

Neurodiversity and Neoliberalism: Talking with University Academic Advisors about Students with Dyslexia

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores how dyslexia is discursively constructed in relation to higher education by Academic Advisors at a UK university in terms of the forms of support offered. Modern understanding of dyslexia has shifted from the view that it is a disability or deficiency to considering the condition as a form neurodiversity. However, there is some uncertainty in higher education concerning practical support implications and therefore this study examines issues surrounding reasonable adjustments for these students. A discourse analysis approach was used to examine interview transcript material resulting in three contrasting themes. First, diagnosis was set in contrast to disposition where dyslexia is professionally confirmed as condition but then undermined through references to student agency and resilience. Second, dyslexia was discussed in terms of support for coursework submission but was set in contrast to a meritocratic notion of fairness for all students. Third, there was recognition for reasonable adjustment under the terms of the Equality Act, but this was set in contrast to resource pressures. The net result of these discursive constructions is to maintain the status quo whereby dyslexia is recognised as a diagnosed condition but set within a neoliberal ideology of individual coping and adjustment rather than aligning with the principles of universal design for learning associated with neurodiversity.

Keywords: Dyslexia, Higher Education, Academic Advisor, Discourse, Neoliberalism, Neurodiversity

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1. Introduction

The UK Equality Act (2010) requires educational establishments to provide 'reasonable adjustments' for students who are recognised as having Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) such as dyslexia. However, dyslexia has subtypes and at present there is no recognised definition (Alexander-Passe, 2015: 204; Snowling et al. 2020). Constructing a definition can create problems in terms of discursive connotations problematise the condition through the use of terms such as 'disability', 'impairment', 'deficit', and 'Specific Learning Difficulty'. This discourse has been contested as discriminatory (Riddick, 2001) and ideological in terms of creating a binary division between ability and disability. This effect of this discursive construction is the positioning of dyslexic learners as inferior (Bolt, 2014). An example of this kind of positioning can be found in Pennington's (2006) multiple deficit model of the cognitive aspects that accompany dyslexia based on working memory, phonology, and speed of information processing. The model, in effect, standardises 'ability' and results in dyslexic students being considered as being outwith established norms. This creates a situation of 'othering' in which disability is highlighted, and literacy-based skills are considered as the yardstick against which academic ability is measured. The effect of such

othering can produce feelings of stigmatisation in dyslexic learners given their judged weakness in literacy.

Macdonald (2009) and Riddick (2012) have put forward an alternative social model of dyslexia which suggests that although disability exists, human capacity is on a broad-ranging continuum, and that dyslexia exists within this range of human difference. In this view difficulties arise due to society's imposition of limitations on what can be learned and accomplished. To overcome these limitations a participatory approach can be adopted with dyslexia students that works seeks work with them in terms of their capabilities (Glassman & Patton, 2014). Such an approach counters a deficit model of learning, allowing for dyslexia to be recognised as a difference in the ways that learners may operate (Abbott-Jones, 2023: 5). This is much more in keeping with the notion of neurodiversity and aligns closely with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), recently advocated for students with dyslexia by Tops et al. (2023).

Scholars have conducted empirical research on how students with dyslexia negotiate the label. Cameron and Billington (2015) in their focus group-based discourse analytic study on students in higher education with dyslexia found a range of discursive constructions indicative of the tensions that arise for these students. For example, students talked about their writing difficulties and set this against a desired attainment of high literacy as a marker of work at this level of education. The dyslexia label was something that students had to learn to negotiate within the education system, either accepting or resisting both lay and professional connotations associated with the term. In follow-up work Cameron and Billington (2017) examined the dominance of neoliberal ideology in students' focus-group accounts concerning "ways of being dyslexic in higher education" (2017: 1362). Neoliberal themes were apparent in terms of narratives that stressed individual responsibility through effort and hard work, as well as engaging in self-help when facing difficulties. It was also found that these students constructed their identities through comparisons with non-dyslexic students.

Hamilton Clark's (2024) qualitative research examined how the stigma associated with dyslexia can impact student identity and self-esteem. This led some students in failing to seek support which further intensified identity struggles and diminished self-esteem, particularly for those who had been identified as dyslexic at school. Despite dyslexia being positioned with a broader and more inclusive framework of neurodiversity, the stigma attached to the condition still seems prevalent. Some critics now question the validity of a categorical approach to dyslexia as a means of gaining access to specialist support in terms of labelling it a SpLD. The latter can result in a conflict between progressive, and more inclusive models of dyslexia as a difference in learning style with the traditional special education perspective. Knight (2025) argues that the categorical model is harmful and suggests that an unconditional approach to enabling all students to succeed is necessary, building a framework that is supportive of the diversity of learning styles and strategies and in keeping with UDL principles.

Students in the UK who have an identified SpLD may be eligible for a Disabled Students' Allowance, providing funds for non-medical support such as laptops and specialist software. A full Needs Assessment can also be undertaken and recommendations made on reasonable adjustments that can be made. This may include alternative examination formats, extra time in examinations, a support tutor, and notification stickers on coursework for markers where a student has an identified SpLD. However, some of these measures will depend on individual students and therefore reasonable adjustments need to be adaptable depending on student needs. Most higher education institutions in the UK provide support for students through

formal support plans although enacting practical measures based on these plans may prove difficult (Cameron et al. 2019). Such support is generally only provided for students who have had a formal diagnosis. Students who have not come forward and declared that they are dyslexic, or have no formal diagnosis, may not qualify for these support plans to be put in place.

