing the actions of the tutor to first understand his challenges and then to provide notes that were exactly what he needed in order to firmly grasp the concepts that were being presented. Student #7 shared “I had a chat with her and came up with some good ideas,” namely that good ideas came from the discussions with the tutor.

A student with challenges in the clinical sciences truly benefited from having a private tutor contracted by an outside service with prior background knowledge. Student #7 stated that

Speaking with her was probably the first time that someone came up with something relatively useful for the clinical scientists... Regarding medical science she said she would look into the long words.

Student #9 expressed some specific things that the tutor would do to provide particular help to the student: “It’s for someone to go through structure with you and things like that, so like if you’ve misunderstood something that you’ve read maybe they can give you a hand with it.” Hence, the tutor came up with something relatively useful. Going through the assignment structure was also identified as helpful due to potential misunderstandings.

Students also described the traits of a good tutor. The following student expressed the ultimate value of having a tutor that could help them because they could not have finished the degree without their help. Student #5, a postgraduate student remarked, “I don’t think I could have completed my degree without his help.” Being “lucky” is a phrase used by Student #7 regarding her access to a tutor who knew the subject well: “I’m quite lucky, my tutor is the head of the dyslexia support part of the veterinary science.” For this student this meant that she had a tutor who knew exactly how to help her. Being the head of the dyslexia department meant that she was knowledgeable about the university, the type of assignments, and the expectations that were required to ensure student success. An effective tutor is also described as a tutor who is knowledgeable to the specific course content (Ireson, 2004). Hence the tutor needs to be knowledgeable as well as pastoral or compassionate. Student #7 related that

I have gone to my tutor who was quite good. She used to help dyslexic students and she also has a PhD in science background so she knows the level of the course and the level of the scientific background.

Student #8 defines the level of support required, remarking that

The person that helps me [tutor] is specific to my course subject, which you know probably makes a bit of sense because it just sort of levels the playing field and that’s what the dyslexia help is supposed to be about.

By “levelling the playing field,” this means that the support made available to students with dyslexia provides the student with the support they require and the opportunity to be successful

as well as competitive with other students in the classroom. By levelling the field, the dyslexic student receives the specialised support needed to access the higher education curriculum material that other students can access without needing such support, thereby assisting the student with dyslexia.

Tutoring continues to be described as a type of support, including when Student #6 remarked that “I got 37 hours every year and she helps me with general stuff, looking at spelling and grammar.” This student’s only wish was that she could get more tutoring, but due to the high cost of tutoring which is paid for by the university, she was only able to receive the tutoring that was made available as support through the student support centre. Student #6 observed that the tutor “...helps me with writing essays or writing revision notes... she was extremely generous with her time and with assisting me.” Student #5 observed that she and the tutor “talked about what specifically the problem was and how it’s influenced me in the past.” In addition, Student #6 shared that his tutor “sat me down and she had already read the report, she highlighted things.” The tutor also “suggested software to me and she gave me examples of them for the purpose of seeing if I would benefit from them, [or] the tutor helped me with writing essays or writing revision notes”.

In these examples, we see very specific types of help being identified by the students, including talking about the problem, the tutor having read the report, suggesting software that could be helpful, assistance with writing essays and revision. These very specific forms of assistance demonstrate why many students interviewed pointed out the effectiveness of private tutoring and why it was so effective.

Finally, Student #6 also identified perceived challenges for the tutor sharing that “she’s an external source and does not have the university bargain.” This most likely means that the

tutor is paid a fraction of the amount of money in her job compared to a tenured professor at a university. This implies that, from the student point of view, the tutor who is directly helping them is not remunerated in the same way as a university academic might be, but the impact of the tutor helping the student is quite substantial. Student #8 observed that the challenges that she would face when booking a room at the library: “So, whenever we meet up in the library, we have to book a room. But she cannot book the rooms because she’s not a university lecturer, she’s a guest”. The implications of this are that with tutoring constituting such a direct benefit for students, it is potentially positive for the university to support one-on-one tutoring more directly by providing rooms and expanding the service for students with dyslexia by allocating more than 37 hours in one academic calendar year.

In summary, students identified tutoring as one-to-one consistent help that was organized, structured, pastoral, sensitive to the feelings of the student, while the tutor was also described as both knowledgeable about dyslexia as well as an expert in the subject the student was studying. Student #6 expressed that her only wish was that they could have more tutoring hours added to their yearly allotment. The experiences of students with their tutors were similar in that the tutor was knowledgeable about both dyslexia and the subject the student was being tutored in.

#### 4.4.4 Theme 4: Faculty Knowledge and Skills in Supporting Students with Dyslexia

The academic staff of the university were mentioned multiple times by the participants by sharing some of the very good support that academic staff were implementing to help them succeed. Participants also mentioned that they shared some of the aspects that they wished the academic staff would do that would greatly help them. The participants’ experiences in some

cases vary greatly, but the information and data gained from their experiences shows the effectiveness of what the university is doing well to support students with dyslexia. The participant experiences shared below also shows areas for discussion and potential improvement for not only students with dyslexia, but all students at the university. Indeed, Student #1 expressed that he overwhelmingly wanted his instructors to know that he is dyslexic: “So I do feel that there needs to be a bit of work put in place for that so the dyslexic student knows that the academic staff knows that they do have a learning difficulty”. The same sentiment was expressed by Academic #1, who stated that “as an instructor, I do not know if my students have dyslexia.” This finding shows that a student would like their instructor to know that they have dyslexia and the academic instructor would like to know “which of my students are dyslexic.” Perhaps this could in some way be addressed. Student #2 remarked, “some people, when you say you’re dyslexic, they patronize you. They think you’re not as clever as them and that’s just not the case”.

Feeling patronized can be degrading and potentially demotivating for the student. The solution is described by student #2 sharing “if I was to quote something that I wanted to say to them it would be “let them know that you know.” Part of letting the academic staff know that they know means that the academic staff is told which students are dyslexic in their classroom and the student is then contacted by the academic staff member and told that she knows that the student is dyslexic. Academic #1 shared a similar thought, observing that “Maybe it would help if I know that some of my students were dyslexic.” From both the academic faculty side and student side, this level of communication should be considered when setting up support systems for students with dyslexia while also providing professional development and support for



academic staff who when interviewed for this study expressed a strong desire to support and help their students achieve success in the classroom.

Student #2 continued by mentioning that there are staff who are specifically responsible for looking after students stating, “There’s the staff that are specifically responsible for looking after students with dyslexia. They are much more understanding of it”. It seems that there are academic staff in this student’s experience who were quite knowledgeable of dyslexia. And the same Student #2, “But like I said, there’s at least one member of the academic staff who is himself dyslexic.” This shows that students could identify with a staff member who was challenged with dyslexia as well, most likely because the academic staff member was open and honest about his challenges as a student with dyslexia. A better understanding of students with dyslexia could greatly improve the performance of students. Student #2 also shared that “Once I had the structure I could actually do it, but some teachers just didn’t understand that I didn’t get it.

By providing professional development for academic faculty, a greater understanding about how faculty can support students could be developed. Student #3 observed that “Tell them to not automatically assume that everyone knows how to put together a standard essay, that it needs to be taught explicitly... Most teachers just seem to think that you automatically know how to write an essay.” The idea of explicit teaching regarding how to write an essay and sharing what is expected at this level in higher education could benefit not only students with dyslexia, but all students in the classroom.

Student #5 describes uncomfortable feelings about going to their professor by sharing “Sometimes you don’t really want to discuss it with them because you don’t feel comfortable about it but if they ask then you just have it, and it’s worse to have to reiterate this to people

who don't understand." This student expressed a sincere desire for the academic staff member to have some level of understanding about what it means to have dyslexia. This same student stated that "I think if they had read and were mindful of my needs assessment that would have been helpful." Student #5 sensed that the professor knew nothing about them as evidenced by him sharing that the professor did not read his needs assessment. He came to that conclusion and then shared "so that part (reading the needs assessment) is not being enforced." From the student perspective, the academic faculty member maybe needs to have the reading of the needs assessment to be 'enforced.' But it is possible that the faculty member did not receive the needs assessment. It is challenging to think of enforcing professional educators to do things on behalf of their students to support them, yet it is important to remember that some faculty have large teaching loads with literally hundreds of students and material to grade and evaluate.

There seems to be a wide range of academic lecturers some of whom are knowledgeable of dyslexia while there are others who know little about dyslexia. There is also pressure experienced by Student #4 who stated that "They saw my request for additional assistance as being needy or not justified or putting me at an advantage compared to the other students". Somehow this student had a very negative experience where she was singled out as a student with dyslexia. But if you receive that assistance there is a fear that the same student #4 shares here by remarking:

...once you receive that [the assistance] you don't know what to do then, you'll follow up your relationship with your lecturer for the rest of your semester and you don't get your way anyway... If the lecturers made it clear they weren't interested then I just had to put up with it...It would be good if the lecturers did what they were expected to do. It would be good if they read the assessments...if they are going to do it, they should do it properly.

A direct and terse comment reflecting on the lack of excellence in teaching and learning can hopefully cause all of us to dig deeper and do our best on behalf of students. Their success

depends on the excellence of academic faculty to effectively engage with students who have dyslexia in their classrooms.

As mentioned previously, there were many positive experiences shared that students with dyslexia experienced with academic faculty at the university. We can capture some key insights by noting what helped students. Student #1 observed “There is one academic staff who does a very good job in the way she delivers her lectures and seminars are targeted at everybody.” This same student added that “more importantly they’re targeted at people who struggle, who have sort of a difficulty in grasping and understanding.” The word ‘targeted’ gives the impression that faculty and staff knew that students with dyslexia were in their classroom and they provided the needed help and support. Student #2 shared “The staff has been really supportive and really understanding.” This points to a positive interaction with academic faculty that resulted in the student experiencing a secure and supportive learning environment. This secure and supportive learning environment is what students need in order to be successful in school. Student #3 described her experience as feeling ‘safe.’ “It really feels like it is a safe place to say that you are dyslexic.” When students feel ‘safe’ they are relaxed and able to learn and grow at the highest rate.