2. Methodology

The investigation presented in this paper forms a larger case study into the discursive constructions of dyslexia by students, support workers and academic advisors. This paper is concerned with the latter group who have been overlooked due to a predominant research focus on dyslexic students themselves. The study follows Rolak et al. (2023) in adopting a value-driven approach to dyslexia in higher education. In other words, the investigation considers whether academic advisors find difficulty in managing ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988) in terms of conflicting discourses around special needs versus a 'capability' outlook that focuses on what students can do and the extent which they are enabled or hindered in their learning opportunities (van der Klink et al., 2016: 74). Enabling dyslexic students to function at their full capabilities and realise their academic potential depends upon a range of individual, institutional, and societal factors (Pino & Mortari, 2014). This investigation examines what the academic advisors raised in relation to these factors using a discourse analytic approach. The central research question was: How do academic advisors construct their discourse around their role in relation to dyslexic students achieving their academic potential?

To address this question, the study sought to examine the advisors' accounts in terms of "how the themes of ideology are instantiated in ordinary talk, and how speakers are part of, and are continuing, the ideological history of the discourse themes they are using" (Billig, 2001: 218). Moreover, the study also drew upon Billig et al. (1988) to consider the ideological dilemmas embedded in the advisors' accounts as they talked about dyslexic students and their role in supporting them. The aim was to examine latent ideological themes underpinning their accounts of working with students and staff. As part of this focus the advisors' accounts were examined for contradictions and how these were reconciled. Following the work of Cameron and Billington (2017), the accounts were closely scrutinised for expressions of neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism can be understood in terms of the weaving together of discursive and material practices that produce and maintain the idea that the organisational locus of life is through the market and the individual. This position leads to a twin focus on "privatisation and personal responsibility" (Duggan 2003:12) which are taken to be a "reasonable" outlook (Duggan 2003: 10). Accordingly, dyslexia can be framed as an individual problem rather than that of the higher education system in general or at the level of its constituent institutions. Given this ideological outlook, counter-initiatives seeking to promote social and pedagogical change through and awareness of neurodiversity are likely to be put at risk.

Following Gee (2005) and Willig (2008), transcripts were analysed in terms of ideologically situated language use in constructing their views of dyslexia. This led to a concern with how dyslexia is constructed ideologically depending on the conversational context (c.f. Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014). For example, part of the conversational context involving the discussion of coursework submission deadlines and the issue of extension for dyslexic students. It was anticipated that this issue would prove ideologically interesting given that students with SpLDs are given an additional period in timed examinations but not for coursework where the deadlines are often set weeks in advance. In other words, close attention was paid to the

advisors' accounts in terms how far support for dyslexic students extends when set against notions of fairness for all students. This broad focus was supplemented by also looking at the micro-linguistic features of how these discourses were instantiated in the conversational turns between the researcher and the advisors. Consequently, attention was paid to features such as lexical choices, contrast structures, equivocation, and the use of hedged responses. The aim here was to examine exactly how, in the nature of their talk, disability and neurodivergence were raised and reconciled in relation to support for students with dyslexia. The role of academic advisor encompasses student welfare and well as acting as a liaison between lecturing staff and centralised university support services for disabled students. This is crucial role given their understanding of dyslexic students plays a key part in translating support policy into practice.

Given the case study approach adopted in this investigation, no claims are made for the overall generalisability of findings. The focus of the investigation is on ways on talking about dyslexia rather than discursive patterns that are representative in the wider population of academic advisors. While the sample involved in this case study is more modest than that of a larger cross-institutional piece of research, it nevertheless provides important insights into the ways in which academic advisors construct and negotiate *in situ* their views on supporting students with dyslexia. This approach examines ideology as the weaving together of ways of talking that may involve tensions or contradictions and that produce ideological effects or outcomes through the interpretative resources that are drawn upon (see Wetherell and Potter, 1992:69-72). The sampling approach adopted is in keeping within the conceptual frame of a 'focusing' move (Elmholdt et al., 2026). This involved aiming for analytical depth by narrowing in the advisors' accounts in terms of how they framed support for students with dyslexia and justified actions. Accordingly, interviews were conducted with three academic advisors about how students with dyslexia are advised and the support they receive. The interview ranged over topics such as referral to university support services relating to a student's diagnosis, coursework support for written assignments, and the provision of reasonable adjustments for teaching, e.g., making lecture slides available in advance on the university's virtual learning space.

The three academic advisors were affiliated to different schools within the university, including science and engineering, business and social sciences, and computer science and digital technology. All agreed to participate in the study after receiving appropriate information, and in adherence with the university's ethics and procedure regarding informed consent and confidentiality. Due to the relatively small sample, and because the study adopts an interpretative paradigm, looking at 'experiences' or 'themes' was not central to the investigation, nor was the notion of 'data saturation'. Instead, the analytical concern was with discursive ways of accounting and the ideological import of the advisors responses. All the interviews were conducted via MS Teams and lasted between 30-45 minutes. Transcripts were created based on readability rather than detailing paralinguistic phenomena as is the case in conversation analytic research (e.g., notations for delays in speech, overlaps, emphasis, etc.). This less detailed form of transcription was appropriate for analysing different discursive themes and ideological practices.

The interviews were analysed in three stages. Firstly, each interview transcript was read and reread to identify relevant ideological themes and dilemmas. Secondly, analysis was performed at line-by-level level with consideration was given to lexical features including hedges, the use of contrasting positions, active voicing, repetition and the overall action orientation of the discourse. Thirdly, the latter features were examined for potential connections between the discursive and ideological levels in terms revealing tensions in how advisors spoke. This three-stage process ensured that broad ideological aspects were

identified, particularly through neoliberal discursive construction, and that the advisors' accounts were examined at the fine-grain level for features that gave indications of tensions between offering support on the one hand and appealing to individual effort on the other. These tensions are often apparent the ways in which accounts are given in conversation in terms of structural features such as equivocal responses, or in ways where the speaker seeks to fend off a potentially controversial remark by first giving a disclaimer or a hedged response. In other words, the shift underway in higher education towards positioning dyslexia as a form of neurodiversity has been broadly welcomed and saying anything that challenges or contradicts this can lead to defensive discursive constructions that are apparent in the way that such remarks are made. Therefore, the analytical value of the three-stage process undertaken lies in being able to connect ideological issues in the advisors' discourse with the ways in which they put across their remarks. The process involved reflecting on the links and contradictions between different discursive constructions and it is recognised that the themes identified are the result of this interpretative process.

Therefore, sitting alongside these three stages a reflexive stance was adopted in terms of the researcher positionality (e.g., insider-outsider dimension or and emic-etic researcher perspective, Beals et al., 2020). In this study a partial 'insider' perspective was initially apparent given the researcher is a university lecturer, in regular contact with dyslexic students and the support staff. However, while this might allow for some insight when examining the academic advisors' responses, positionality was also considered as an ongoing and potentially shifting process during the course of the investigation. A researcher can move from being an insider to an outsider during the course of research study, as well at particular stage in the analytical process (Bukamal, 2022: 344). Therefore, a sense of changing positionality has been reflected by incorporating reflexive comments alongside analytical comments to give additional insight into the interpretative process.

3. Findings

The findings are organised by broad ideological dilemmas apparent across the interview data and how they relate to the nature of the academic advisors' discursive constructions. They can also be seen as highlighting the tensions in attempting to reconcile support for dyslexic students and neoliberal accounts of agency, meritocratic views on student success, and pitting support against the 'reality' of resource provision. Lexical items, figures of speech, and other micro-linguistic features that instantiate these ideological dilemmas are drawn attention to in the analysis. The interview extracts presented below have therefore been selected as thematic exemplars that demonstrate the intertwined nature of ideological discourse and the ways in which it is constructed within the conversational context of the responses given.

3.1. A Condition and Conditional Agency

A common theme in the data was the treatment of dyslexia as something akin to a medical condition. In this perspective dyslexia is externalised as something to be diagnosed which then serves as a basis for supporting for students. On a reflexive level this is an understandable discourse within higher education given that we often come across student support plans that highlight those who have SpLDs and who require particular teaching and learning adjustments. However, this discourse can be weaved together with another discourse that sets support as being conditional upon student disposition and agency.

Academic Advisor 1:

(i) *“Some people don't want any help, but obviously some people do, especially if they've had it at school and things like that. So, they've kind of lived with that stigma for, you know, a number of years and it's only now it's sort of like as a student, that it's now been diagnosed.”*

(ii) *“I just think maybe we should think about how do we actually do help them, their mentality, does that make sense? We need to think about building up confidence for the student.”*

In extract (i) the advisor's ambiguity around the idea of students "wanting help" is an illustration of the issue of treating support-seeking as an individual choice that comes about through the student's agency rather than seeing dyslexia as a condition that the institution should accommodate in terms of a more inclusive approach to neurodiversity. In extract (ii) the advisor subtly skirts the issue of support through the hedged comment "I just think maybe we should think about we actually do help them". The word "think" features three times: the first occasion as self-referential, the second and third occasions in reference to the more ambiguous and general "we", as in lecturing staff. The use of the word "actually" serves to throw into question the forms of support offered and sets this in contrast to "building up confidence for the student". Confidence can be considered as linked to agency and the ability to do things for oneself. In other words, there is an indirect point being made about individual effort and how this can be enabled rather than support in the form of what is provided for dyslexic students.

This interpretation further highlights an apparent contradictory element to advising students with dyslexia. While Academic Advisor 2 below talks about the idea of having students "tested" and going through academic services, this is contrasted this with the notion of the student "mindset". It is interesting that this discursive construction ties in with extract (ii) from Advisor 1 in referring to metal outlook. This discursive construction is related to overcoming barriers in a future workplace, with the issue of pushing students to be more independent and resilient to the fore. Such a contrast represents a shift from positioning dyslexia as a diagnosed condition that requires support needs to one of positioning the student as needing a greater sense of confidence and agency in order to cope in a world beyond university that is characterised as less sympathetic to neurodivergence. In other words, these discursive constructions point to dispositional issues that are related to student agency and effort.

This analytical point was arrived at in terms of a shifting researcher positionality by seeking an interpretative distance from an insider view in which the advisor's discourse at an unreflective intuitive level. On initially reading the advisor's transcript, the way that diagnosis and support was talked about and then weaved together with talk about individual choice and mental outlook seemed to intuitively make sense. However, in applying an analytical external positionality it became apparent the way in which neoliberalism operates as discursive undercurrent. This analytic stance represents a changed interpretative positionality on the transcript data in terms of considering the ideological dimension of the advisor's words.

Academic Advisor 2:

(i) *“I'm coming across students with dyslexia that perhaps have never been diagnosed with it. So as academic advisor, just to answer that question, what happens then is I suggest to the student that they obviously go through academic services and to be tested and things like that.”*

(ii) *“And sometimes I think what we may need to be doing, maybe it's a bit of a mindset, because when you go into the world as a dyslexic person, you know that it's not easy either. And it's how you're going to overcome some of that. When you're in a workplace and somebody asks you for something that, yeah, you know, that can be problematic. And so, what I'm trying to say is maybe we should be talking, engaging with dyslexic students in a way that, how do we get them to push forward? Does that make” sense?*

Int: “Mhmm and try and see that sometimes using me as a crutch, if that makes sense. And I don't mean that in a very, I don't mean that in a malicious way whatsoever. But I think if you're going to come to university, there's other things as well. Like how do you strengthen your own concept about yourself? Yeah, your dyslexic and how are you going to deal with it in the world when you get employment. I just think maybe we should think about how do we help them, their mentality, does that make sense, in building up confidence for these students?”