Specific help and aid were offered by teachers, with one student saying that “It’s very much done in a simplified format that I can understand and also it’s not in a patronizing format.” Another student (#4) described lecturers as “It was encouraging and there was even a lecturer who was dyslexic as well.” There were some highly praised lecturers who were open and approachable: Student #3 underlined that “Some of the lecturers are brilliant. They’ll go through their slides, they’ll go through them and talk about them a lot.” This interaction is with a student in the lecture hall with several hundred students. It shows that some academic faculty

were tuned in to making sure that the students in their classes were understanding the material in the lecture. Student #3 went on to share:

They'll also give handouts that are extra notes to go with the slides. The disability centre sends out a page to all the lecturers saying that I had dyslexia, this is what I struggled with, and my work might be lacking in these certain area.

While there are other students and academic staff who seemed not to receive this type of information, it is apparent that the university tries to get information about those students with dyslexia to academic staff.

Student #4 observed that “teachers recognized that I found reading and writing difficult so they let me stay behind after class and gave me answers for it in how to actually write an essay, things like that”. This student shared specific ways that the academic faculty member directly helped her to succeed in the class. In the other case, the math teacher was also helpful: “My maths teacher actually helped me with my English homework more than my English teacher did.” What is important to point out is that the academic faculty member reached out to a student to where the faculty member got to know the student so well that she helped the student in another subject. This means that the faculty member developed a relationship of trust with the student, and the student benefitted greatly as a result.

Student #5 shared that “Some lecturers were sympathetic, and some weren't. I was very fortunate that my supervisor in my undergrad was very sympathetic; he assisted me through my dyslexia, I was very fortunate.” It would be advantageous if all students in higher education institutions ‘felt fortunate’ to have academic staff who were sympathetic and understanding. Student #6 described all the activities that staff do right, including the following: “They are more helpful to me but they're also more helpful to everyone else in that course that has some sort of problem.” The student noticed that the academic faculty member reached out to many

students, ensuring that everyone was learning who was experiencing challenges in the class.

They elaborated that

The staff at uni actually do quite a lot without having to specialize towards people with dyslexia. For example, they put the lectures notes up, the slides up, and they've got the recordings up, and they actually do quite a lot just for the average student.

Here we have a student with dyslexia who notices some solid inclusive teaching practices that support both herself as well as all the other students in the class, offering a constructive example of how inclusive teaching practices can greatly assist both dyslexic students as well as all students in the classroom. Student #7 remarked that,

It's not necessarily anything more they could do. This shows that some students can really 'feel' the level of support happening at the university to meet their learning needs while at university. This same student shared that 'I do not feel like any of them come across judgmental. I feel like they are all very understanding in regards to that subject.'

Academic staff that demonstrate a level of understanding of what it means for a student to have dyslexia helps to support and strengthen that student's chance to achieve success. In addition,

All of them [upload] the slides, so you want the info again you can look at it. And as far as the academic staff, anytime I have spoken to them about anything or with any sort of an issue that I have had with the work, or making a deadline, they are always understanding and really helpful. (#7)

Students described the lecturers and teachers as supportive, and that the academic faculty did everything they could to make each student feel comfortable and provide an environment where questions were encouraged. The effective academic staff member seemed to set the tone for an inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

#### 4.4.5 Theme 5: Delays Caused by Financial Challenges

The theme of financial challenges emerged for participants in this study who needed financial help while there were some delays in getting the necessary support in place for students. These delays made it difficult for students in the very first semester in university; they were entitled to extra time for exams, needed cash to purchase a computer or for tutoring support, but this support was not put into place in time for it to be utilized. This created some serious challenges and difficulties for some students as a result. It is important to point out that students were thankful for the support that they had received, and they made a point to ensure that this was shared as part of my research. Student #7 remarked that “I do feel grateful to just get the help at all to be honest with you.” Students who did not need financial support as part of their support package did not experience the delays that some other students experienced.

Student #1 had to “... get a new needs assessment. In addition to these costs and a few other pounds, it was money that I didn’t have,” adding that “I am from a lowly family, so I couldn’t afford it before I went to university and I had to apply for hardship fund to get it done.” Student #2 stated that “the aid was not forthcoming for quite some time and this was less of a problem then because I still had aiding equipment from my undergrad.” In addition, Student #4 mentioned that although “The process is there to assist you [namely financial aid support], but you’re applying for it because it’s giving you access to student support”.

This student is thankful for the support that is available but is also challenged by the fact that there is a process involved, and this process takes time. Student #7 even mentioned the actual costs: “It costs £220 through the university [for the testing] so when I first thought about it I thought that was quite a lot.” We can see that it takes time and persistence to get the support in place. Student #2 also described the support as being delayed: “So all of this assistance I

enjoyed up to this point, was not in place for the first 6 to 8 months of uni.” This is past the first semester and it took well into semester two before everything was in place for this student. Furthermore, Student #3 remarked that “I have gone through university but the support was always lacking, and it was always late.” It is a strong word to say “always lacking” and “always late.” This denoted a sense of frustration from this student who was trying to do his best to get the supports that he so desperately needed. Student #4 stated that “there is some structure there but it is a very slow, sluggish and difficult to access some sort of support.” Hence the supports are there to get but they are slow, sluggish, and difficult to access.

The impact of a lack of a support plan was shared by Student #6: “So, for my first couple months at university I didn’t have a support plan because it wasn’t implemented until after my meeting with a representative.” Therefore, it takes a period of time for students to get everything set up regarding their financial support. This period of time is perceived as slow moving for students who are already enrolled in university and have deadlines to submit work and complete exams. The impact of not receiving this support in time might not show up in this study because the student with dyslexia could potentially fail as a result of not receiving support in a timely manner which means that we never knew nor were able to capture the experience of this student. The student’s grade point average could also be affected because they have not performed as well due to not having the support available to them. Student #6 stated that “November last I had no support plan, so for the exams in January, as it stood, I didn’t get the extra time because my plan hadn’t gone through.” The impact of not getting the support in place for a student with dyslexia could be the difference between success and failure.

The final analysis is best articulated by Student #7 who remarked that “It’s been relatively slow [i.e. receiving the support]. I have come to university and I’ve done it just before

the semester.” As is evident from the participant responses, students over and over again expressed their thankfulness for the support they received; however, they lamented that it took a lot of time to get it in place. Given this finding, it is important to review systems for efficiency and effectiveness in order for students to receive the full benefit of the support that is available. Students’ ideas are expressed politely and, with this perspective based on their experiences, maybe something can be done to make simple adjustments so that students can more quickly receive the financial support that will help them succeed. Finally, the impact on students is felt deeply which is expressed by Student #2: “This had a horrible impact on me, and the year I wasn’t getting any assistance made me terribly low.” Student #3 stated that “It caused me quite a bit of depression and I had to go to counselling.

Hence, having to wait so long for the financial support to be in place affected some students adversely to the extent that they needed to receive counselling as a result. Therefore, it is important to reflect on ways to make services even more efficient than they already are, which is worth the effort when we assess the positive and negative experiences of students with dyslexia.

#### **4.5 Academic Staff Thematic Analysis**

As an introduction to the thematic analysis of the data collected by interviewing two academic staff members, it is important to outline the attitudes that seem to exist about dyslexia in a higher education setting. As faculty member #1 stated, “I can affirm with your research that we do not know how the different supports are helping students and maybe we should find a way to measure this.” The same academic staff member expressed and validated the research for this study. She also shared that “I am dyslexic myself and I have been ‘put down’ in the



workplace by my colleagues.” Another strong sentiment expressed about dyslexia concerned “The negative attitudes that have existed for dyslexic students over twenty-five years ago that included teachers thinking that dyslexic students are lazy or unmotivated still exist today. But these attitudes are unspoken attitudes.”

The only way that these attitudes are going to change is through education, training, and dialogue. Three themes emerged in the thematic analysis process. I will unpack each theme in more detail below and I will share and identify corroboration between the academic staff perspective and the student data collected:

Theme 1: More education and training and share inclusive practices;

Theme 2: Tell academics who has dyslexia;

Theme 3: Develop skills and support for students.

#### 4.5.1 Theme 1: More Education and Training and Share Inclusive Practices

This theme is described as the opportunity for academic staff to have access to professional development that specifically addresses how to assist students with dyslexia as well as defining dyslexia for academic faculty. The academic staff member shared that inclusive practices are defined as strategies that teachers can use that could potentially help all students in the class as well as students with dyslexia. Academic Faculty #1 remarked:

I was given a board course on students with disabilities as an academic teacher at the university. It was a compulsory course, a course that was very broad in the area of general disability for students. The aim of the course was to help to learn how to behave with the student, and the steps that need to be taken to refer to the disability officer and that we needed to protect the identity of the student.

Although one faculty member said there was a course on disabilities, Academic #2 stated, “Regarding continual professional development offerings, there have been no topics on disability or on how to work with dyslexic students.” Both academics demonstrated that they

care deeply for students by underlining that targeted training can help to address particular ideas when teaching students. Faculty member #1 said that “I am afraid that I might stigmatize the students and maybe receiving some training would really help me. And it would be very good for the training to be compulsory”. Hence, the idea for training to be compulsory was also suggested. Academic #2 remarked that “If I know that a technique would work, then I would use it. Sometimes we do not know how to deal with this problem.” This compulsory training could be characterised by practical ideas and suggestions on how to make adjustments in the classroom that benefit both dyslexic as well as all other students. Academic #2 observed that “Once again, the student has to make contact with the disability officer.” This comment is corroborated by the student self-advocacy theme where it is identified that students had to seek out help for themselves or they would not receive the support that was available.

#### 4.5.2 Theme 2: Tell Academics Which Students Have Dyslexia

Academic faculty stated that they would like to know the students who are dyslexic in their classes so they can help them. Academic #1 remarked that “As an instructor, I do not know if my students have dyslexia.” This could be helpful for academic faculty in providing student help and support. The same faculty member continued that, “Maybe it might help if I know that some of my students were dyslexic.” Students are predominantly on their own when organizing support through the student support services office. Academic #1 stated that “Students had to present their case and how to deal with it.” There were also students who shared that they would like their teachers to know that they are dyslexic with Student #2 sharing: “Tell them [faculty] that I am dyslexic”. This sentiment is expressed from both students and academic staff. Academic #1 added that “Another thing that we do not do is to track students. Because we do

not track students, they easily get lost and [do] not find what it is that they need.” It was mentioned that tracking students could be an option in order to ensure that students are taken care of and that they receive the support that is available to them. The challenge is that this is left to the students to make all the necessary arrangements. At what point do we expect students who are of adult age to handle these arrangements by themselves while also exploring levels of support for students with dyslexia that include ‘tracking’ students who have special needs as a way of following up with them so they can be successful? Maybe this type of support could be made available for any student who would like to access it.

More challenges were identified, and suggestions are made for improvement. Academic #2 stated that:

Written interventions and ideas are just not enough. We need to look at the assignment, and give examples on how to change or help students, and students need more practical in the form of practical ideas and concrete stuff, and when I have provided more concrete examples, students have improved a bit more.

Academic faculty sense the responsibility of helping students succeed. Academic #2 remarked that “If a student has a diagnosis, the teacher should be prepared to help the student. And more awareness is apparent in higher education,” however it is recognized that “There is a lot more work to do to develop more support for students.” Finally, Academic #1 shared that “Inclusive practice in the form of good practice is what is needed to address the issues for students with dyslexia.” In addition, they stated that some inclusive practices might include using “... a proper font size in PowerPoint presentations, and by also sharing information for 7 minutes and then giving students 3 minutes to process the information” while “academic faculty members could organize the screen in online teaching so my students can more easily find and navigate the learning site.”

Another idea of inclusive practice is to “remind students of up and coming assignment deadlines and post work ahead of time,” while “I have had the feeling or perception that a student has dyslexia, I try to pick up the weak points and then come together to pick up some things to improve.”

Finally, Academic #1 sums it up by stating, “Just tell academic staff who has dyslexia in the classroom. We provide opportunities for all learners in the classroom to be successful by using some of the inclusive strategies mentioned in the data.”

#### 4.5.3 Theme 3: Develop Skills and Support

In the third theme, academic staff identified that they would like to see the university develop skills and support training for students with dyslexia. Academic #2 stated that “The university also needs to support students in the area of information technology skills.” How could the university help them? Academic #1 suggests teaching “some techniques to students that can be used to help them,” adding that “We should not humiliate the student, but still provide specific techniques that could really help them.”

The need for skills and support are further corroborated by faculty when expressing why extended time for exams is so effective. Academic #1 shared that

One of the reasons that the extended amount of time for exams is effective for dyslexic students is due to the fact that it can be measured: 25% more time on exams can be measured and applied for dyslexic students.

Hence the skills and support provided could somehow be measured in terms of keeping up with the support that has been made available. This is in part what this research is about.

In providing skills and support training for students, Academic #1 observed what must happen in order for there to be any type of change in delivering services for students with **dyslexia**:

The only action that will cause changes to occur are to make policy changes. If we cannot make academic staff teach inclusively, then they simply will not do it. We cannot make them do it, so they won't do it.

Although this is a strong and straightforward approach, policy changes that can provide funding for training students with dyslexia in higher education as well as faculty training in the form of professional development might be welcomed by both academic staff members, students with dyslexia, as well as other students who would enjoy the training that is provided. I suggest this based on the premise that most academic faculty members would like to see their students improve and succeed in their classes. Providing ongoing professional development for faculty members can further nurture academics' desire for every student that they teach to succeed.

As this chapter closes, it is obvious that there are certainly challenges for all students who are experiencing the learning process. What we hear from those students with dyslexia is that these challenges are more intense, and it is important to identify the traits that result in students persevering. As faculty participant #2 shared, these 'traits' can potentially be 'taught or shared' in ongoing orientations for students. These orientations can potentially happen during school tours for students as well as at the student support centre. Can we teach students how to be resilient? Well, we can certainly try. The idea of providing orientation is further underlined by a student who shares that students with dyslexia can struggle with organization and independent self-advocacy, and this points to the idea of providing explicit teaching and training for students with dyslexia on how to advocate and fight for themselves. Such training for students with dyslexia can be part of a required orientation for all new students.

Finally, all of the students interviewed started university with the idea that there was a substantial challenge ahead of them. As a result, these students took action immediately to get the support that was needed. This is a skill that was somehow taught to these students

before they enrolled in the university. The point of bringing out this variation in self-advocacy is that this is a skill that can and is possible to teach to students in higher education institutions.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion of the Findings**

In this final chapter, a summary of the thesis sets the stage for the major findings of this research. In the section that follows, the findings are linked to the current literature and theories. The limitations of this study are outlined and finally separate conclusions and implications for practice sections are presented with an emphasis on how the findings of this research might be shared in order to have the greatest impact, thereby improving the experiences of students with dyslexia and the academic staff who teach these students.

### **5.1 Summary of the Study**

The goal of this qualitative study was to capture the lived academic experiences of students and academic faculty at a university in England using the semi-structured interview method. The research was designed to investigate students' conceptions of their learning experiences while also exploring their experiences with the supports provided. The research also explored the experiences of academic staff as they supported students with dyslexia. This part of the exploration was important as academic staff have power in the classroom. The study addresses gaps in the literature as there is little information about the impact of learning support provided at the university level as experienced and considered by the students themselves. Nine students and two academic staff were interviewed for this study. The semi-structured interview method was utilized and designed to capture the experiences of students with dyslexia with a freedom to share their experiences and describe the support that has worked to support their learning needs.

## 5.2 Answering the Research Questions

It is important to consider to what extent the research questions were answered as a result of conducting this research. The first question considered in the research was “What are dyslexic students’ experiences of the support provided to them by the university?” The semi-structured interview format equipped me with the opportunity to ask specific questions directed toward answering this question while also giving me the flexibility to ask follow up questions in order to keep students talking and sharing their lived experiences. As is evident in Chapter 4, students shared rich experiences about which supports provided by the university were most effective in helping them to succeed. The second was “What are academic faculty’s experiences of teaching students diagnosed with dyslexia at the university?” It was important to hear directly from academic faculty because they have power in the learning environment. It was also important to discover the skills that they have and apply in the learning environment. This question yielded captivating data about what both students and academic faculty shared that were similar. The third question was “What are the possibilities for improvement in terms of the delivery of services for students with dyslexia?” These identified improvements first yielded themes which were further operationalized as findings that can be immediately applied in an academic environment that is similarly situated in a higher education context.

Using the phenomenological approach, I captured the experiences of the students as well as the academic faculty I interviewed. The idea of capturing the experiences of participants is at the heart of the phenomenological approach and framework. After identifying the themes, some subthemes also emerged through the thematic analysis process. I continued to spend time with the data and finally refined the themes, identifying five themes from the nine students interviewed and three from the two academic staff members who were interviewed.



In addressing research question 1: “What are dyslexic students’ experiences of the support provided to them by the university?” the following five themes emerged: 1) most preferred support; 2) self-advocacy; 3) tutoring; 4) faculty knowledge and skills in supporting students with dyslexia; and 5) financial challenges. In addressing research question 2: “What are academic faculty’s conceptions of their involvement with students diagnosed with dyslexia at the university?” the three themes that emerged: 1) more education and training and sharing inclusive strategies; 2) informing academics which students have dyslexia; 3) developing skills and support for students.

It was interesting to note where the themes identified overlapped between students and academic staff, thereby creating points of comparison between students and academic staff members. This was explicitly the case when identifying the finding relating to those inclusive practices desired by both students with dyslexia as well as academic faculty. It is hoped that this qualitative study will help both researchers and educators to better understand the needs of students with dyslexia as universities move forward to develop plans and programmes in an attempt to facilitate dyslexic students’ success. It is important to point out that as we prepare the academic environment for higher education students with dyslexia, this paves the way for higher education access for such students. By ‘paving the way,’ I mean that universities effectively serve students with dyslexia who are currently enrolled while improving their support and processes. As a result, new students with dyslexia who enrol would receive improved services with better and more clearly articulated support structures, thus raising the probability of such students’ higher education success.

### **5.3 Current Trends in the United Kingdom**

In reporting the major findings of this research, we must also discuss the Equality Act 2010 that has effectively changed the way support is provided for students with dyslexia as well as all students with disabilities enrolled at the university. The Disabled Students Allowance is discontinued, and this includes services provided that include tutoring and other related services. What is planned to take its place is a major shift to providing inclusive pedagogy across all aspects of the university (Equality Act 2010). Hence, instead of inclusion being something that is experienced in pockets at the university, depending upon the academic faculty that employ these types of strategies while teaching, the goal for the future is to provide training while requiring inclusive practices throughout the academic faculty in a systematic approach that enhances the teaching and learning aspect of university. This is not only for students with disabilities but for all students enrolled who will hopefully benefit from such practices. According to UNESCO (2009), “an inclusive education system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive; in other words, they become better at educating all the children in their communities” (p. 8). The theories of social justice, inclusion, and capability demand that within the context of Equality Act of 2010, we look deeply at how best we can serve students. We need to make sure that students are not excluded, that their educational needs are met inclusively, and that we consider their capabilities in what they identify that they would like to become as a result of their study. It is with this in mind that I present the major findings of this research. Each finding is described and discussed in greater detail in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the finding.

Before getting into the presentation of the findings of this research, it is important to highlight the good work that is included in The Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-

25 which boasts a long term track recording of improving social mobility for students that enables access to and participation in Higher Education. The university in this study is one of the most successful in creating opportunities for all students in the Russell Group universities for widening participation. But the university is ready to build on this reputation by thinking carefully about the best way that it can be welcoming and supportive for a diverse range of student backgrounds. The ambitious plan will be accomplished in two ways: first, by identifying what barriers to access and participation are found to impede success and second, by creating a culture that enables students to fully engage within the university community of learning, whatever the background. The five-year APP (Access and Participation Plan) sets out to overcome institutional, regional, and national access and participation challenges by first, creating a diverse student body, and second, to provide fair access and participation for anyone who can benefit from higher education.

In addressing disabled student access, the following examples of increased student support for students with disabilities include the following:

- Learning and Teaching Support Officers to provide additional support for students
- Support plans which allow reasonable adjustments such as sitting exams in smaller rooms, provision for rest break during exams, deadline extensions upon request and longer library book loan periods
- A review of funding for dyslexia and autism assessments
- Support for self and students through implementation of Mental Health First Aid courses

One of the OfS (Office of Students) key performance measure five's aim is to remove the gap in attainment between students with and without registered disabilities. And finally, as part of preparing for APP delivery in 2019-20, further work will be commissioned with the Student

administration and support service to better understand the student support issues behind this data. Several case studies were mentioned that demonstrate the commitment of the university to continue to support students with disabilities and one such idea is the KnowHow program that offers face to face workshops and online tutorials aimed at breaking down barriers to the academic success of students. Another such program is a whole approach towards mental health and wellbeing using the UUK Step Change approach.