The speech in extract (ii) illustrates the advisor's attempt to disengage from any potentially controversial interpretation, for instance when they repeat “does that make sense” three times and their remark “I don't mean that in a malicious way whatsoever”. These discursive features can be considered as a means of pre-empting the thought that they were being less than sympathetic to dyslexic students by relating their “mentality” to being resilient in the future workplace. Essentially, this discourse constructs dyslexic students in such a way that they must not only develop ways to deal with their condition but also adapt themselves to be confident in dealing with the world of work.

These contrasting discourses represent an ideological dilemma and this is evidenced through the repeated sense checks (“does that make sense”), use of a disclaimer (“I don't mean that in a malicious way whatsoever”), and focus upon the individual (“Yeah, your dyslexic and how are you going to deal with it”). This further moves the discourse away from an understanding of dyslexia as a form of neurodivergence towards portraying support as a form of individual dependency. Again, an altered state of positionality permits an interpretation that reveals an undercurrent of neoliberalism that runs through this discourse by shifting the emphasis from support for dyslexic students to one of what can students do for themselves.

The following from Academic Advisor 3 demonstrates how a diagnosis of dyslexia is taken as being a key aspect of ensuing support and that there is need for this is “spotted”. The advisor then later goes in the interview to deploy the familiar neoliberal equivocal trope of “some people like to be treated as special case and some people don't”.

Academic Advisor 3:

(i) *“And generally, if it's something that I've spotted and often, you know, things that we do spot could be diagnosed, I will just ask the student if they would like some support and I start them generally with the learner development service.”*

(ii) *“I mean, some people like to be treated as special case and some people don't. So, it's very, very difficult to do that.... I mean, not all students are comfortable.”*

(iii) *“And again, I know that over marking this term, I've seen two students that are clearly, I would say clearly dyslexic, but don't have any support. and then for us that becomes a problem, but they may not want to disclose it.”*

The contrasting responses in extracts (i) and (ii) show how an undercurrent of ideological tension is present in terms of a commitment to aiding students in getting diagnosed if the condition is suspected and then being offset against a neoliberal notion of individual choice in being treated as a “special case”. As in the analysis of the other advisors' responses, the

adoption of an external positionality permits a focus on the ideological nature of this discourse. In extract (iii) the advisor refers to experience of marking work from two students “that are clearly” dyslexic. Note how the advisor repeats clearly twice but on the second occasion qualifies with “I would say”. The use of this phrase acts as a way of signalling that this is a personal point of view rather than being based on a professional judgement. This is important given the following remark on this being “a problem” for “us” but that the students “may not want to disclose it”. In other words, the advisor is surmising that these students are aware they are dyslexic but wish to exercise their agency in not wishing to disclose it to the university. This construction of student agency provides an indirect means of drawing on neoliberal ideology in terms of the assumption that the students concerned are willing to deal with their dyslexia by themselves without support.

3.2. Contradictions around Coursework

Another important aspect raised in the discussions with the academic advisors was that of coursework support for dyslexic students and whether any changes needed to be made to deadlines. Some interesting points were made in relation to treating dyslexic students equally with non-dyslexic students while at the same time allowing for reasonable adjustment for coursework submission. However, it was clear that the advisors also espoused a meritocratic notion of fairness bound up with individual academic effort. This is exemplified by tentative responses that were made regarding the question of extra time for coursework deadlines for dyslexic students. These responses consisted of hedged statements (Holmes, 1990) in which the use of particular lexical units weaken the strength of a proposition thereby making it less secure (Prince, Frader & Bosk, 1982). According to Brown and Levinson (2011) such hedges are used to avoid disagreement, in this case avoiding saying anything that would breach the neoliberal view of achievement through individual effort and the notion of fairness for all. In the case of the utterance by Academic Advisor 1 below, the use of “kind of”, “maybe not quite as strict” and “I suppose”, “I don't know”, serve to create a position that is less definitive on the question of extended deadlines for dyslexic students.

Academic Advisor 1:

“But no, they would definitely need to submit their assignment on the dead date the same as everybody else. So, it's just kind of taken that just not being quite as maybe strict as what you would be when you were maybe mark it. But I suppose it depends on the kind of field of study as well; just how important it is. You know, maybe in Law it would be something completely, it would need to be bang on sort of thing. I don't know. So, they would basically, I mean, it's only a handful of students that do get this kind of proofreading. That's something that is agreed separately. But they would still need to submit exactly the same dead as everybody else.”

It is evident from the above extract that the advisor adheres to the notion of individual merit through all students facing the same coursework deadline (“definitely need to submit their assessment on the deadline”; “they would still need to submit exactly the same deadline as everybody else”). The emphasis on the same deadline for all students is reflective of an education system where assessment is considered as being driven by a combination of ability and effort. From an insider position, this is something that teaching staff can relate to in that we reward effort and ability in grading students’ work. However, in adopting a more external view, this position is based on an unreflective assumption of neurotypicality.