As my research has sought to hear the voices of students in higher education, the report shared that more time on exams, longer periods of time for book loan, as well as providing additional support for students at the very beginning of their university experience were some of the many services planned for present and future. As you read the findings of my research, my findings validate and corroborate the efforts of the university while also highlighting the need for the university to continue to listen to the voices of students enrolled, and especially students with dyslexia which make up 10% of the entire population. My contribution to knowledge is the listening of the voice of students with dyslexia. Let's listen carefully and hear what it is that they have to say. In doing so, this is an opportunity to widen participation for dyslexic students through the APP.

#### **5.4 Finding 1: Tutoring as a very effective form of support**

First, in explicitly answering research question number 1, tutoring was discovered to be a very effective form of support for many students participating in this study. Bray and Kwok (2003) define private supplemental tutoring as “tutoring in academic subjects which is provided for financial gain and which is additional to the provision by mainstream schooling” (p. 12). In English the term ‘private tutoring’ generally refers to tutoring on a one-to-one basis (Ireson,

2004, p. 110). Bray and Kwok (2003) further argue that recent international research suggests that private tutoring is likely to grow and have a greater impact in the future.

It is important to point out that tutoring is an 'extra' support provided that is independent of the university teaching and learning experience, and it is for this reason that we do not know the relative impact that tutoring might have when it comes to student success nor do we know what happens in the tutoring sessions. Yet in attempting to assess why tutoring is successful, what we do know is that participants mentioned again and again that tutoring was integral to their success, but we do not know why the tutoring causes students with dyslexia to be successful. The university is definitely concerned for its students by providing DSA funding that can purchase tutorial support, thus caring for the well-being of students who learn differently compared to their peers. From this study's research it would appear that some of the tutoring mentioned was arranged by the university and that tutors were paid via the university while other students experienced working with a private tutor who was a professional in their field of study, or with an educated family member who could help the student with challenges such as writing or understanding integral parts of an assignment.

Another student described tutoring as pastoral. Ireson (2004) has stated that trying to describe effective tutoring is challenging because it is difficult to obtain representative samples of a given tutor's lesson plans. In this research study, it was difficult to understand from the students' point of view how the tutoring enabled them to be successful. In addition, there was no professional organization whereby tutors can be contacted, and this made it more challenging to discover what effective tutors do in their sessions with students that cause success. Ireson (2004) has also suggested that the prevalence of tutoring is also impossible to measure. Although impossible to measure the prevalence, the contribution of tutoring in the success of

dyslexic students could open a door for tutoring to be considered an inclusive practice. This potentially could address social justice theory issues of exclusion as inclusive practice hopes to provide further access to services for students with disabilities. Additional research in area of the effectiveness of tutoring could bring forth more ideas to meet the educational needs of all students in an overall inclusive approach.

Bray and Kwok (2003) underline that individual tutoring can be tailored to the needs of the given student as it gives the tutor a chance to identify their respective strengths and weaknesses. Some disadvantages might include focusing exclusively on strategies and knowledge for examination success (Bray & Kwok, 2003). In relation to the effectiveness of tutoring in school, Bloom (1984) has argued that the average attainment of those students who received tutoring in place of teaching was about two standard deviations above the average of students taught in a control group using conventional methods. The result was that the average tutoring students outperformed 98% of the students in the control group class.

Walberg (1984) has identified tutorial instruction as having the greatest influence on attainment. It can be inferred, according to Ireson (2004), that the effectiveness of tutoring relates to the content and structure of the given programme. A student involved in this study stated that “I don’t think I would have completed my degree without his [i.e. their tutor’s] help.” At present there is scant government policy on private tutoring, with Ireson observing that it remains “firmly in the shadows” (p. 110). However, there have been some attempts to discover what makes private tutoring work as a choice for students. Rogoff (1986, 1990) reviewed the literature and suggests laboratory investigation and naturalistic observation is required to identify general features of effective collaboration, observing that:

- (1) Tutors serve to provide a bridge between a learner's existing knowledge and skills and the demands of the new task. Left alone, a novice might not appreciate the relations between what the task demands and what they already know or can do that is relevant;
- (2) By providing instructions and help in the context of the learner's activity, tutors provide a structure to support the learner's problem solving. For example, while focused on their immediate actions, learners, left alone, might lose sight of the overall goal of the activity;
- (3) Although the learner is involved in what is initially, for them, 'out of reach' problem solving, guided participation ensures that they play an active role in learning and that they contribute to the successful solution of problems;
- (4) Effective guidance involves the transfer of responsibility from tutor to learner;
- (5) Not all guided participation involves deliberate or explicit attempts to teach and learn. Often, interactions with the four characteristics just listed occur when children set out to 'help' their parents, as they participate in everyday activities, or in playful encounters (p. 30).

The points above describing effective tutoring are also evident in the opinions and experiences of students with dyslexia. When reading through these tutoring interactions with the students in this study, these features are hardly surprising and might be considered self-evident. At the same time, Ireson (2004) argues that it is in the familiarity of the features of effective tutoring that its power lies. In other words, common sense might explain or describe why tutoring is effective. When reflecting on what students with dyslexia in higher education are saying, their words and comments are simple to understand when they describe their experiences, namely that what is happening in the tutoring sessions is working to help solve dyslexic students' educational challenges. Loewen and Pollard (2010) argue that "Striving for dignity is at the core of social justice movements" (p. 5), while receiving tutoring offers students dignity and the opportunity to achieve success while providing this support levels the playing field by giving students access to the support they require. The tutoring experience that involves consistent one-to-one help is described by students in this study as organised,

structured, pastoral, sensitive to their feelings, with tutors being both knowledgeable about dyslexia and experts in the subject.

As we consider the Equality Act 2010 and discontinuation of the DSA for students with dyslexia, it is very important to consider this finding in light of fact that this research was designed to ask students directly about the supports that are most effective. This certainly does not mean that moving forward and embracing inclusive practices will not meet the needs of students with dyslexia. The implication of this finding is that we must continue to keep asking students with dyslexia what is most effective for their success as a student. A further implication is that more research must be conducted that could be translated into making tutoring something that is inclusive in higher education. These changes that are presented in the Equality Act 2010 are designed to address the needs of all students as well as students with dyslexia. I would like to make a call for research into how inclusive practices meet the needs of students with dyslexia by making sure that we ask the students themselves and specifically in the area of tutoring. If we commit to listening to our students while remaining open and neutral to what they share, changes in support structures can continue to be considered when making policy changes that affect students with dyslexia as well as all students enrolled in higher education programmes.

### **5.5 Finding 2: Students' ability to self-regulate and seek out help on their own.**

The second major finding of this research is that students need the ability to 'self-regulate' and seek out help on their own. When students are faced with new situations, such as enrolling and studying in higher education, there are things that they have to learn or know how to do in order to be successful. Students with dyslexia, where support was available, sometimes struggled to find the help available.



Kristner (2008) summarises the students' concerns by observing that when there is no external guidance, a learner has to regulate their learning process themselves. In other words, certain skills must be present in order for the student to be successful (Zimmerman, 2008). Although it is difficult to find a good working definition of self-regulated learning, Wirth and Leutner (2008) have combined the core features of different models, defining self-regulated learning as "a learner's competence to autonomously plan, execute, and evaluate learning processes, which involves continuous decisions on cognitive, motivational, and behavioral aspects of the cyclic process of learning" (p. 103). Part of the learning process involves students advocating for themselves to seek out and identify the necessary tools to be successful in higher education as a student with dyslexia.

There are two models that represent different perspectives on self-regulated learning. Wirth and Leutner (2008) propose process models of self-regulation and component models, and these two models represent different perspectives on self-regulation. Process models focus more on phases of events that constitute an ideal process of self-regulated learning (Otto, 2018; Schmitz & Wise, 2006; Winne & Hadwin 1998; Zimmerman, 1998, 2000). Zimmerman (2000) defines the phases as forethought, performance, or volitional control, and self-regulation, which are then repeated. However, component models describe competencies that enable the learner to study in a self-regulated way (Kistner, Rakoczy, Otto, Dignath, & Buttner, 2010). Boekaret's (1999) example of component models consists of three layers embedded into each other, representing the cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational aspects of self-regulation. Cognitive regulation deals with learning activities that refer to information processing.

The metacognitive layer focuses on the whole learning process and on motivational regulation. Self-regulating strategies such as organization, elaboration, and problem solving are

typical examples of cognitive approaches (Kistner et al., 2008). At the metacognitive level, planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process play an important role. What most closely relates to this study's students is the component model of self-regulation, namely motivational regulation with aspects of strategies involving resource management, causal attribution, action control, and feedback. The motivational levels of this study's students were very high and they seemed determined to not allow anything to keep them from being successful. In addition, their self-regulation demonstrated that the students were aware of their challenges but, after discovering the help they needed, these students made insightful decisions regarding how to get the help or support, and they then found it on their own.

Several studies demonstrate that self-regulation goes hand-in-hand with better performance (Nota et al., 2004; Purdie & Hattie, 1996; Zimmerman & Matinez-Pons, 1986, 1988). Other intervention studies reveal that self-regulation training enhances students' academic performance (Dignath & Buttner, 2008; Dignat et al., 2008; Fuchs, 2003; Masui & DeCorte, 2005; Perels et al., 2005; Schunk & Ertner, 2000). Furthermore, Waeytuns, Lens and Vandenberghe (2002) suggest that teachers have to help foster their students self-regulated learning behaviours.

This leaves us with the question, what can teachers do to foster self-regulated learning in their students? Otto (2010) suggests direct and indirect promotion, with teachers promoting self-regulated learning directly by teaching learning strategies. The first way to teach learning strategies is to implicitly induce students to exhibit certain behaviours. Brown, Campione and Day (1981) terms this 'blind training', where a given teacher acts as role model applying a strategy and verbalizing the given teacher's thought processes (Collin, Brown, & Holum, 1991). The other way is that a teacher explicitly tells her students to perform a certain activity,

explaining by example that this activity can help improve their performance. Brown et al. (1981) calls this explicit strategy 'informed training'. In addition, Veenman (2007) and Pintrich (2002) share the need for explicit teaching of metacognitive knowledge.