For students with dyslexia there are not only issues with writing assessments, but also in reading and preparing for them. Furthermore, they may have other attendant neurodiverse conditions such as dyscalculia or dyspraxia that compound their difficulties. While there has

been a move towards UDL, assessment practices have somewhat lagged behind. As Hamilton & Petty (2023) note, there is scope for building more flexibility into assessment practice through, for example, diverse types of assessment that permit students to play to their strengths. This can also include additional time for coursework assessments for students with dyslexia. What arguably prevents this kind of adjustment is twofold: first, a neoliberal ideology that places a blanket level of individual responsibility on students above a recognition of neurodivergence and second, a lack of challenge to the inertia of uniform assessments with single deadlines.

The sense that giving extra time for coursework breaches fairness is interesting given that examinations for such students often involve additional time to offset slower reading and writing. It seems that a set examination period is considered as being different from an extended period to complete a coursework assignment. However, extra time for these assignments need not be a blanket entitlement. An extended deadline for coursework submissions can aid students with dyslexia in preparing written submissions. This is arguably appropriate only where there is evidence that a student's particular form of dyslexia merits an extension to an assignment deadline.

Advisor 2 adopted a different form of discourse in response to the question of possible extensions to coursework deadlines for dyslexic students. The answer below provides an equivocal response that does not answer the question posed but nonetheless indirectly argues in favour of not giving dyslexic students extended submission deadlines.

Academic Advisor 2:

(i) *“And what I find interesting about that is, is that some students really push themselves not to be dyslexic, if that makes sense. They overcommit themselves to preparing their work, redrafting their work. Whereas sometimes we have other students that might just say 'I'm dyslexic, so here it is and just accept it, right'. So, what I'm trying to say there is there's different types, there's different types of dyslexia, but there's different types of students that will say “I spent three weeks writing that essay because I was at my dictionary all the time and I was using this, and I was doing edits”.”*

(ii) *“Int: Should students with dyslexia get an extended deadline for coursework? Well, objectively and by the university's policy every student is treated, should be treated the same, that's what it is.*

It's a difficult one, really, it's a difficult question.

Yeah, I think objectively the university does, you know, treat to every student the same way but there's some conditions which we can be a bit more flexible with.

So that's my answer, I think because I wouldn't like to say subjectively, because I do think we have to be fair to all students.”

In extract (i) The initial utterance "what I find interesting about this" permits a way of making the controversial claim that "some students really push themselves not to be dyslexic". Declaring the issue as "interesting" operates as a partial disclaimer, a step back in support of the claim while still raising it. The tagged phrase "if that makes sense" acts as a hedge in softening the potential inappropriateness of claim that some students with dyslexia seek to overcome their condition through effort and will. This position is then set in contrast to those students who are actively voiced as saying "I'm dyslexic, so here it is and just accept it". In other words, a contrast is set up between those who struggle "not to be dyslexic" and who "overcommit themselves", and those who accept their dyslexic condition as something to be accommodated, and who consequently submit coursework by taking the view "here it is, just accept it". The key point in this discursive construction is the focus on student effort and how

this acts as a motif for a neoliberal ideological stance. Those students who “push themselves not to be dyslexic” are presented as admirable and this is confirmed in the final part of the extract where the advisor engages in hypothetical active voicing in terms of a student who has put in effort in terms of preparing their written coursework (“I spent three weeks writing that essay because I was at my dictionary all the time and I was using this, and I was doing edits”). It is evident from the advisor’s words that individual effort is lauded at the expense of adopting a stance of understanding students with dyslexia as being neurodivergent. Again, this analysis was achieved through a shifting positionality and greater critical awareness of how the agency and self-reliance of dyslexic students can be ideologically inscribed in the outlook of advisors who offer students guidance and support.

Extract (ii) on the issue of extended coursework for dyslexic students reveals an interesting contrast structure in the advisor’s response. The response is constructed around an objective-subjective dichotomy in which the initial remark externalises the issue to that of university policy (“objectively and by the university’s policy every student is treated, should be treated the same, that’s what it is.”). Note the rephrased “is treated” to “should be treated”. This adds emphasis to make clear what is university policy. Having drawn attention to the policy the advisor then points to the issue being “a difficult one, really, it’s a difficult question” before going on to say that “there’s some conditions which we can be a bit more flexible with”. In other words, the advisor makes clear that although there is the official university policy leeway may be given for students with some conditions. The next aspect of the response points to this subjective element while reverting back to the university policy (“I wouldn’t like to say subjectively, because I do think we have to be fair to all students”). It is evident from this response that the advisor does not want to offer a personal ‘subjective’ view and therefore keeps within the bounds of ‘objective’ university policy.

In extract (i) below Academic Advisor 3 presents a familiar neoliberal theme in terms of support being a matter of individual choice.

Academic Advisor 3:

(i) *“I mean, some people like to be treated as a special case and some people don’t. So, it’s very, very difficult to do that. I mean, and again, I say not all students are comfortable telling you that they’re dyslexic, you know.”*

(ii) *“I mean, things like well, when students have to get things proofread and it might take a bit of time for that for, for students to be able to get things proofread.*

Int: Should that be built into the submission time for them? Should they get any extra submission time?”

“I mean, we have the extra week, you know, but the proofread version is not the one that’s marked. I mean, it’s only there just to, to make sure, you know, if there’s something you’re unsure of and you, you refer to it.”

Again, the discursive construction involves discourse markers such as ‘I mean’ and ‘you know’ that function as hedges that have the effect of softening the claims being made. In this regard it is noteworthy that these surround the equivocal statement that “some people like to be treated as a special case and some people don’t”. The effect of this discursive construction is to treat dyslexia as a “special case”, in other words falling back on the notion of special needs and a disability model of the condition rather than viewing such students within the range of neurodivergence. Moreover, the equivocation around the idea that these students may or may not be “comfortable” declaring their condition once again throws it back onto the student as a matter of individual choice. This is particularly apparent when addressing the question of extra time for students to submit where the use of the collective “we” avoids directly giving a

personal view in addressing the question before pointing out that subsequent submission of a proofread copy is “just there.... if there's something you're unsure of”.