The support suggested above could be presented in the form of self-regulation strategies for students or be even more specifically tailored for dyslexic students in higher education. It is difficult and challenging to 'get the word out' to students who have a disability that affects their ability to access print and online material and then, once this information is accessed, it needs to be acted upon by the student. Hence, a student must be actively involved in seeking out and accessing the help that is available to them. This is a capability in that growing the skillset of a given student allows them to develop and choose their destiny. This takes a certain tenacity that, for a student with dyslexia, is not always something 'ever-present' in their hearts and minds given that they have faced schooling challenges for their entire lives. Knowing ahead of time that you are going to face challenges when undertaking courses while having the fortitude and emotional strength to face those challenges is something that still needs to be researched as we continue to discover the best ways to support students with dyslexia. The Access and Participation Plan 2020-24 has included some initial training for all students as it relates to getting the support that is needed when it is needed. As the university moves to providing inclusive strategies for their students, making things more explicit to gain and ask for help will help all students including those with dyslexia. This finding could be utilized as informing the strategy and curriculum for these new students at university and to specially address self-advocacy. The plan could also, based upon capability theory, engage students more intentionally to discover what it is that they can do for themselves and identify specifically the skills needed to have success. More research in relation to self-regulated learning has the

potential to uncover skill sets and subsequent learning that can help to cultivate not only student success, but resulting in a student actually believing in himself enough to access a higher education setting or to stay in higher education when the going gets tough, resulting in graduating from university.

### **5.6 Finding 3: Students and academic staff call for inclusive practices**

The third major finding of this research is that both students and academic staff called for the need for ‘inclusive practices’ in terms of the delivery of educational services for students with dyslexia. Several students offered information that they wished their academic instructors knew about them. It was evident through the research that there were pockets of good practice rather than an inclusive learning experience. Maybe if inclusive practices can be achieved, the challenge of ‘let academic staff know that I am dyslexic’ will go away, but it is absolutely vital that academic staff know that there are dyslexic students in their classrooms. Both the students and academic faculty pointed toward the need for what both named ‘inclusive practices,’ mentioning that such practices could assist the learning process by sharing teaching and learning process tools that could help them. Loremen, Forlin, Chambers, Sharma and Deppler (2014) suggest that a lack of a tight conceptual focus might contribute to some confused practices. Indeed, and as mentioned earlier in this research, the absence of a working definition of inclusion could potentially hinder the development of measurable and authentic inclusive practices to assist students in higher education.

Even the idea of the university sharing with academic faculty who is dyslexic can be considered as an attempt to apply inclusive theory that translates into actual practices by identifying and then defining dyslexia for academic staff while discussing potential ideas about

how to service students with dyslexia through professional development opportunities. Berlach and Chambers (2011) argue that inclusive education is often a contentious term that lacks a conceptual focus and, as stated earlier, may contribute to confusing practices. In order to foster inclusive schooling, according to UNESCO (2009) “an ‘inclusive’ education system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive, in other words, if they become better at educating all children in their communities” (p. 8). However, it is widely acknowledged that children with disabilities continue to experience different forms of exclusion which vary depending upon their type of disability, domicile, and the culture or class to which they belong (UNICEF, 2013). This is a social justice issue that must continually be addressed in the current context when considering improving and widening the opportunities for all students.

It is important to point out that the students who participated in this research were positively affirmed by their academic instructors and very thankful for the dedication and hard work undertaken by the university to create a positive learning environment with effective support available for students with dyslexia. The inquiry behind this research is to help determine what is working and to consider how to make adjustments that serve students with dyslexia by listening to their experiences and learning from them. Social justice theory demands equal access for students with dyslexia, and the university has provided support that promotes inclusive activity throughout the students’ experience. The student participants asked me to promise that I would convey information regarding the very good support in place to help and enhance their learning. Although inclusion is mentioned here as a major finding, students did feel included in the life of the university; what is interesting is that they want a more inclusive environment. As mentioned earlier, capability theory causes us to look beyond social justice and examine each person and their ability to grow and self-actualize. It is apparent that students

want to create their own destinies and to be successful on their own terms which brings us to the conclusion that students are free to be themselves and self-actualize. Therefore, it was important to the students that this be shared when critically analysing aspects of this research.

Furthermore, when thinking about barriers to inclusion, Shaddock (2006) underlines that impediments perceived by teachers could include a lack of time, difficulty in providing individualized help when teaching a group of students, inadequate training of teachers, and a lack of school support. Hence, the view of some teaching professionals is that adjusting the curriculum and its delivery compromises the learning of others because the academic staff member might have to slow down to help struggling students, thereby falling behind in terms of curriculum coverage. When an academic staff member takes time with a struggling student using class time, this can draw negative attention to student learning differences, and the end result is that the academic staff member could potentially fail to cover the material required for the class. One way to address such ideas and mind-sets is to challenge them through systematic training. However, we must also address the definition of inclusion and further explain inclusive theory by tightening it and making it classroom operational for academic staff who are under tremendous pressure to deliver a solid and authentic education to each and every university student. As we continue to explore and apply inclusive theory, perhaps a potential definition for schools to consider is conceptualising inclusive education as the removal of that which excludes and marginalises (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2006; Mittler, 2012). By removing that which excludes or marginalizes, more students can potentially participate and succeed in higher education. In addition, by providing training for academic staff, strategies for inclusive practices can be presented and potentially implemented in the classroom.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Slee (2011) argues that the term “inclusive education shows all the signs of jetlag” (p. 62). The question then boils down to the best way to go about implementing those inclusive practices that can be achieved in a higher education setting. The idea of developing inclusive practices has to involve academic faculty in proper inclusive practice training whereby academic faculty can learn how to approach students and affirm their challenges, thereby resulting in positive outcomes. Another aspect of this finding, as stated earlier, is students desiring that their academic instructors know that they are dyslexic and academic instructors asking to be told which of their students is dyslexic, which cannot be overemphasised. This points to the need for good communication and for an open dialogue in discussing best practice while meeting the learning needs of students at the higher education level.

The Equality Act 2010 paves the way for inclusive practices to be implemented and systematically developed in higher education institutions across the United Kingdom (Equality Act, 2010). It is a powerful finding that both the students and academic faculty interviewed here explicitly identified inclusive practices as a very effective way to meet the educational needs of students with dyslexia. One academic faculty member interviewed shared that this would have to come through policy changes at the government level, but it is important to point out that there are many academic faculty members who already employ inclusive teaching practices in their teaching and learning classroom approaches. What is interesting is that students with dyslexia notice these practices, and the future of higher education in the United Kingdom will see a systematic implementation of inclusive practices in teaching and learning in higher education.

In closing, it is important to consider how changes in teaching and learning inclusive practices can be implemented. With the Equality Act 2010, there is an opportunity to provide professional development opportunities in the form of training that is something that would be interesting to pursue in my career. The training of teachers is something that I have always been involved in and developing relevant and meaningful professional development is now in demand for academic faculty across the United Kingdom as a result of the Equality Act 2010. Finally, it is refreshing to know that these changes are happening across higher education in the United Kingdom, but we must remember to continue to ask students to share their experiences in terms of how these changes are helping and equipping them for success. There continues to be a need for research in this area, especially with the sweeping changes that are happening and intended to meet the needs of students with dyslexia in higher education in the United Kingdom.

#### **5.7 Finding 4: The speed at which services are accessed could be improved**

The fourth and final finding of this research is that the speed at which services can be accessed was identified as something that could potentially be improved because students were sometimes not receiving services and support that they had applied for at the beginning of semester one until the very end of the first semester or in the first part of semester two. This is important because students from deprived socio-economic backgrounds continue to be underrepresented in higher education worldwide (Argentin & Triventi, 2011; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Groenez et al., 2009). Not receiving support in a timely manner is a challenge that students experience, and this is particularly challenging for students from deprived socio-economic backgrounds who, even after gaining access to higher education, have a lower completion rate compared to their peers (Argentin & Triventi, 2011; Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993;



Groenez et al., 2009). Although it is not the goal of the university to socially exclude students from receiving higher education, it is evident from this research that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds experienced difficulty in accessing what they needed to be successful as students with dyslexia.

What these students have gone through to get support could be referred to as social exclusion. This social exclusion which is connected to social justice and access to a university education can also be linked to student-level factors including academic ability, cultural and social capital, and motivation (e.g. Aina, 2013; Ayalon, 2007; Ball et al., 2002; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Belloc et al., 2010; Checchi et al., 2008; Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Frank & Cook, 1995; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Schindler & Lorz, 2012; Tieben & Wolbers, 2010). The second factor involving social exclusion is evident at the system level (Ayalon, 2007; Liu, 2011; Naidoo, 2004; Shavit et al., 2007; Triventi & Trivellato, 2009), and these factors can be described as reflecting the discriminatory nature of higher education systems. Students with dyslexia have the right to be treated with respect and to enjoy both social and economic equality (Loewen & Pollard, 2010). Social justice demands that an equal playing field is created for students with dyslexia in relation to economic equality, and it is apparent from the students who participated in this study that the university is trying to put services in place for students. When considering this finding, systems can be evaluated and ideas suggested to make improvements so that students who are economically disadvantaged can receive services more quickly.

Naidoo (2004) describes higher education as “a sorting machine that selects students according to an implicit social classification” (p. 459). It should be noted that higher education systems are found to maintain social exclusion instigated at earlier stages of students’ educational journeys (e.g. Lucas, 2001; Raftery & Hout, 1993). Although social exclusion may

exist, students did not sense that the university was trying to hurt them, and they were and are very appreciative of the services and support provided. However, the students also expressed that they are willing to take whatever support they can get regarding the services provided.

Students participating in this study shared the impact that delays in financial support had on their overall higher education journey. When looking at these factors, it becomes clear that the organizational level role remains unexplored (Mampaey, 2017). When looking at organizational institutionalism, Meyer and Rowan (1977) describe the phenomenon of building gaps between public commitment and core organizational practices as ‘decoupling.’ Although this phenomenon is not intentional on the part of the university as pointed out by Gondo and Amis (2013), it is something that must be looked at further when trying to address the causal factors that result in the delays described by this study’s student participants. What I am thankful for is the opportunity to capture the experiences of the students who participated in this research, which has meant that I have reflected on all of the students who gave up and decided that a university education was not for them because they could not cope without the services and support through the first semester and into the second. Finally, this finding is not meant to criticize all the good work that universities throughout the world are doing to address and support students. This finding is predicated on a goal for all higher education institutions, namely to help students succeed and for their voices to be heard loudly as we continue to provide and expand access for students with dyslexia in higher education. Perhaps the call for inclusive practices based upon inclusive theory across all universities according to the Equality Act of 2010 would make access to additional services no longer required. That said, we need to continue to aggressively research and subsequently meet the needs of students with financial challenges. The connections to both social justice theory and capability theory are directly

linked because we do not want to exclude students nor do we desire to superimpose our ideas of what it means to students to be successful. When we create possibilities, we create inclusion as well as capabilities or opportunities for success.

## **5.8 Links to the Literature**

This study went on to look in depth at disabled student views by narrowing the type of disabled student (dyslexia) and asking each student what their particular view or experience was regarding higher education. Vickerman and Blunzell (2010) have conducted a quantitative study with 504 respondents whereas my study was qualitative and sought to hear the stories of the ‘lived’ experience of students with dyslexia as well as those of the academic staff supporting them. Quantitative research using structured interviews yields closed responses that might not result in rich data that can be developed when pursuing a qualitative study and semi-structured interviews with the goal of getting to the heart of the experience of both students and academic staff. The latter approach also allows each story to stand for itself. Hence, my study was more directed by its intention to capture the experiences of students and academic faculty using a qualitative research approach. This study also gathered data from academic staff who are teaching students with dyslexia in their classrooms, thereby allowing more insight into the challenges that I believe are experienced by sympathetic academic staff who have a desire to see all of their students succeed. This study gave academic faculty the opportunity to share their views in a way that helped demonstrate the challenges that they face when trying their best to support all of their students. It is in this way that this research adds to the current literature as I was able to capture their views by actually speaking with academic staff members about supporting students with dyslexia.

Oga and Haron (2012) conducted a study in Malaysia where there is reported to be 314,000 students with dyslexia using a phenomenological approach similar to this research in that it recruited five students with the goal of uncovering the experiences of individuals living with dyslexia. It identified the need to, respectively: increase efforts to instil awareness of dyslexia in Malaysian society; educate the public about the nature, limitations, and potential of individuals with dyslexia; and rectify an education system that marginalizes dyslexics' educational opportunities. Oga and Haron's (2012) purpose was different than this study in that the former's exploration was focused on the participants' everyday lives and social interactions. My study focused on looking specifically at the support students received and asked participants how such provisions helped them. In addition, the students who participated in this study were all enrolled in university, and the goal was to capture their and their instructors' experiences. The findings can also be applied in a way to improve dyslexic students' educational experiences by improving their learning environment.

Rualye (2011) conducted research to enhance the experiences of disabled people trying to access higher education in Lithuania. Research about the inclusion of disabled students was reviewed using the analysis of secondary data based on the experience of disabled students who had mobility and visual impairments. Although Rualye's research does contribute to the wider body of research mentioned in higher education in the broader sense of students with special needs, this particular research does not review or cover the challenges of students with dyslexia or dysgraphia (p. 52). The research mentioned above demonstrates disabled students' continued interest in accessing higher education, but my research specifically asks students with dyslexia about their experiences in higher education. This is important because 10% in our society

struggle with some form of dyslexia (Smythe, 2011). It is important to note that dyslexia is a condition affecting people with average or above average intelligence.

Borland and James (1999) conducted a study with 22 students who had some form of disability as well as some senior tutors and representatives of the university's central offices. The findings of the most concern related to disclosure, access, quality assurance, and the moral basis of the institution's disabilities policy. This study was similar to mine in that students with some form of disability and tutors were interviewed in addition to central office staff. What is different about my study is the specific group of students that participated in the study. Disabled students could include a number of different types of disability whereas my study specifically focused on dyslexic students. This is important because as we move forward in learning how we can support all students with disabilities in higher education, a more targeted approach to researching specific groups of students can yield more targeted findings that can potentially be used to further assist and help students with disabilities, specifically students with dyslexia in the instance of my study. The findings, if implemented, have the potential to impact positively the learning for all students while also widening student participation.

Finally, when looking at this study's theoretical implications, the discussion of theory started with social justice theorisations leading to inclusion, which then led to an examination of capability theory. When looking at this progression, each theoretical aspect has had its influence on the disability movement over the last fifty years. Social justice demanded that we change our worldview to not exclude people because they are different, and inclusion was born out of a desire to not exclude students who learn differently but instead to educate everyone in the same learning environment, thus giving both students with disabilities and regular students a chance

to become friends and to understand each other, resulting in what I would call a potentially better and more enlightened society.

In addition, capability theory develops and asks the question, what does each person want to do or become? This is a powerful issue as the social justice movement was about intellectual elitists telling others what they should do and how they should do it, thereby focussing on classifications and telling people what to do and what was good for them. Capability theory moves away from this notion of telling students what is good for them and instead asks the individual what it is that they would like to do. This is a remarkable shift that allows the person to be at the centre of their life, helping them to make their own decisions about what is important to them and about what it is that they truly would like to do or be. What has been a constant throughout this research is the fact that this study investigated students with a diagnosis of dyslexia. In our discussion about dyslexia and that it affects 10% of the population, it is important to realize that dyslexia affects reading, spelling, writing, and speaking. And as we think about this constant, that there are students with dyslexia enrolled in universities, we must continue to think about how their learning needs can be met. There are presently students with dyslexia in higher education who are constructing their own realities in the environment created for them and they are exploring their own capabilities by self-actualizing and understanding who they are and what they wish to be. When interacting with the findings of this research study, the reader is hearing what was communicated thematically from students diagnosed with dyslexia and academic staff members who teach students with dyslexia. The impact of listening to the students themselves affirms their courageous participation in higher education when faced with the challenges of dyslexia.

The final insight to share when thinking about the impact of this study relates to the issue of funding and how to allocate funding for students with dyslexia and special needs. The social justice theorist might want to just throw money at a challenge, while the capability theorist might say, “Let’s look at a person’s self-identified capability and find a way or system to use in order to actually fund their capability.” In this way, each person gets what they need to achieve what they chose in higher education based on their own capability or functioning. Although education services’ funding was not the focus of this study, the findings can certainly be used to begin discussions concerning how support for students with dyslexia should be implemented and developed. Finally, more research in the area of funding for students with dyslexia and special needs students is important to consider because the money allocated must be spent wisely and have the greatest impact on students with dyslexia, thereby creating opportunities for the many students with dyslexia who have the potential to achieve a higher education degree.

## **5.9 Limitations**

The phenomenological approach has its roots in psychology and recognizes the central role of the researcher as the analyst who is attempting to understand the experiences of the given participants. This is a process whereby the researcher attempts to interpret how each participant makes sense of their experiences. Using this approach has enhanced the research by allowing the researcher to specifically hear and understand the experiences of this study’s participants. While upholding the standards used in the methodology, there were some limitations that emerged that should be mentioned.

Despite my lack of experience with the phenomenological approach, after researching and developing a greater understanding, I realized that one of its values was to capture the lived experiences of the participants, which gave me confidence in the process while conducting the interviews, transcribing the data, and subsequently analysing the latter. Although the limitation due to my relative lack of experience in conducting research should be acknowledged, it should also be noted that careful consideration was made to follow relevant protocols concerning the data collection, transcription, and analysis processes, all of which involved identifying themes in order to allow the experiences of participants to speak clearly. Hence, the phenomenological approach added to uncovering the experiences of students with dyslexia that might have otherwise not been possible by following a quantitative research framework.

The second limitation is related to my potential bias as a researcher of students with dyslexia. As a professional teacher and strong advocate for students with dyslexia, my career in education spans over thirty years; therefore, it is important to point out a potential source of this potential bias. I have adopted the position that dyslexia is a disorder that affects up to ten percent of the population globally. While it is my professional opinion that dyslexia is a challenge for students, there were professional colleagues that I have worked with over the years who did not think that this diagnosis was valid. These colleagues believed that students with dyslexia were lazy and unwilling to work diligently when completing their work and handing in assignments. It is through continued research in the area of dyslexia that as the field continues to work toward a common and workable definition while also consider a more social model of disability, more practices will develop to support students with dyslexia in the future. And as it is evident that I do have an interest in serving students with dyslexia, the careful, systematic, and rigorous analysis of the data – which is something that requires patience and



openness in order to see the world through someone else's eyes – shaped the approach of this research.

### **5.10 Conclusions**

The first finding is that tutoring helped students to achieve their goals. When thinking about tutoring, it was previously mentioned that there is little information about tutoring available at the university as well as a limited understanding of why tutoring is so effective. Hence, although the DSA provision is discontinued as a result of the Equality Act 2010, and this directly effects funding for tutoring for students with dyslexia, this does not mean that this finding is invalid. What it means is that researchers must continue to listen to students with dyslexia and listen intently to what students are saying. With new approaches come new opportunities for success for students with dyslexia and it is with this positive outlook that we must move forward. I would like to acknowledge that tutoring is successful and that a call for more research into what makes it so could enhance the overall experience for students across the university. Tutoring could actually become an important aspect of the inclusive practice now mandated by the university in the Equality Act of 2010. Many students do not have a tutor who is pastoral in nature, knowledgeable about the subject, while understanding what it is like to be dyslexic as a student. When one student mentioned that the tutor does not get the university bargain, they meant that either these professionals are part time or are not paid the kind of money that academic staff are paid, yet the tutor is a substantial aid to the student. Tutoring is also something that I have provided for K-12 students and, for the first time, as part of my own learning I am considering opening a tutoring business specifically for students in higher education who could benefit from these services and consequently find success in higher

education. This was a strong finding in my research and one that deserves attention because it relates so directly to student learning and achievement.

The second finding was that students have the ability to self-regulate, meaning that they were able to seek out and access the help that they needed in order to be successful. What is notable about this finding is that I was speaking with students who had the skills needed to find the student support centre, asked for the appropriate help needed, and then stay connected with the support centre and receive that help. My thinking involves enquiring about those students who are not able to self-regulate. Students who could not self-regulate are not found in a research study because they have already dropped out of university and made the decision that they are unable to be successful. This is important because such students go from a very protected environment in high school where they have many advocates to university, where they are beginning something new and must fend for themselves as adults in an adult learning environment. Some students may prove unable to cope with the challenges they face, simply because they do not know how to ask simple questions of the right people. It is with this in mind that I suggest targeted training during the orientation phase of a student's life at university. This training could include a specific menu of services provided with a tour of the student support centre where students are made to feel at ease in the process. This could truly make a difference in the life of a student who dreams of graduating from university. The goal is to make university accessible to all students who are graduating from high school as well as welcoming adult students who have decided that they would like to come back and study toward a university degree. Self-advocacy is very important and, given the challenges that students with dyslexia face, this skill is not always apparent.