Taking the three academic advisors' comments together on the issue of extra time for coursework assignment submission for students with dyslexia, it is evident that there is tension in the responses between constructing their discourse around supporting these students and the meritocratic notion of equitable treatment for all students. In taking an insider perspective, it is understandable that we wish to offer students support and see them succeed but this is tempered when stepping back with a more external perspective that reveals the apparent tension rooted in assumptions of meritocracy and neurotypicality.

3.3. Reasonable Adjustment and Reality

The UK Equality Act (2010) states that there needs to be a reasonable adjustment to enable a disabled person in education to study. While this is a legal requirement, there are issues to be considered in terms of ensuring that the adjustments themselves are reasonable in the context of available institutional resources. The conflict between legislative requirement and institutional resource limitations is highlighted by the discursive constructions of the advisors. Each draws a contrast between support plan entitlements and lecturers' perceived "reality" of workload pressure associated with providing these adjustments. This conflict is demonstrated clearly in the Academic Advisor 1, in relation to providing slides for dyslexic students in advance of lectures. The advisor first refers to students support plans and then a "reality" of teaching a new module and not being able to meet this requirement.

Academic Advisor 1:

(i) *“Int: Do you, do you liaise with, with lecturing staff about say, putting slides up early or changes in background colour?”*

Adv: “Yeah, again, that's part of the support plan, right.

So, to be honest, I, would, I would only raise it with a, with a member of staff if this if they said look, you know, we're not getting these early. Then you know, then I would ask, I mean, I'm not, you know, I'm not a boss of any of the, any of the members of staff, you know, but I can, I can nudge them gently and say look, this, you know, this student, and there's always a number of students, who've got the support plans that require slides early. The problem is, of course, a lot of the time if it's a new module and things like that, they're only writing them, you know, writing that week's lecture, you know, so it's hard. It's hard to get things in advance, or it can be.”

(ii) *“I think that most of us should be looking to make sure that they're making everything accessible.*

And I think most of us do, you know, but not everyone.

I know it can be difficult doing this if it's a new module, you know, it takes a bit of extra time, but it has to be done.”

In extract (i) The advisor signals that raising matters with lecturing staff on the provision of learning materials for students with dyslexia is contingent on the students themselves pointing out that “we're not getting these [lecture slides] early”. The discourse markers (“you know”), and hesitation through the repetition of “I can” underlies the advisor's point of not being the “boss of any member of staff” and of only being able to “nudge them gently”. What is apparent in this statement is how the provision of reasonable adjustment is framed around circumventing direct managerial involvement through informally liaising with staff. The

“problem” is then reframed in terms of staff workload, particularly when teaching new modules and “writing that week's lecture” making it “hard”.

In analysing this discourse, an insider positionality leads to a sympathetic stance. Many lecturing staff are aware of the pressure in preparing learning material when teaching a new module. Often this preparation cannot take place in advance due to other commitments that are both personal (e.g., holiday entitlements between academic sessions) and professional (e.g., research or administrative work). Nevertheless, in taking an external view on this discourse it is apparent that shift from talking about the requirements of support plans to the ‘reality’ of time pressures in ensuring lecture material is presented in advance, effectively reframes the issue as a resource one. Again, this moves further away from adopting a neurodiversity perspective towards a neoliberal framing of the issue as one of resources and individual lecturer responsibility.

In extract (ii) the issue general issues of making learning materials accessible for students with SpLDs is raised by the advisor. What is interesting is the use of the word “most” which is used twice. In the first instance it softens the potential point that all teaching staff should be making their materials accessible. In the second instance, it used to in advance of making the point that there are exceptions and “not everyone” does. What follows draws upon the same excuse in relation to a new module taking “a bit of extra time”. Given the advisor may be aware that the researcher is also a lecturer this is not explained any further. It is taken as understood that teaching a new module can involve creating new teaching materials, but this is followed up by returning to the point that materials should be accessible by pointing out that “it has to be done”.

Academic Advisor 2 also constructed a response involving “a gentle nudge” with lecturing staff to ensure lecture slides are made available early.

Academic Advisor 2:

Int: “So, I mean, what about putting up slides early for them? Do you help anybody or advise on that?”

Adv: “Yeah, well, what I do is I usually chase up the lecturer. As you see my role as academic advisor is to support the students [mentions a specific individual case]. And so, what I normally do is I become the go between yeah, and I might just contact the tutor right away. And just to remind them maybe they've not looked at the support plan because, you know, we're up to our necks, right? And it never ends, right. So, my role is to be a kind of go between, just to give it a gentle nudge to the tutor.”

What is interesting about this response is follows a similar structure to Academic Advisor 1. The phrase “chase up the lecturer” is followed by “maybe they’ve not looked at the support plan because, you know we’re up to our necks, right?” Notable again is the use of discourse makers “you know” and “right?” that signal the advisor is checking that what is being said is landing in way that treads the line between advocating support for students but also recognising that “we’re up to our necks”. This colloquial phrase implies being overburdened with work and acts as a defence for lecturing staff who may have “not looked at the support plan”. This point is shored up using the plural “we’re” thereby strengthening the claim by drawing upon a collective “we” in terms of lecturing staff. As with Advisor 1, this is presented as involving informally following up on issues with the advisor role being presented as a “go between” in terms of students and lecturing staff. The net result of this discursive construction is that while support for students with SpLDs such as dyslexia is recognised in terms of practical measures such as the early provision of lecture slides, it is countered by raising the issue of lack of staff time. Furthermore, the logic of neoliberalism is

apparent in the presentation of notion that the advisor operates in terms of influence by giving a member of lecturing staff a “gentle nudge” to provide the lecture slides early. Neoliberalism relies on this kind of soft power where pedagogical norms are maintained through the notion of staff operating on an individual basis. In this case student support plans act as a technical bureaucratic mediating mechanism in ensuring that staff must consult these and put in place the support measures required.