The third finding is that both students and academic staff highlighted the need for inclusive practices. One academic stated that the only way that this could happen is through policy changes that made such alterations a legal requirement. The Equality Act 2010 seems to have accomplished this with wide sweeping changes that will implement inclusive practices in teaching and learning in universities throughout the United Kingdom (Equality Act 2010). Another academic instructor remarked that they would like professional development related to teaching dyslexics but that there was nothing available about how to help students with dyslexia. Professional development in higher education must be valid and pertinent to the academic professional's everyday challenges. Professional development does not have to be delivered in traditional ways; instead it can be communicated via YouTube videos or through a professional development hub, thus giving the busy higher education professionals the flexibility to listen and engage in some high quality professional material designed specifically for them. Exploring this as an idea can save both time and resources as well as enhancing the professional development experience with the goal being to provide the necessary tools to academic faculty that help students become successful.

The fourth and final finding concerned the speed at which services can be accessed. When reading the book *Better* by Atul Gawande (2006), it became obvious that the speed at which treatment for war-related injuries is a matter of life and death. By moving the treatment tent closer to the battlefield during Operation Desert Storm, doctors were able to save more lives. By focusing on providing improved support to students with dyslexia, we can succeed in offering a better quality of life for a student with dyslexia because they are more likely to graduate university, potentially qualify for a higher paying job, and subsequently enjoy a more successful life. Therefore, we can see that this is a matter of the quality of life and is an issue of

social justice for so many people who have the opportunity to enrol in a higher education institution. As mentioned earlier, we need to keep in mind that higher education access is on the rise with more students enrolling in higher education institutions worldwide. Hence, giving students who are economically disadvantaged the chance for success is especially worthwhile.

So how do we increase the speed at which different support systems can be provided? This is a question that involves looking at systems and seeing how support can be modified to speed up the process. This might be a staffing issue in which case more staff are needed to speed up the delivery of the service provided, or it might be a matter of asking departmental staff for ideas regarding improving the speed of service. Sometimes it is the people who actually do the work who have the best ideas to posit for improvement. Regardless of the reason for the delay in service, by making a decision to improve its delivery, this can set in motion the potential for change. When each and every staff member realises the importance of their role in educating and equipping students to be successful, this can change the delivery speed of services so students who are disadvantaged financially can be successful in higher education.

The final question for each participant was: What do you want the university to know about your experience? This is a poignant question, and the responses encompass a type of raw data that can be powerful because it is when participants are able to speak for themselves that we hear exactly what they need in order to be successful. Several students thanked me for asking them this question. The responses (included in tables 2 and 3 below) indicate that the students and faculty appreciated that someone cared enough about their experiences to ask pertinent questions and that somebody is actually listening.

1.2 Table 2. Final Ideas Expressed by Students with Dyslexia

Student No.	Responses
1	If I was to quote something that I wanted to say, it would be 'let them know that you know' that I am dyslexic.
2	I would like the lecture to be more of a lesson so we can actually practice doing the constant skills.
3	The university is doing alright to help me. I don't think there is anything more they can do. I would be good if there were a bit more... if they could offer more support. Just general support for everybody and go from there.
4	One improvement would be to have a meeting where students could meet and discuss ideas with each other. Lectures could be explained in more detail.
5	There must be financial support in place. So you join at the back of the queue and the queue is a very long process itself. The support is there but it is very slow.
6	It was very much 'find it yourself and organize yourself', which is not a trait most dyslexics have. I'm not going to lie. So its stressful especially when you've just moved into university. So I would say in freshman week, have an open day for us.
7	Just to record all of the lectures and have the study skills all at the beginning (of the semester).
8	But generally with dyslexia would probably just be more general education about it. Do this for all students.
9	I guess I would say helping me with exams so I'm not so nervous. I would like more contact time with the lecturers and the academic staff.

## 1.3 Table 3. Final Ideas Expressed by Academic Staff

Staff	
	The university should pursue policy that forces academic staff to develop inclusive practices that benefit not only students and dyslexia but all students in our classes.
	The university should provide training [about] what dyslexia is and also train academic staff in teaching techniques we could use to help these students.

As the responses of students and academic staff are considered and reviewed, it is important to reflect and think deeply about how to serve students with dyslexia in higher education. As we consider the responses of both the student and academic faculty participants, receiving answers to this direct question can serve as a call to action because this is not an administrator telling us what should be done to make improvements nor is it the words of an educational theorist who has been out of the classroom for twenty years. These responses are from students in classrooms enrolled in higher education and from academic staff who are currently teaching students with dyslexia. Therefore, what can one do with these responses? My suggestion would be to develop these responses into actual action points. For example, if someone can provide training in dyslexia to academic faculty and staff, the idea is to offer and provide that training. Another example is that if you are on a policy making board, think deeply about the policy statements in place and brainstorm with your colleagues about the best possible solution to addressing some of the challenges that students are facing. In this way, immediate intervention can have an impact on student learning and this can contribute to their success.

### **5.11 Implications for Practice**

When thinking about this study's implications, it is my hope that the findings of this research study have a profound effect for students with dyslexia as well as for academic faculty who are dedicated to see every student in their classrooms succeed. The implications of this study involve a call for additional research and practical action in moving forward.

Research opportunities abound with the changes happening in order to change the funding as well as improve the delivery of services for students with disabilities and this includes students with dyslexia. It cannot be overemphasized that the research asked students and academic staff directly how the services prepared for them are working for them. This type of research can be completed across campuses in England and around the world in any university system that is dedicated to improving its services for students with dyslexia. With the changes in services and the move toward inclusive practices in teaching and learning in higher education, there is a wonderful opportunity to conduct research and provide professional development for faculty in higher education. This is an opportunity that sounds interesting as I continue in my career to improve teaching and learning for university students. With university enrolment on the rise worldwide, it is in the best interest of universities to equip and help their students to achieve success. When students with dyslexia graduate, this is a success for every stakeholder, and a university degree opens doors for graduating students for the rest of their lives.

As I have continued to reflect on my journey as an educational practitioner, I enjoyed a recent experience as a direct result of my thesis experience that involved my being hired as a consultant for an international school located in the United States. The school was interested in discovering how to improve their middle school. Using some of the skills learned through this

research journey, I designed a research proposal that was accepted by the board of the school and its administrative team, and as a result, was hired as a consultant to conduct research and provide a report that would potentially help the school improve and move forward. The research centred around the effectiveness of the Middle Years Program of the International Baccalaureate and specifically what can be done to strengthen the MYP at the school. The result was a 36 page report with 11 findings designed to cause the school to think deeply about its history, and share some contributing viewpoints from key stakeholders (Eplin, 2019 March). It was a rich and fruitful experience that was only possible as a result of the learning in my doctoral program and journey. It is my hope to start an educational consulting company with the goal being to help schools align themselves according to their stated mission, vision, and core values. This type of practical action is something that can be replicated and implemented across continents and in countries to meet the needs of students with dyslexia worldwide.

Another practical implication involves students' statements that the university should tell faculty that they are dyslexic while the academic staff asked that the university inform them which students are dyslexic. Both students and academic staff communicated that this would be very helpful in the process of providing support and services for university students with dyslexia. The issue of disclosure and privacy needs to be considered when exploring who should share that a student is dyslexic. Regardless of who discloses, it is important to consider the privacy of the student and to allow them to make decisions for themselves. Other practical applications involve the opportunities to provide training for faculty, to make teaching resources more readily available and accessible, and to improve the speed at which supports are provided for students with dyslexia.



Finally, more research must be completed by expanding the reach of this study to include universities around the world. When I originally embarked upon this research, I wanted to conduct a comparison study that would capture the experiences of students with dyslexia from three to five different universities. It was decided that this project would potentially take ten years or more and, as a result, I narrowed the scope of this doctoral study to one university. However, the need to reach out and ask students how they are doing remains, and my hope is that additional research in this area, namely asking students with dyslexia directly how they are doing in universities around the world, can help to shape and inform the policies for support structures for students with dyslexia, thereby allowing full access to anyone who would like to one day graduate with a higher education degree.

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## Appendix A. Students' Interview Guide

I hope to collect experiences relate to admissions, the learning process, support when things get difficult, and relationships with professors.

Describe what it was like in the admissions process for the university?

What tangible supports helped you to be successful in your courses?

What suggestions do you have to make the student experience better for other students?

What was your most difficult experience at the university?

Are you comfortable and supported in sharing with faculty that you have dyslexia?

When did you discover that you had dyslexia?

Was the university helpful in your self-discovery of dyslexia?

What kinds of support are available to you as a student?

What are the most effective supports that you have experienced?

Did you feel stigmatized once after you revealed that you have dyslexia?

Is there a support group for students with dyslexia and are you active in the support group?

Are there some professors who demonstrate a greater understanding of dyslexia and if yes, what is it that they understand that you would like all professors to understand?

## Appendix B. Academic Staff Interview Guide

I hope to inquire about information related to training about dyslexia and provisions for students, test modifications available to students, inquiry into what is expected from the administration, and if students are truly getting the accommodations that they need to succeed in classes from the point of view of the professor.

Is there a working definition of dyslexia used by you as a faculty?

Do you provide differentiation of instruction for students with dyslexia in your classes?

Do you think that it is possible for students to have dyslexia?

Do the interventions and techniques that you develop help other students as well as students with dyslexia?

Is faculty training provided for you to assist students with dyslexia?

Do you find that providing supports to dyslexic students gives them an unfair advantage over other students?

Do professors understand a working definition of dyslexia and does this help them when making supports for students?

Would professors provide support for students even if the law did not require them to?

Do the supports provided for students with dyslexia help not only the students with dyslexia, but all students in the class?

Do students with dyslexia receive an unfair advantage in the classroom because of the supports that are set in place for them?

What are the best types of support that have been used to help students with dyslexia?

## Appendix C. VPREC Ethical Approval



UNIVERSITY OF  
LIVERPOOL

ONLINE  
PROGRAMMES

Dear Randal Eplin		
I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.		
Sub-Committee:	EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)	
Review type:	Expedited	
PI:		
School:	Lifelong Learning	
Title:	Experiences of students with Dyslexia in Higher Education	
First Reviewer:	Dr. Lucilla Crosta	
Second Reviewer:	Prof. Morag Gray	
Other members of the Committee	Dr. Anthony Edwards, Dr. Martin Gough, Dr. Danis McIntyre	
Date of Approval:	09/09/2015	
The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:		
Conditions		
1	Mandatory	M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD Thesis Primary Supervisor.

<p>This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at <a href="http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc">http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc</a>.</p> <p>Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).</p>			
Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.			

Kind regards,

Lucilla Crosta

Chair, EdD. VPREC

## **Appendix D. Student Information Sheet**

### **A Call for Participation in a study here at the (removed name of university)**

#### **1. Title of Study**

**Experiences of students with Dyslexia in Higher Education**

#### **2. Version Number and Date**

**Student Information Sheet  
June 18, 2015**

#### **3. Invitation Paragraph**

**You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask us if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends, relatives and GP if you wish. We would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.**

**Thank you for reading this.**

#### **4. What is the purpose of the study?**

**The objective of this research is to explore the experiences of students with dyslexia. There are programs of support in place for students with dyslexia, but not much is known about how effective the programs are in serving the needs of students with dyslexia. Using a phenomenological methodological approach, both students, academic and support staff will be interviewed. Using thematic data analysis, the data will be analysed describing both explicit and implicit ideas within the data identifying themes. Finally, a discussion of the data will result as well as findings to be used to improve the supports in place for students with dyslexia in higher education settings.**

#### **5. Why I have been chosen to take part?**

**Students with dyslexia have been chosen to participate in this study because your experiences in higher education are unique and they need to be 'heard' in order to evaluate the systems that have been developed to provide support. Both academic and support staff are also invited to participate in the study.**

**6. Do I have to take part?**

**Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage.**

**7. What will happen if I take part?**

**If you would like to take part in the study, you may email me at randyeplin@pcmail.com. My name is Randy Eplin and I am the only researcher for this project that serves as my thesis for the Doctorate in Higher Education. I am currently working in China as a Secondary School Principal at an International School.**

**After hearing from you, the next step in the process would be to set up a Skype interview with you. Using a semi-structured interview approach, I would ask you questions about your university experience as a student with dyslexia from the time of enrolment to the types of support that you might receive as a student. I would ask your consent to record the interview so I can log the answers to the questions that I would ask.**

**The interview would last no more than one hour, and at any time if you felt uncomfortable or wanted to stop the interview, we would stop with no question asked.**

**8. Expenses and/ or payment**

**There is no payment for your participation, but I do plan to provide a small gift as a token of my appreciation for your participation in the interview.**

**9. Are there any risks in taking part?**

**The risks for taking part might involve your sharing some things that are uncomfortable for you to talk about. Sometimes we go through things that are hurtful and make us feel uneasy when talking about those things. This is the biggest risk associated with the interview process, but rest assured that I will not force you to talk about something that you do not want to talk about and we can end the interview at any time during the interview process.**

**10. Are there any benefits in taking part?**

**Sometimes it is helpful for a person to share their experiences as it feels good to 'get things off your chest' so to speak. My goal is to sincerely listen to and capture your experience as a student enrolled in the university. Another big benefit is for you to know that your participation could lead to making things**

**better or more transparent for your fellow students as well as students who are applying to the university as we speak. The goal is to try to make things better, your participation in this study could do just that: make things better.**

**11. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?**

**If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting [Principal Investigator name and number] and we will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to us with then you should contact the Research Governance Officer at [ethics@liv.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@liv.ac.uk). When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher(s) involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.**

**12. Will my participation be kept confidential?**

**I hold myself to the highest ethical standards, and you have my word as a researcher that your participation will be kept confidential both during the interview process as well as after the final 'write up' of the research dissertation.**

**13. What will happen to the results of the study?**

**The results of this study will be used for two purposes. First, the results of this study form my doctoral thesis to fulfil the final requirement for my Doctorate in Higher Education. Second, I plan to seek publication of the results of this study in journals to share with a wider audience the results with the goal of getting the word out about how institutions of higher learning can make things better for students with dyslexia at their universities.**

**Finally, it is important for you to know that you will not be identifiable from the results of this study.**

**14. What will happen if I want to stop taking part?**

**You may withdraw at any time before or during the interview process. And you do not have to provide an explanation. Results up to the period of withdrawal may be used, if you are happy for this to be done. Otherwise you may request that they are destroyed and no further use is made of them.**

**15. Who can I contact for further questions?**

**Please contact any of the following people for further information:**

**1) Randal Eplin (Doctoral candidate and researcher for this project) (removed email) or [Randyepin@pcmail.com](mailto:Randyepin@pcmail.com)**



**Skype address: 'randyeplin'**  
**Telephone: 18518389834 (China number)**

**2) (removed name of university) Ethics Office**  
**(removed email)**

**3) (removed name of supervisor) (Primary Supervisor)**

**16. Criminal Records Bureau check (CRB)**

**The researcher involved in this study has obtained a CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) check, and as a participant in this research study you may request evidence of the disclosure from the PI.**

### **Duty of care to research participants**

**As mentioned previously, the risk associated with this study might involve your feeling uncomfortable because of the experiences that you have had at the university that are discussed during the interview process.**

**If you become upset as a result of the interview process to the degree that it would be helpful to speak with someone, please follow the information for counselling services below.**

#### **Counselling Services:**

**Phone Number: (removed phone number)**

**Email Address: (removed email)**

**Appendix E. Student Recruitment Flyer**

# **Research Study: An invitation for Participation**

**You are invited to participate in a study. The study is conducted by Randy Eplin, a student at the (removed).**

**The Study Involves...**

**One hour of your time and is a recorded Skype interview where you share your experiences as a student at the (removed).**

**To Qualify...**

**You must be an active student at the university, be self-identified as a student with dyslexia and/or recognized by the university as having dyslexia. Participation is on a first come first served basis.**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.**

**Please Note:**

**This document and project information is available in alternative formats on request.**

**If interested, please contact:**

**Randy Eplin  
(removed email)**

## **Appendix F. Academic Staff Information Sheet**

### **A Call for Participation in a study here at the (removed)**

#### **1. Title of Study**

**Experiences of students with Dyslexia in Higher Education**

#### **2. Version Number and Date**

**Academic Staff Information Sheet  
June 18, 2015**

#### **3. Invitation Paragraph**

**You are invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being completed and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Please also feel free to discuss this with your friends, relatives and GP if you wish. We would like to stress that you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree to take part if you want to.**

**Thank you for reading this.**

#### **4. What is the purpose of the study?**

**The objective of this research is to explore the experiences of students with dyslexia. There are programs of support in place for students with dyslexia, but not much is known about how effective the programs are in serving the needs of students with dyslexia. Using a phenomenological methodological approach, both students, academic and support staff will be interviewed. Using thematic data analysis, the data will be analysed describing both explicit and implicit ideas within the data identifying themes. Finally, a discussion of the data will result as well as findings to be used to improve the supports in place for students with dyslexia in higher education settings.**

#### **5. Why I have been chosen to take part?**

**Academic staff members have been chosen to participate in this study because something can be learned to understand both the successes and limitations of the types of support being provided. Academic staff members have a unique perspective in working with students with dyslexia that is virtually unheard of and not researched extensively. Your participation could help to gain a**

**perspective that could help higher education institutions enhance and improve services and supports for students with dyslexia.**

**6. Do I have to take part?**

**Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage.**

**7. What will happen if I take part?**

**If you would like to take part in the study, you may email me at (removed email). My name is Randy Eplin and I am the only researcher for this project that serves as my thesis for the Doctorate in Higher Education. I am currently working in China as a Secondary School Principal at an International School.**

**After hearing from you, the next step in the process would be to set up a Skype interview with you. Using a semi-structured interview approach, I would ask you questions about your university experience in teaching and working with students with Dyslexia. I would ask your consent to record the interview so I can log the answers to the questions that I would ask.**

**The interview would last no more than one hour, and at any time if you felt uncomfortable or wanted to stop the interview, we would stop with no questions asked.**

**8. Expenses and/ or payment**

**There is no payment for your participation, but I do plan to provide a small gift as a token of my appreciation for your participation in the interview.**

**9. Are there any risks in taking part?**

**The risks for taking part might involve your sharing some things that are uncomfortable for you to talk about and share.**

**10. Are there any benefits in taking part?**

**My goal is to sincerely listen to and capture your experience as an academic staff member as you have supported students with Dyslexia. One potential benefit in participating in the study is that it could lead to making things better or more transparent for your students as well as provide support for you as a member of the academic staff at the university. The goal is to try to make things better for your students, and your participation in this study could very well make things better.**

**11. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?**

**If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to let us know by contacting me, Randy Eplin, using the contact information below. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to me with then you should contact the Research Governance Officer at ethics@liv.ac.uk. When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.**

**12. Will my participation be kept confidential?**

**I hold myself to the highest ethical standards, and you have my word as a researcher that your participation will be kept confidential both during the interview process as well as after the final 'write up' of the research dissertation.**

**13. What will happen to the results of the study?**

**The results of this study will be used for two purposes. First, the results of this study form my doctoral thesis to fulfil the final requirement for my Doctorate in Higher Education. Second, I plan to seek publication of the results of this study in journals to share with a wider audience the results with the goal of getting the word out about how institutions of higher learning can make things better for students with dyslexia.**

**Finally, it is important for you to know that you will not be identifiable from the results of this study.**

**14. What will happen if I want to stop taking part?**

**You may withdraw at any time before or during the interview process. And you do not have to provide an explanation. Results up to the period of withdrawal may be used, if you are happy for this to be done. Otherwise you may request that they are destroyed and no further use is made of them.**

**15. Who can I contact for further questions?**

**Please contact any of the following people for further information:**

**1) Randal Eplin (Doctoral candidate and researcher for this project.)**

**(removed email) or Randyepin@pcmail.com**

**Skype address: 'randyeplin'**

**Telephone: 18518389834 (China number)**

**2) (removed) Ethics Office**

**(removed email)**

**3) (removed name of primary supervisor) (Primary Supervisor)**

**(removed email address)**

**Appendix G. Academic Staff Recruitment Flyer**

# **Research Study: An invitation for Participation**

**You are invited to participate in a study.**

**The study is conducted by Randy Eplin, a student at the (removed).**

**The Study Involves...**

**One hour of your time and is a recorded Skype interview where you share your experiences as a student with dyslexia at the (removed).**

**To Qualify...**

**You must be an academic staff member at the university, and have taught or teaching student(s) with dyslexia. Participation is on a first come first served basis.**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.**

**If interested, please contact:**

**Randy Eplin  
(removed email)**