Finally, Academic Advisor 3 talked about recorded lectures but again fell back on the familiar point concerning staff time, in this case due to the editing process when making these recordings.

Academic Advisor 3:

“And if you're going to record lectures, I mean, you know, if they're serious about that, then there has to be proper things set up that, you know, staff again, are really busy, to go in and then re-edit that lecture. I'm not making excuses just for lecturers, but you know, sometimes, you know, we've got to edit half the recordings and there's a million other things going on.”

What is noteworthy in this extract is the phrase “if they’re serious about that” that appears to allude to an unspecified “they” which can be taken as referring to a wider management policy on the use of recorded lectures as an aid for students. This is followed by “there has to be proper things set up” that signals a requirement for sufficient staff time to edit lectures (e.g., captions and cutting extraneous material). There follows the disclaimer “I'm not making excuses just for lecturers” followed by the “sometimes, you know, we've got to edit half the recordings” points to the work involved with the workload issues being emphasised through the use of an extreme case formulation “and there’s a million other things going on”.

In adopting a reflective insider position, the defence of lecturing staff is understandable in terms of the workload involved in the early provision of lecture slides and in ensuring other teaching material is suitable for students with dyslexia. However, adopting a lens that scrutinises this discourse at an ideological level leads to a focus on how this kind of response focuses upon the workload of individual staff and them having to manage learning material in terms of editing recorded lectures. This points again to the way in which the pervasive logic of neoliberalism drives the advisor’s response in pointing to they way in which the work of making learning materials accessible for students shifts the focus from neurodiversity and an inclusive curriculum towards framing the matter as one of individual lecturer responsibility and workload.

4. Discussion

The three general themes presented in the analysis of the academic advisors’ responses can be analysed in relation to ideological dilemmas (Billig, 1988, see also Billig, 1991). The analysis revealed how these dilemmas were instantiated through the lexical features and micro-level details of the talk such as hedging, hypothetical active voicing, hesitations and extreme case formulation. Moreover, it is possible to make a connection between these micro-level discursive features and an underlying macro-level neoliberal ideology that evidences the ways in which advisors’ responses are constructed through contradictions and differences (Edley & Wetherell, 1997). It is worth reiterating that the findings are not generalisable in the sense of seeking to claim representative across the higher education sector. Rather the focus of the case study has been on the advisors’ ways of talking about support for students with dyslexia. This has involved examining their talk in terms of how they reconcile a recognition that such students should have their learning needs meet in terms of being part of a

neurodiverse range of students with the view that these students are to some extent responsible for managing themselves. Of course, as in any form of qualitative enquiry, the analysis undertaken is an interpretative exercise and an alternative research focus could yield a different set of analytical conclusions.

In the first theme of ‘Condition and Conditional Agency’, it is evident that there is that there is an understanding that dyslexia is a condition and as such can be regarded as a SpLD that stems from a neurological cause. The diagnosis of this condition is considered as an essential precursor to providing access to support in the management of students’ learning. However, each of the academic advisors in varying degrees constructed a discourse around such support being conditional upon student agency. This was framed around the notion of individual difference and whether students wanted to declare their condition or seek support. The notion of personal responsibility is familiar neoliberal theme and therefore while there is a recognition that dyslexia is a condition, it is undermined by the focus on individual agency.

Second, the theme of ‘Contradictions around Coursework’ illustrated how while recognising that students with dyslexia may encounter cognitive difficulties in tackling written coursework, this was set against a meritocratic ideal of individual effort and ability as being the basis for set coursework deadlines for all students. In other words, a neoliberal notion of individual agency and ability overrides the view that students with dyslexia may need additional time to complete coursework. While it is common practice to make an additional time allowance for such students under examination conditions, the extended time for coursework assessments was ruled out, although students can submit a proofread copy up to one week later. The assumption that students with dyslexia only have problems with grammar and spelling does not recognise other issues such as difficulties with concentration span or time involved in reading and rereading. Often these can be assessed through the process of diagnosis but the view that coursework deadlines are set for all students does not permit adjusting these on a case-by-case basis for those with SpLDs.

Third, ‘Reasonable Adjustment and Reality’ appeared as the dilemma in the academic advisors’ responses. Each of the advisors pointed out that that lecturers should facilitate student support plans in the form of providing advance learning materials (lecture slides and recordings), and that they may have to “nudge” them to do so. However, they proceeded to offer a defence for why lecturing staff may initially fail to meet this requirement due to the reality of their workload. In raising this point the advisors’ alluded to the conflicting notions of supporting students in their learning being fundamental but that such support is ‘down’ at the level of individual lecturers making the required reasonable adjustments. The neoliberal logic of lecturing staff internalising notions of support for neurodivergent students while at the same time being responsible for adapting their pedagogy accordingly is the root of this dilemma.

5. Conclusion

This case study represents a focused piece of research exploring how support for students with dyslexia is discursively constructed in relation to the Academic Advisor role at a higher education institution. While the investigation does not seek to draw general conclusions about the higher education sector, the findings suggest particular ways in which dyslexia fails to be constructed as a form of neurodivergence. Instead, it is presented as a diagnosable condition that requires a support plan that individual lecturers must implement through their pedagogical practice. It has been argued throughout that this aligns with the logic of neoliberal ideology in two ways. First, students with dyslexia are presented in relation to their support needs in an equivocal way in which their own individual disposition is paramount:

some students may want support, others not. Given that dyslexia is considered as an unseen condition, it is unsurprising that students' own views and dispositions towards revealing any diagnosis and consequently being considered as having a disability feature in the advisors' responses. Many students with dyslexia have developed coping strategies to mask their condition to avoid the stigma associated with it. It is likely that the advisors are aware of this through their interactions with these students and hence their equivocal response about individual decisions on seeking support. However, this discursive construction shifts the focus down to the level of student agency rather than presenting dyslexia within a framework of neurodiversity and an attendant focus on the principles of UDL.

Second, the discourse of 'reasonable adjustment' obligations under the Equality Act (2010) has become established in higher education as part of the widening participation agenda. The view that there are constituencies of students who have been traditionally underrepresented, including those with SpLDs is widely recognised. This policy is now ingrained in UK higher education and has become internalised for staff through various national and institutional policy initiatives. Nevertheless, while this is the case it is offset against a backdrop of reduced resources and increased workloads. It is little wonder that the advisors, who are themselves part of the faculty teaching staff, put forward defensive points concerning lack of staff time to provide lecture slides early or in editing recordings. However, while understandable, this discourse frames the issue as one of individual responsibility for staff in terms of meeting the needs of students with SpLDs as a time resource issue. This neoliberal position of individual staff responsibility again shifts the focus away from the broader issue of creating an inclusive learning environment for all students. Instead, a deficit model of SpLDs prevails rather than an alternative view that encourages student capability, and the acceptance of neurodivergence within the student population.

While it may appear the logic of neoliberalism conflicts with the recognition of neurodiversity, the widening of access in higher education has prompted thinking and policy around creating a more inclusive curriculum and associated pedagogies. Initially this focused on non-traditional students from social class backgrounds who were underrepresented in higher education. However, the widening access agenda has come to encompass a much broader meaning with the view that neurodivergent students are also very much part of this process. This has led to an understanding that higher education must embrace a much broader understanding of inclusion that is reflected in its core activities of teaching, learning, and assessment.

The 'higher' in higher education in this sense should also represent higher aspirations for students that have, or can develop, capabilities that enable them to gain knowledge and skills associated with education at this level. Institutions that offer higher education, predominately universities, are after all educational establishments and not research institutes. The fundamental connection between research and teaching requires a much greater liberation that extends to both staff and students. Inclusivity within higher education institutions as learning organisations can operate in tandem with an understanding of diversity. In practical terms this means that higher education institutions have some work to do in working with a neurodiverse student population, and indeed there are moves in this direction. While it is now commonplace to release lecture slides early for all students this can result in workload challenges for lecturing staff. One way of tackling this problem is to ensure that workload allocation models explicitly factor in time needed to develop and implement inclusive teaching materials (Atanasova & Papen, 2026).

On the issue of extensions for student coursework due to dyslexia or other SpLDs, the advisors' remarks point to this being a more vexing matter. Their responses on coursework

deadlines suggest that there is considerable store placed in the meritocratic view that these are fixed for all students. In many institutions, extensions may be granted for a period of time (e.g., five working days) contingent upon a mitigating circumstances claim being formally approved. However, such extensions may be limited to specific one-off instances (e.g., illness or personal circumstances at a given point in time) and do not normally apply in cases for students with dyslexia in a recurrent manner. The assumption is made that given coursework deadlines are often set weeks in advance students will have a lengthy time to prepare their submission. However, this assumption rests on the view that dyslexia only involves literacy issues and does not consider other common problems such as poor concentration and fatigue that can arise for such students.

While support plans are to some extent a bureaucratic necessity, they have the benefit of logging impediments to learning that students with SpLDs encounter and that in turn require accommodation. For this reason, the blanket assumption that only timed examinations and not coursework requires additional time should be re-examined and an allowance made for students with SpLDs. This would not interfere greatly with marking schedules but could benefit these students in giving them some additional leeway in managing cognitive processing and concentration issues. Giving dyslexic students some additional time for literacy-based coursework assessments need not jeopardise treating all students fairly but rather provides a recognition of some additional compensatory time. It is also possible to use developments

However, an alternative approach is to consider more flexible and inclusive approaches to assessment. For example, it is possible to design coursework assessments that entail the option of submitting a written piece of work or a video presentation. This is especially helpful for dyslexic students studying in the humanities and social sciences. This can also involve an aspect of assessment co-design as way of promoting inclusivity (see e.g., Nieminen 2023, 2024; Wallbank, 2025). Another route is to explore the use of AI in creating assignment-specific rules based on the principle of constructive alignment (Madhav Ram et al. 2026). This can be used in parallel with a student-facing AI scaffold that uses these rules to create a structured workflow for dyslexic students that guides their assignment preparation and submission while maintaining authorship and critical engagement.

Perhaps the most pressing the most pressing need is for staff development in pedagogic design and practice to enable an approach to teaching, learning and assessment that affords a more inclusive approach. This requires staff training, firstly in terms of what some of the most common SpLDs such as dyslexia entail, and secondly in ensuring an approach to pedagogy that is based on UDL principles. In short, this is a cultural and ideological change supported by the view that higher education should be as inclusive as possible. This could be achieved through the lynchpin role of academic advisor in terms of supporting students as well as academic staff in their pedagogic practice.

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